

Abbott Lawrence Lowell Biography

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Biography

The American college president and political scientist Abbott Lawrence Lowell (1856-1943) strengthened the Harvard undergraduate college during his presidency at the university. As a political scientist, he stressed the role of parties in government.

On Dec. 13, 1856, Abbott Lawrence Lowell was born into one of the leading families of Boston society. When he received his bachelor's degree from Harvard University in 1877, he was the sixth in an unbroken series of generations of alumni.

Although he earned a degree from the Harvard Law School in 1880 and opened a law office in Boston, Lowell found this profession uninteresting and began writing articles on political science, collected into a book, *Essays on Government* (1889). He went on to compose a two-volume comparative study, *Government and Parties in Continental Europe* (1896), which led to his appointment to the Harvard faculty in 1897.

Lowell insisted on the value of careful observation of actual political practice rather than theoretical speculation, and his studies convinced him that political parties played a greater role in government than did constitutional forms. This approach dominated his *The Influence of Party upon Legislation in England and America* (1902; published as part of the annual report of the American Historical Association), a work whose ideas and data political scientists still find valuable. His best known book was *The Government of England* (2 vols., 1908), which won praise on both sides of the Atlantic for its detailed and sensitive description of the way the political life of England actually functioned.

Lowell was active in university affairs and, on the retirement of Charles W. Eliot in 1909, was chosen president of Harvard, serving until 1933. Concentrating on the college, he modified Eliot's elective system by reintroducing some required courses; established a tutorial system to encourage individual work; introduced the "house system," which divided the undergraduates into smaller residential and social units, modeled after English universities; and encouraged changes in the admission and scholarship practices that opened Harvard to public school graduates from the entire country, making it a truly national educational institution. A strong believer in academic freedom, he vigorously defended his faculty against attack during and just after World War I.

In the 1920s Lowell aroused great controversy when appointed by the governor of Massachusetts to a committee to review the murder conviction of Sacco and Vanzetti, because he strongly affirmed the justice of that decision. He died on Jan. 16, 1943.