

Notes from the Editors

As the flagship journal of the discipline of political science, the *American Political Science Review* (APSR) proudly publishes pathbreaking articles from many disciplinary subfields, including political theory, comparative politics, international politics, formal theory, and methods. Subfield journals such as *Political Theory*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *International Studies Quarterly*, the *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, and *Political Science Research Methods* also publish many excellent papers. What distinguishes an article published in the APSR from one published in a top subfield journal?

In this “Notes from the Editors,” we begin to answer that question, drawing on both our experiences as editors and the kinds of feedback we often receive from reviewers. We focus on political theory articles; articles that use quantitative or experimental methods to address substantive political questions; those that advance qualitative, quantitative, mixed, or experimental methods of inquiry; and those that develop formal models. We also discuss thematic advice that holds across a variety of article types.

In future “Notes,” we hope to expand this discussion to cover other types of manuscripts, such as papers that use or advance ethnographic methods. Interested readers might also watch the recording of our [APSA 2021 panel discussion](#) on framing papers for a general audience journal, which offers overlapping recommendations.

POLITICAL THEORY

Authors who publish in the APSR skillfully explain to nonspecialists why their work matters: why it is something that political scientists should care about, even if they are not participants in the subfield debates to which it contributes. Political theorists who succeed in publishing in the APSR are no exception. They not only make excellent and original contributions to important debates in political theory, intervening in and advancing the relevant literature(s), but also make clear how their contributions change the ways that political scientists think about important political problems or questions.

Some political theory articles published in the APSR draw attention to normative political questions that have been largely overlooked, perhaps because they have been naturalized or otherwise depoliticized (for a recent example, see, Cordelli and Levy’s 2021 article, which draws attention to the normative issues at stake in global capital mobility). Successful normative theory articles develop compelling principled arguments about how best to address the problems they identify

and clearly articulate the political implications of their analyses. They often also engage creatively and constructively with questions of institutional design and/or policy reform, telling readers: “If you are persuaded by my normative argument, then you should embrace institution X, or policy Y.”

Of course, not all political theory is normative. The APSR publishes a wide range of excellent political theory articles including conceptual and historical papers. (For examples of recent conceptual and historical theory articles motivated by important political problems, see Arneil 2021 and Digeser 2021.) Much like the normative theory in the journal, the conceptual and historical work that we publish not only advances the subfield debates to which it contributes but also spells out its implications for how we understand and practice politics. Is the concept that your paper explores one that is used in apparently competing or contradictory ways? Is your interpretation of the thinker(s) you engage both persuasive and novel? If so, why does that matter?

If your answer is, “It matters, because scholars who work on concept X or thinker Y care about this argument,” then consider submitting your paper to a more specialized, subfield journal. If, on the other hand, it matters because it changes how we think about some important political question or problem—for example, it changes the way we think about what it means to make decisions democratically or changes what it means to say that an action taken by a government actor is legitimate or illegitimate—then motivate and frame your manuscript in a way that makes that evident to your reader.

EMPIRICAL PAPERS THAT USE QUANTITATIVE AND/OR EXPERIMENTAL METHODS

Speaking to a disciplinary audience also presents challenges for authors of papers that leverage quantitative methods to answer empirical political questions: a category that accounts for a substantial portion of manuscripts submitted to the APSR. Generally, an APSR article or letter that addresses substantive research questions with statistical and/or experimental evidence offers a novel theoretical argument that builds on existing scholarship, uses data and methods sufficient to answer its central question, and demonstrates that its findings are not only methodologically sound but also robust. In this section, we discuss each of these goals, in turn.

Empirical APSR articles typically go beyond testing or evaluating existing arguments with new evidence and articulate new theoretical arguments. Although

providing a new, well-executed test of a long-standing theory may help particularized research communities solidify answers to debates about which competing theory is most empirically supported, or under which conditions, doing so does not shift theorizing to a different mechanism or reframe how we think about a substantive question or debate. As editors we have been struck by how frequently reviewers—who are fierce protectors of the *APSR* as a leading journal—recommend rejecting even technically well-executed papers that use sophisticated methods of causal inference if they do not demonstrate novelty by making unique and important theoretical contributions.

In addition, the data and methods of an empirical *APSR* paper clearly align with its core theoretical argument. Our reviewers and readers expect detailed, convincing discussions about the operationalization of primary concepts, research design, and methods, especially when authors use prefabricated models and datasets, which are not always clearly suitable for operationalizing a paper's core concepts or measuring its main causal mechanisms. Of course, new methods and original data collection are not required for a successful empirical paper. Indeed, some recent articles leverage existing datasets to answer important substantive political questions (e.g., Baccini and Weymouth 2021). However, authors should bear in mind that they must convince readers, beginning with the reviewers and editors, that well-worn methods and public or observational datasets are genuinely suited to answering the paper's core question.

Finally, although a subfield journal may only require that authors demonstrate that their arguments are plausible and generally supported by the analysis, the results of empirical *APSR* papers should hold up to alternative models, alternative specifications, alternative scope conditions, alternative measures, endogeneity or selection concerns, biased samples, and so on. Although a subfield journal might publish results that are modest or that only hold under specific conditions, perhaps to open discussion about why this might be the case and about how to generate more solid results, empirical *APSR* papers are expected to be robust. At the same time, authors are not expected to address every conceivable concern about methods and every robustness check. Instead, whether in the main paper or the Supplementary Materials (online appendix), they should engage the various potential methodological concerns that a reader might *reasonably* raise, selectively and thoughtfully (see Arrington et al. 2021 for an exemplar). Readers, reviewers, and editors prefer reasoned discussions about what statistical analyses and results can and cannot tell us to kitchen sink approaches that include every possible estimation strategy.

PAPERS THAT ADVANCE QUALITATIVE, QUANTITATIVE, MIXED, OR EXPERIMENTAL METHODS

Papers that develop new or enhance existing qualitative, quantitative, mixed, or experimental methods may

seem distinct, but they share a common goal of persuading readers that their new method can replace one currently in wide use in political science. Successful methods papers demonstrate that current methodological practices lead to incorrect inferences (e.g., by producing biased estimates or standard errors) and that the new method genuinely solves the problem identified. They also use accessible explanations to convince potential users that investing time in learning and implementing the method will pay off.

To motivate papers that advance new methods, authors typically establish that an existing method is commonly used to study politics. They might report the results of systematic searches of general interest journals or demonstrate how a selective search reveals heavy usage across two or more subfields (e.g., Blair, Coppock, and Moor 2020; Clifford, Sheagley, and Piston 2021). Unsuccessful methods submissions often generate reviews that suggest that even if the proposed method is innovative and the reviewer might use it in their own teaching or future work, it is nevertheless too niche or narrow for the *APSR* audience.

In addition, authors of methods papers published in the *APSR* typically show that the proposed new method or approach solves problematic inferences reached by current methods, perhaps by replicating important studies using the new method or by generating simulation evidence (e.g., Bisbee 2019; Blair et al. 2019; Clifford, Sheagley, and Piston 2021). We recommend that authors use both strategies or include at least two replications. In addition, authors should demonstrate that the methodological innovation makes substantial, rather than marginal, improvements with concrete results.

Finally, both the skilled methodologists that are typically invited to review papers that advance new analytic techniques and the editors expect papers to be considered for the *APSR* (in contrast to journals specializing in methodological advances such as *Political Analysis*, *Sociological Methods & Research*, or *Econometrica*) to be written and the methods presented in such a way that applied researchers can understand why they need to invest in the new method and how to apply it in their own work. This ensures that a methods paper will have broad influence.

FORMAL THEORY

Like methodologists, formal theorists rely on mathematics to conduct their investigations, and the formal theory papers that are most likely to be published in the *APSR* find ways to communicate technical features of their work to a broad intellectual audience whose members may not all be versed in the same specialized language. Because *APSR* editors typically invite a mix of specialist and generalist reviewers, potential authors should strive to communicate with a broad audience even at the initial submission stage. Successful authors of papers that develop formal models use a variety of strategies for communicating the models themselves and their deductions or implications: soliciting

prereviews, framing the model's contributions in a way that makes them exciting and useful to scholars working on various substantive topics, and adopting various devices for making a model accessible.

The first strategy we recommend, and perhaps the easiest to adopt, involves asking a trusted nonformal theorist colleague to read your formal modeling paper and mark up passages that do not make sense for nonspecialists. A trusted colleague might not find helpful a jargon-laden list of how your model's assumptions differ from each of five other models they have never heard of but might find useful an intuitive discussion of how your model's assumptions tap into some substantive feature of politics that previous models have not.

Another strategy that successful formal theory authors use is to explain how their model resolves a long-standing substantive or theoretical puzzle in a new, insightful way. For example, Cox's (2021) paper offers a formal model framed around a substance-based question—why do governments deviate from cabinet portfolio allocations that are proportional to their legislative seat shares, as Gamson's Law would predict?—that appeals to comparative politics scholars regardless of whether they are themselves formal modelers. Similarly, Coe and Vaynman (2020) center their paper on the question of why arms control is so rare when the costs of arming are so great and could be avoided through negotiation. Scholars of international politics need not have extensive training in game theory to appreciate the argument underlying the math: “Any deal that preserves the balance of power well enough to be safe for the arming side may not be transparent enough to assure the monitoring side of its compliance. When this is true, no arms control deal will be viable” (Coe and Vaynman 2020, 343).

Communicating with the *APSR*'s editors, reviewers, and readers can also be facilitated by deploying some standard devices such as assigning parameters using mnemonics (e.g., *c* for costs or *s* for signal), giving intuitive labels to key terms in an equation (e.g., “B's temptation to renege by seeking arms” (Coe and Vaynman 2020, 345), and labeling portions of graphs that represent types of solutions or outcomes. We also find that a table that lists all the terms in a model along with their names, and ideally, substantive interpretations and real-world referents, can make a model more accessible to readers. Dal Bó, Hernández-Lagos, and Mazzuca (2021) provide this handy kind of guide for their complex model of the rise of a civilization that must become prosperous while also fending off predators that are drawn to prosperity. These devices not only make a model more accessible but also draw readers into the mechanics.

Our last piece of advice for formal modelers seeking to publish in the *APSR* concerns the use of empirical cases. Historical cases can crisply motivate a model and illustrate its core assumptions and features. They can also evidence the causal story the model captures or its deductions, especially when authors use two or more cases to compare scenarios with different conditions. For example, Coe and Vaynman (2020) set up their investigations of the United States and Iraq, the INF

Treaty, and the Freeze and SALT I negotiations to “allow [them] to test all three of [their model's] observable implications about whether a deal is made, what kind of monitoring it features, and which arms it limits” (Coe and Vaynman 2020, 348). Finally, empirical cases give authors leverage over cases for which we do not have data. For instance, Dal Bó, Hernández-Lagos, and Mazzuca (2021) draw on archaeological and historical studies of the first two civilizations, Sumer and Egypt, to trace the two different paths to civilization predicted by their model.

CONCLUSION

As the above discussions make clear, much of our advice to prospective authors is consistent across multiple types of manuscripts. Most importantly, given the journal's reputation as one that publishes pathbreaking work, reviewers, editors, and readers expect that *APSR* papers not only make a contribution but also do so in a way that convinces nonexperts that the contribution is both distinctive and potentially useful to their own research or teaching.

Regardless of a paper's epistemological, methodological, or theoretical approach, the most influential pieces published in the *APSR* often straddle various subfields and generate implications that are relevant to a wide variety of substantive questions about politics. Work that does not fit neatly in one subfield is almost ideal for a discipline-wide journal. A case in point is Chung and Duggan's (2020) article, which presents a strategic model of debate that represents three different styles of democratic deliberation, appealing to social choice modelers and democratic theorists alike.

Perhaps the most important advice we can offer for an author seeking to pitch their work to the *APSR* is to reflect on what first got you excited about the paper's topic and analytic exercise. What made you want to ask the question you ask in your paper? What facts or findings surprised you? Then incorporate those early inspirations and ah-hah moments into the framing in a way that addresses a discipline-wide readership.

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