

Response to APSR

From the outside looking in, it is hard to specify what is wrong with an institution. Those of us trying to reform *APSR* know from the results that something is wrong. The journal is not representative of the many types of research that political scientists perform. No one, not even the editor, has questioned that. But exactly why the journal is so unbalanced, and what might be done to correct it, are vexing issues for those of us who have never participated in its management.

The editor is undoubtedly right that self-selection is one factor explaining the journal's skewed contents. This is a message that critics of the journal must take to heart. Many who don't do the kind of research that fills the journal's pages have assumed that their research is unwelcome. Their chances of getting a fair hearing may be better than they think. I know of no evidence to challenge the editor's claims on this point.

But *APSR* has not always been the sort of journal it is now, and one has to wonder when and why certain groups of scholars turned to other outlets. Surely, the many soft-science scholars out there didn't just wake up one morning 15 years ago and decide, "No, we really don't want our work to appear in the most prestigious and best-circulated journal in our profession." Nor would the low acceptance rate account for their mass exit. Many scholarly journals have acceptance rates in the 10–20% range. If the abandonment of the *APSR* was unrelated to the content of referees' reports and editorial decisions (perhaps a preoccupation with technique over substance?), then this is a strange phenomenon, indeed. How would Professor Finifter or her predecessors explain it?

Whatever its cause, Professor Finifter emphasizes that it is not her problem if certain groups of scholars do not submit to the *APSR*. But when

a major disciplinary association publishes a journal, isn't it the editor's responsibility to try to represent the discipline as a whole? If so, shouldn't the desertion of major schools of thought be a troubling matter? In 1991, Richard Betts exposed the lopsided nature of *APSR*'s contents to the APSA publications committee. Why have the journal's editors not tried to remedy the situation? The answer seems obvious: the editors preferred to publish the type of work that the journal was carrying and they saw nothing wrong with its unbalanced contents.

In her memo, Prof. Finifter defends the type of research that dominates the journal, praising its "more systematic and reliable knowledge" over alternative approaches. Moreover, she classifies articles that do not fit the "quantitative" or "formal" rubrics as "interpretive" (*PS* 33:921–28). This is interesting nomenclature, since I don't know of any scholars who describe themselves as "interpreters" of politics. Is it unfair of me to say that "interpretive" sounds like a euphemism for "subjective" or "unscientific"?

This question of what constitutes the most "systematic and reliable knowledge" about politics underlies the current debate. One scholar does a detailed study of interest groups in four countries and includes field work, the examination of materials in native languages, and a keen awareness of the historical and cultural context in each case. Her work is classified as "interpretive." Another loads into a computer schematic data on the interest groups of 40 political systems, most of which the investigator could not discuss intelligently for

10 minutes, and the research he produces is "systematic and reliable"?

One scholar works inductively from diverse sources of empirical data to develop a qualified middle theory of how one aspect of politics has acted in particular conditions. His work is "interpretive." Another scholar posits assumptions about human behavior observed nowhere and deduces from them a grand scheme of theoretical axioms. She provides us with "systematic and reliable knowledge?" About what? If the former is "interpretive," might we call the latter "imaginary?"

I neither want nor expect the editorial board of the *APSR* to settle these questions. I would be happy to have a journal that represented fairly the many different understandings of political knowledge and political wisdom, including those that are self-consciously

nonscientific. What is troubling is that the people running *APSR* for the last decade or more obviously have settled these questions to their satisfaction, and that is why they are not the least bit bothered by the de facto exclusion of large bodies of research from the journal.

Either this needs to change, or subscription to this journal must be divorced from APSA membership, or (preferably) both. If *APSR* is as highly reputed as Prof. Finifter asserts, then the "quantitative" verdict of the marketplace will only give us more "systematic and reliable" proof of that.

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Online Discussion

Over the past several issues of *PS*, members have been offering comments on the APSA Strategic Planning Report. To read previous comments and review the reports of the Strategic Planning Committee and Publications Implementation Committee please visit APSANet at www.apsanet.org

Comments by an Alienated Political Scientist

I read with interest the letters to the editor in the December 2000 issue of *PS*. They prompted me to offer some comments based upon my 20 years of experience as an American

political scientist. I am one of the legions of alienated members of the APSA. I believe that the Association and its official journal, *APSR*, have done a huge disservice to the field of

political studies in the U.S. Indeed, it has worked assiduously to deaden any scholarly interest in what is inherently an exciting field of study.

Not only has APSA elevated mindless number-crunching to the realm of penultimate scholarship in the profession, but also tragically, it has created a reward structure that rejects any scholar who seeks to understand politics. If there is any doubt of this, consider the recent orgy of commentary—mainly by lawyers on TV—on the Bush-Gore election. Where were the political scientists? Sure, it is possible to name a handful of political scientists who offered commentary, but they were hugely outnumbered by lawyers and law professors. Essentially, political scientists had nothing of importance to say about the election. This, I believe, is the most damning indictment of the profession. It underscores that political scientists, for the most part, do not study politics.

I have heard numerous political scientists at major research universities refer to certain members of their departments as “stars” by virtue of publishing in *APSR*. When I asked what their colleagues had published, they could only give vague references, such as “Congress,” or,

“International trade.” It was clear to me that they had no real interest in the research except that it was published in *APSR*.

It strikes me that this is akin to a tribal initiation ritual. How peculiar is it that one’s career is measured in terms of publishing a few articles in a journal that virtually no one reads? However, since this initiation rite is held up as an obligatory, ultimate professional goal, it does incalculable harm to professionals in the field. I believe that it has virtually destroyed the creative potential of innumerable political scientists. I cannot recall the number of doctoral candidates I have known who have been pressured into mimicking what they see in *APSR*. This in itself may not be bad—however, they have no understanding of what they are copying and worse yet, no real interest in what they are doing. Is it any wonder that most political science dissertations are so dreary and uninteresting? Indeed, this also explains that with the exception of a handful of textbooks, most booksellers regard political science as the “kiss of death.” It is a form of scho-

lasticism, which serves no purpose and certainly does not explain politics.

Indeed, how many midcareer political scientists have given up research and writing for precisely the same reason? They recognize that to publish in the *APSR* or its many clones, they must engage in a tortured process of pretending to do work that they intuitively recognize is stupefying, tedious, and worse yet, has nothing to do with the study of politics.

I think that many of the suggestions offered by the Perestroika, Gregory Kasaz, and others for reforming APSA and *APSR* are worth considering. However, I am not hopeful. The whole project of the discipline is antithetical to the original purpose of the field—the study of politics. Until we have APSA leaders who recognize that as the fundamental purpose of the discipline, the only alternative is for scholars to ignore APSA and its official journal.

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Encouraging Faculty and Librarian Collaboration

I just finished reading John Lyman Mason’s interesting discussion of his senior seminar course (March 2001). In it, he recommends a number of online sources for student research projects, most notably JSTOR, ProQuest, and the Social Sciences Index. While I applaud Dr. Mason’s enthusiasm for emerging research sources, I feel compelled to qualify his remarks for the general audience of political science professors.

Dr. Mason reports on what he deems the most useful sources available at Rhodes College, but online sources are not uniformly

available nationwide. Discrepancies exist and are based on institution size, funding, and location. Thus, many of the sources mentioned will not be accessible to all readers on their home campuses. Luckily, faculty need not determine themselves what is or is not provided by their campus—they can consult with their librarians, who will know if the library subscribes to JSTOR, ProQuest, and the Social Sciences Index. If the library does not, librarians can tell you what else would be suitable for political science research.

Librarians, furthermore, may attend classes to teach students how to conduct database searches, to orient students to the physical space of the library, and to offer individualized consultation for students. A partnership between professor and librarian may prove to be mutually beneficial, and may also introduce new databases or research methodologies to both parties. Finally, understanding the needs of students may help librarians to purchase materials that support the curriculum.

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