What is Political Methodology?

Margaret E. Roberts, *University of California, San Diego*

What is political methodology? Can someone interested in any application in political science also be a methodologist? Incoming graduate students interested in American politics frequently report that they are interested in American politics and, "of course" methods. But very few students in my own subfield of comparative politics come to graduate school intending to be methodologists.

This is puzzling. By definition, a political methodologist *develops and characterizes measures and methods to more scientifically answer political science questions.* Political methodology is therefore relevant to all subfields and all questions in political science. The more tools we as political methodologists can develop to answer a wider variety of important political science questions with greater scientific accuracy, the better we are at being political methodologists.

Because political methodology is about finding methods to do better social science, it should be question-oriented rather than focused on the type of method, as it is commonly defined. Many students and scholars incorrectly equate political methodology with statistics, and students will often tell me they do not want to become a methodologists because they are "bad at math." While statistics is one very useful class of methods for doing good social science research and therefore should be a core part of any methods training, there are many components of the research process that do not involve statistics, but that can be refined to do better social science, from developing new technology for better measurement or discovery of new social phenomena through participant observation. A stronger social science research design will sometimes mean that inference will require less, not more, sophisticated statistical methods. Political methodology is about finding the most scientific method conditional upon the stage of the research process, the data availability, and question of interest (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994).

Perhaps because of our tendency to define political methodology by the type of method rather than as a means for answering important political science questions scientifically, scholars at the general political methodology conferences tend to tackle questions conducive to a particular set of methods, which typically reflect a small subset of the broad range of questions in political science. While the presentations at the Society for Political Methodology's annual conference (POLMETH) generally include a lot of statistics, they typically focus on a narrow set of political science questions with easy to access data. By my count, there were as many methods papers over the last four years at POLMETH applied to US voting, ideology, and Congress as to international relations and comparative politics combined.

Addressing only a the narrow set of questions within American politics may be one reason why the political methodology community has been unable to attract a more diverse group of scholars. The subfields that are reflected in political methodology venues also happen to be more male.[1]

Using data on APSA section membership and substantive applications within papers presented at POLMETH and Visions in Methodology meeting (VIM), I posit in this piece that substance and gender diversity are related—that our subfield of political methodology may be less diverse because it is concentrated on a narrow subset of methods and questions, and that greater demographic diversity might lead the methodology community to consider a broader range of applied problems that would ultimately lead us to our primary goal: to become better political methodologists.[2]

By tackling a broader range of political science questions and adhering more closely to the definition of political methodology, political methodologists can kill two birds with one stone—create methods that have greater impact and importance to the field and better reflect the discipline demographically. Researchers in other subfields—such as race and ethnicity in American politics, comparative politics, and international relations—run into many roadblocks that are interesting methodological challenges that require new methods, and many are doing interesting and creative methods research in this area, as I'll detail below. Including them in the political methodology community would not only raise the bar in terms of science, it would lead to greater diversity that our community is lacking.

THE IMPORTANCE OF APPLICATIONS IN POLITICAL METHODOLOGY

Political methodology—the study of methods for answering political science questions—has two parts: (1) the questions in political science and (2) the methods for answering these questions. Political methodologists are fundamentally concerned with developing and characterizing methods to answer political science questions more scientifically. While some methods can be broadly applied to many areas in political science, others are tailored to answer particular political science problems. Much of political methodology lies in adapting solutions developed in different contexts to the political science realm, taking into account the data realities of a particular situation and creating tools that better fit the needs of applied researchers (King 1990).

Because the purpose of political methodology lies in answering *questions*, it is no wonder that many political methodologists wear two hats: one focused on answering questions in their particular subfield, another on writing papers developing and characterizing methods that could be

© American Political Science Association, 2018

used more generally. In my own methods work, I take inspiration from questions in Chinese politics to develop approaches that can better answer these questions (Lucas et al. 2013; Roberts, Stewart, and Airoldi 2016; King, Pan, and Roberts 2014). While the field of political methodology is fortunate to have a few scholars exclusively focused on developing methods, these scholars are few and far between. The vast majority of political methodologists run into methodological problems in the course of their substantive work and then develop approaches to solve these methodological roadblocks. Political methodology is not about developing methods without reference to their implementation, it's concerned with *need-finding* and creating scientific approaches to answering political science questions that frequently have difficult-to-use data.

developed for US applications so that they are better applied to comparative contexts (Ferree 2004; Adida et al. 2016; Blair and Imai 2012).

Because researchers in comparative politics are more likely to be working in data scarce environments, they have also been required to be creative in developing methods that can be useful under these conditions. Comparative politics scholars have been at the forefront of developing methods for difficult-to-study applications; for example, developing technology to do better measurement or to elicit more accurate answers to questions (Abdelal et al. 2006), case analysis and process tracing (Collier 2011), and pairing qualitative and quantitative methods together in mixed methods research to answer questions in environments

> *Because political methodology applies to every question in political science, scholars in every subfield engage in academic debates over the best methods to use for particular questions.*

Because political methodology applies to every question in political science, scholars in every subfield engage in academic debates over the best methods to use for particular questions. For example, in my subfield of comparative politics scholars face a particular set of questions and circumstances that require innovative approaches and therefore have long been at the forefront of developing new methods in political science. An entire cohort of comparative political scientists have developed and honed approaches for running field experiments and taking advantage of natural experiments in different countries around the world (Dunning 2012; Humphreys and Weinstein 2009). Comparative politics researchers are well represented in methodological groups such as Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP), which is focused on experimental research. As data in comparative contexts has become more rich, political methodologists in comparative politics have devised creative ways to use quantitative methods to make inferences about difficult to reach places using new technology. Cell phone applications, satellite images, and online geo-location are only a few ways that comparativists have used technology to get better data in difficult-to-reach places (Christia et al. 2015; Pierskalla and Hollenbach 2013). Text as data methods are allowing comparative political scientists to analyze more data about their countries of interest in less time (Laver, Benoit, and Garry 2003; Eggers and Spirling 2014; Catalinac 2016). While data provided by governments in many countries cannot be taken at face value, scholars have used this creatively, namely, to identify corruption and manipulation (Mebane Jr 2010; Ghanem and Zhang 2014; Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2014; King, Pan, and Roberts 2013) or use data errors to measure lack of institutionalization (Golden and Picci 2005; Lee and Zhang 2017). Similarly, methods developed for American politics are not always directly applicable to comparative politics, and political methodologists in comparative politics are amending methods originally

that are less favorable to traditional statistical approaches (Dunning 2008; Glynn and Ichino 2015; Lieberman 2005; Mahoney and Thelen 2015).

MISSING METHODOLOGISTS

When one looks at the breadth of scholars in political science doing exciting methods research in even just the example of comparative politics (not to mention other subfields) it's a wonder that more students in subfields outside of American politics don't come to graduate school intending to do methodology. While data scarcities and implementation challenges that come hand in hand with field research can make directly applying established methods frustrating, they also create interesting opportunities to develop and apply new approaches.

Yet, few of the papers presented in the official venues of political methodology in our field are related to questions outside of American politics. Even within American politics, political methodologists tend to focus on a particular set of questions within American politics—those concerning ideology, voter turnout, and Congress and not other parts of the subfield like race and ethnicity.

With the help of undergraduate political science students, I coded the subfield applications of each of 88 methodology papers in all the conference programs available from recent POLMETH meetings from 2012–2016.[3] Almost 60% (52 papers) had applications in American politics. Despite the fact that comparative politics is the largest section in APSA, only a quarter of the papers at POLMETH had applications in comparative politics and only 15% in international relations. Among the 52 papers with applications in American politics, these papers focused on a narrow set of American politics applications. Indeed, there were as many papers with applications to ideology, voting, and Congress in the US as there were papers that included applications to comparative politics and international relations combined.

This pattern is also clear when examining the overlap between those in the political methodology section of APSA and other sections of APSA. Figure 1 plots the proportion of members in each section of APSA who are also members of the political methodology section. Sections that tend to include more scholars studying American politics, such as elections, public opinion, and voting behavior, have a larger proportion of their members in the political methodology section than even that of the methodology section political networks. Even though sections like the African politics conference group and race, ethnicity, and politics are conducive to quantitative approaches, they have very little overlap with the political methodology section.

are attending other methods conferences like EGAP conferences, Text as Data, and experiments conferences. It could be that because POLMETH is in the summer when students who study other countries tend to be in the field, they are less likely to attend the general political methodology meeting. Perhaps we do not do enough to press students studying questions outside of American politics to attend and participate in methodology conferences. But somehow the political methodology meeting is missing a swath people who study a broader range of political science questions.

That the political methodology meetings do not reflect the field of political science substantively is problematic not only because the general section for political methodology should

However, regardless of whether or not increasing the scope of POLMETH would increase diversity, the narrow substantive focus of the general methodology conferences does a disservice to the field as a whole, and expanding the scope would push our community to conduct better science.

Where are the political methodologists in other subfields, if not at the annual political methodology meeting or in the political methodology APSA section? Partly, these methodologists

serve all questions in political science, but also because the lack of substantive representation may explain why political methodology does not reflect the field of political science demographically. As has been previously pointed out elsewhere (Teele and Thelen 2017), the subfields that are over-represented in the Society of Political Methodology also tend to be those that have a higher proportion of men.

Figure 2 shows the proportion of women by section membership in APSA. The red dotted line shows the overall proportion of women in the entire field, 31% (Teele and Thelen 2017). With the lowest proportion of women of all sections in political science (21%), political methodology is at the bottom. This is consistent with attendance at the annual POLMETH meeting, where women make up only very few of presenters, as noted by others in this symposium.

Interestingly, the subject matter that is the focus of applications at POLMETH happens to be dominated by men. Sections such as legislative studies, political organizations and parties, and elections, public opinion, and voting behavior are all sections that are less representative of women overall and are more likely to be the focus of papers at the political methodology conference. On the other hand, organized sections such as comparative politics, comparative democratization, African politics, race, ethnicity and politics, women in politics, and European

Figure 1

Proportion of Members in each APSA Section Who are also in the Political Methodology Section
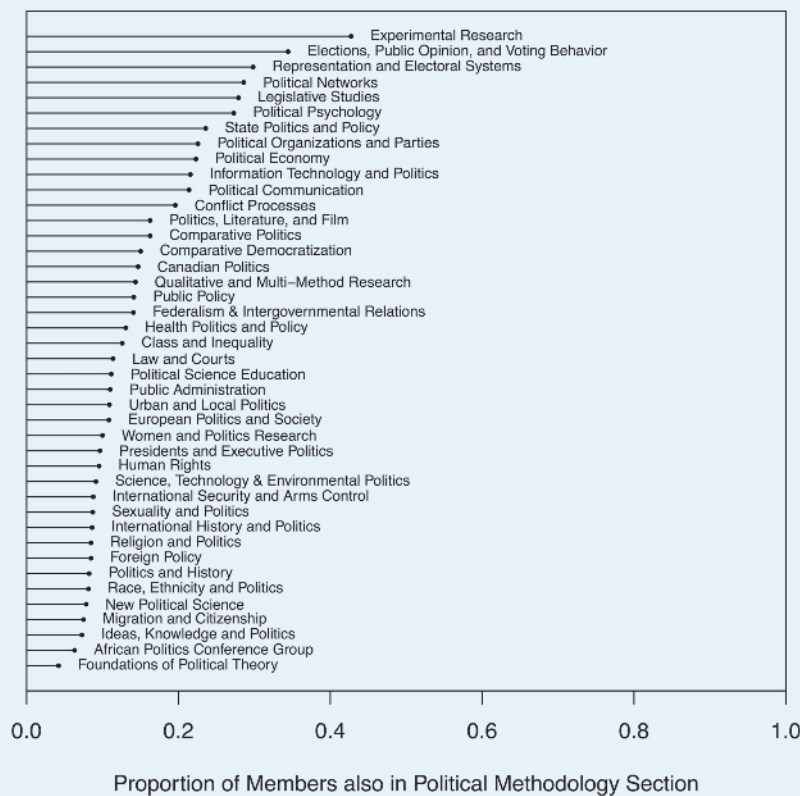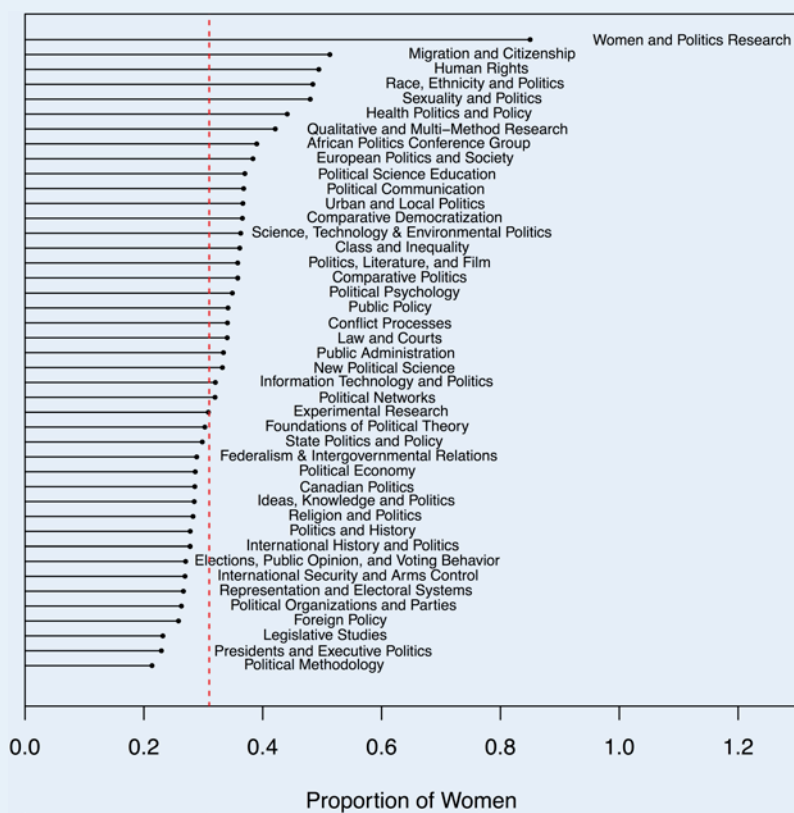

Proportion of Members also in Political Methodology Section

Figure 2
Proportion of Women by Section at APSA

Red dotted line indicates overall average of women in political science.

Evidence from other methods conferences and APSA sections also suggests that women are indeed interested in and working on methodology in the context of different political science questions, even if they are not attending POLMETH. Not only is the qualitative methods section of APSA more representative of women, the experiments section of APSA is also representative of women in the field, as is the political networks section, both of which are focused on the use of quantitative methods in political science. This is further reflected by the EGAP group, which is focused on experimental research that includes applications to many countries outside of the United States and is nearly half women.

In 2016 one of the Society for Political Methodology's own conferences for women, Visions in Methodology, received around as many proposal applications as the annual POLMETH conference, despite having about a five times more competitive acceptance rate. My RAs and I took the same approach to coding the papers presented at VIM in the available programs on the website. VIM papers reflected a much broader base of political science research—only 43% of papers has applications in American politics, a full 36% of papers had applications in comparative politics and 18% of papers in international relations.

STEPPING UP TO THE CHALLENGE

There are many people across subfields in political science who are working on methods, but they are not attending the general political methodology meeting and are not participating in the APSA political methodology section. They represent a more diverse group of political scientists, both in terms of the questions they focus on and in terms of their demographics. Their participation in meetings such as POLMETH would be beneficial to the field, as it would transmit methods across subfields and deepen the development of methods in all areas of political science.

How can we attract political methodologists who are focused on a broad range of applications? One way is to widen our networks beyond our substantive fields and encourage people working on methods in areas of political science that are underrepresented at POLMETH to attend the meeting. This could mean partnering with a comparativist to include applications to both comparative and American politics in your next POLMETH methods paper or encouraging someone developing methods in other subfields to attend the POLMETH meeting.

Making POLMETH inclusive of all subfields in political science may also mean changing its structure. Scholars often

politics have more female members than the overall average and tend to be less well represented by papers at POLMETH.

Of course, it does not follow directly from this correlation that expanding the scope of general venues in political methodology would also encourage more women to participate. Many more factors influence women's decisions to go into political methodology (Unkovic, Sen, and Quinn 2016; Shames and Wise 2017). I do not want to suggest that broadening the applications at POLMETH would be the silver bullet that would completely solve the problem of including more women in political methodology.

However, regardless of whether or not increasing the scope of POLMETH would increase diversity, the narrow substantive focus of the general methodology conferences does a disservice to the field as a whole, and expanding the scope would push our community to conduct better science. Political methodology should serve the whole field, but as it stands is more likely to serve questions where data is easy to download and field work is not required. Because many mistakenly confuse methodology with the type of method, the meeting sometimes rewards the development of complicated statistical methods that can often only narrowly be applied, at the cost of exploring new applications or simpler approaches that would have a broader impact on research in political science.

tend to first attend POLMETH in graduate school, when many graduate students in subfields outside of American politics tend to be in the field. Perhaps changing the timing of POLMETH would encourage a broader swath of students in all subfields.

I am not advocating that we lower the methodology bar in order to include a broader swath of applications in political methodology. On the contrary, I am encouraging political methodologists to step up to the challenge of answering questions in political science where data is not as easy to access and where methodological questions are paramount. To signal that we are serious about questions, not just selecting on type of methods, POLMETH could also include panels that focus on methods for applications in difficult or data-scarce areas of political science. This would recognize that questions with less data often require more creative methods and we as political methodologists should also focus on answering these questions as well as those with easy data access.

To students of political science: it's never been a better time to be a political methodologist studying questions in subfields less represented at POLMETH. There are new opportunities to develop and understand methods that travel around the world. If you can, join us at the next POLMETH meeting. You will push us to think more broadly. We hope that we can be helpful in transferring tools across subfields and disciplines that will be helpful in your research.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NOTES

1. While in this paper I focus on gender diversity in political methodology because I have data to speak to this question and this was the focus of the APSA roundtable that originated this, racial diversity in political methodology is also a very important problem. I expect many similar arguments would apply, though it's important that future research should study this in more detail.
2. This argument is similar to that made by Lake (2016) about the subfield of international relations.
3. With the exception of the 2014 program which is no longer linked online.

REFERENCES

Abdelal, Rawi, Yoshiko M. Herrera, Alastair Iain Johnston, and Rose McDermott. 2006. "Identity as a Variable." *Perspectives on Politics* 4 (4): 695–711.

Adida, Claire L., Karen E. Ferree, Daniel N. Posner, and Amanda Lea Robinson. 2016. "Who's Asking? Interviewer Coethnicity Effects in African Survey data." *Comparative Political Studies* 49 (12): 1630–60.

Blair, Graeme, and Kosuke Imai. 2012. "Statistical Analysis of List Experiments." *Political Analysis* 20: 47–77.

Catalinac, Amy. 2016. "From Pork to Policy: The Rise of Programmatic Campaigning in Japanese Elections." *The Journal of Politics* 78 (1): 1–18.

Christia, Fotini, Leon Yao, Stephen Wittels, and Jure Leskovec. 2015. "Yemen Calling." *Foreign Affairs*, July 6. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/yemen/2015-07-06/yemen-calling

Collier, David. 2011. "Understanding Process Tracing." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 44 (4): 823–30.

Dunning, Thad. 2008. "Natural and Field Experiments: The Role of Qualitative Methods." *Qualitative and Multi-Method Research* 6 (2): 17–23.

———. 2012. *Natural Experiments in the Social Sciences: A Design-based Approach.* Cambridge University Press.

Eggers, Andrew C., and Arthur Spirling. 2014. "Ministerial Responsiveness in Westminster Systems: Institutional Choices and House of Commons Debate, 1832–1915." *American Journal of Political Science* 58 (4): 873–87.

Ferree, Karen E. 2004. "Iterative approaches to R × C Ecological Inference Problems: Where They Can Go Wrong and One Quick Fix." *Political Analysis* 12: 143–59.

Ghanem, Dalia, and Junjie Zhang. 2014. "Effortless Perfection: Do Chinese Cities Manipulate Air Pollution Data?" *Journal of Environmental Economics and Management* 68 (2): 203–25.

Glynn, Adam N., and Nahomi Ichino. 2015. "Using Qualitative Information to Improve Causal Inference." *American Journal of Political Science* 59 (4): 1055–71.

Golden, Miriam A., and Lucio Picci. 2005. "Proposal for a New Measure of Corruption, Illustrated with Italian Data." *Economics & Politics* 17 (1): 37–75.

Hollyer, James R., B. Peter Rosendorff, and James Raymond Vreeland. 2014. "Measuring Transparency." *Political Analysis* 22 (4): 413–434.

Humphreys, Macartan, and Jeremy M. Weinstein. 2009. "Field Experiments and the Political Economy of Development." *Annual Review of Political Science* 12: 367–78.

King, Gary. 1990. "On Political Methodology." *Political Analysis* 2: 1–29.

King, Gary, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts. 2013. "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression." *American Political Science Review* 107 (2): 326–43.

———. 2014. "Reverse-Engineering Censorship in China: Randomized Experimentation And Participant Observation." *Science* 345 (6199): 1251722–1251722.

King, Gary, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba. 1994. *"Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research."* Princeton University Press.

Lake, David A. 2016. "White Man's IR: An Intellectual Confession." *Perspectives on Politics* 14 (4): 1112–22.

Laver, Michael, Kenneth Benoit, and John Garry. 2003. "Extracting Policy Positions from Political Texts Using Words as Data." *American Political Science Review* 97 (02): 311–331.

Lee, Melissa M., and Nan Zhang. 2017. "Legibility and the Informational Foundations of State Capacity." *The Journal of Politics* 79 (1): 118–32.

Lieberman, Evan S. 2005. "Nested Analysis as a Mixed-Method Strategy for Comparative Research." *American Political Science Review* 99 (3): 435–52.

Lucas, Christopher, Richard Nielsen, Margaret E. Roberts, Brandon M. Stewart, Alex Storer, and Dustin Tingley. 2013. "Computer Assisted Text Analysis for Comparative Politics." *Political Analysis* 23: 254–77.

Mahoney, James, and Kathleen Thelen. 2015. *Advances in Comparative-historical Analysis.* Cambridge University Press.

Mebane, Walter R. Jr. 2010. "Fraud in the 2009 presidential Election in Iran?" *Chance* 23 (1): 6–15.

Pierskalla, Jan H., and Florian M. Hollenbach. 2013. "Technology and Collective Action: The Effect of Cell Phone Coverage on Political Violence in Africa." *American Political Science Review* 107 (2): 207–24.

Roberts, Margaret E., Brandon M. Stewart, and Edoardo M. Airoldi. 2016. "A Model of Text for Experimentation in the Social Sciences." *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 111 (515): 998–1003.

Shames, Shauna L., and Tess Wise. 2017. "Gender, Diversity, and Methods in Political Science: A Theory of Selection and Survival Biases." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 50 (3): 811–23.

Teele, Dawn Langan, and Kathleen Thelen. 2017. "Gender in the Journals: Publication Patterns in Political Science." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 50 (2): 433–447.

Unkovic, Cait, Maya Sen, and Kevin M. Quinn. 2016. "Does Encouragement Matter in Improving Gender Imbalances in Technical Fields? Evidence from a Randomized Controlled Trial." *PloS one* 11 (4): e0151714.