

# Rethinking American Democracy?

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May 1, 2014 marked the 132-year anniversary of International Workers' Day—"May Day"—an event declared by the socialist Second International in 1890 to commemorate the May 1886 labor protests in Haymarket Square, Chicago, that were violently suppressed by the Chicago police.

May 1, 2014 also marked a bizarrely interesting development in the contemporary history of political science in the United States.

For on this day political scientists Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page were the featured guests on "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart." For 6 minutes and 37 seconds, Gilens and Page held forth on their current scientific research for the millions of television viewers who regularly tune in to watch Comedy Central's hottest show.

The research they discussed is the lead (and cover) article of this issue of *Perspectives*.

We accepted the article for publication in late 2013, and scheduled its publication for September, 2014. In Spring 2014, Gilens and Page posted a draft of the article online and began to circulate it. What ensued was a media frenzy about a quantitative analysis of U.S. politics that was not yet even published. In the lead up to Jon Stewart, Gilens and Page's relatively innocuously-titled "Testing Theories of American Politics" was the subject of dozens of columns, newspaper articles, and op-ed pieces. Commenting on the piece in the *New Yorker*, John Cassidy asked "Is America an Oligarchy?" The BBC News reported "Study: US is an Oligarchy, Not a Democracy," commenting: "The US is dominated by a rich and powerful elite . . . This is not news, you say . . . Perhaps, but the two professors have conducted exhaustive research to try to present data-driven support for this conclusion." In "Oligarchy Nation: Political Scientists Find Wealthy Elites Control Politics in America," the *U.S. News and World Report's* Jeff Nesbit observed: "There can be no doubt that economic elites have a disproportionate influence in Washington, or that their views and interests distort policy in ways that don't necessarily benefit the majority: the politicians all know this, and we know it, too. The only debate is about how far this process has gone, and whether we should refer to it as oligarchy or as something else." In his *Talking Points*

*Memo*, Brendan James went further, announcing: "Princeton Study: US No Longer an Actual Democracy."

The extensive attention to the link between economic and political inequality is nothing new either to public discourse or to political science, and indeed it is a theme that our journal has featured frequently in recent years, most notably in our March 2012 issue highlighting "The Politics of Inequality in the Face of Financial Crisis." But in recent months this theme has acquired a particular currency. The strong reception of drafts of the Gilens and Page piece is one sign of this; the extraordinary recognition and success of economist Thomas Piketty's massive *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*—which rapidly rose to the top of the Amazon and *New York Times* bestseller lists—is a second (we will include a discussion of Piketty in a future issue).

These works do more than declare the contemporary economic and political importance of inequality. They develop this theme in a manifestly *scientific* idiom, drawing upon relevant scholarly literatures, deploying empirical evidence, including statistical analysis, and submitting their arguments and conclusions to peer review. Tom McKay put his finger on this in his blog post at *PolicyMic*, noting that: "A new scientific study from Princeton researcher Martin Gilens and Northwestern researcher Benjamin I. Page *has finally put some science behind* the recently popular argument that the United States isn't a democracy any more. And they've found that in fact, America is basically an oligarchy [emphasis added]."

Larry Bartels—whose work on the topic has also been featured in our pages—neatly sums this up in an April 8 *Monkey Cage* post bearing the caption "Rich People Rule": "Everyone thinks they know that money is important in American politics. But *how* important? The Supreme Court's Gilded Age reasoning in *McCutcheon v. FEC* has inspired a flurry of commentary regarding the potential corrosive influence of campaign contributions; but that commentary largely ignores the broader question of how economic power shapes American politics and policy. For decades, most political scientists have sidestepped that question, because it has not seemed amenable to rigorous (meaning quantitative) scientific investigation. Qualitative studies of the political role of economic elites have mostly

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been relegated to the margins of the field. But now, political scientists are belatedly turning more systematic attention to the political impact of wealth, and their findings should reshape how we think about American democracy.”

Bartels’s observation could be regarded as the epigram for this issue of *Perspectives*. But his comment suggests, at least for me, two further questions. The first regards our discipline: Why have studies of inequality been so long relegated to the margins, and does the current moment represent not simply a new attention to the issue by quantitative scholars, but a broader conception of the practice and purpose of political science as a discipline that joins quantitative and qualitative research, empirical, historical, and normative inquiry, and scientific and public credibility? The second question regards the politics of so-called “advanced” (or aging or decaying) democracies like the United States: Will important new political science research reshape what we think about American democracy, and what should political science as a discipline do to cultivate relevant publics and to project itself in a broader political world with its own agendas, centers of power, and means of communication?

These are questions that we hope you will ponder as you read this issue of *Perspectives*. Clearly there is a rethinking going on. At the same time, how substantial or consequential this rethinking turns out to be is an open question. Thus the question mark at the end of my title.

At the same time, my title also means to imply something else: that in returning the study of inequality to the center of the study of American politics, our discipline is also returning the subfield of “American politics” to the fold of political science more broadly, abandoning a certain insularity born of methodological rigor, placing it into fruitful conversations with scholarship in comparative politics, international relations, political theory, and political economy. In our December 2011 issue we published a review essay by Alfred Stepan and Juan Linz on “Comparative Perspectives on Inequality and the Quality of Democracy in the United States.” The piece calls for precisely such a broadening of inquiry: “Now is the time for a new look at the United States, taking into account the wealth of new data and research currently available. Such studies should fully incorporate the fact that the United States, by many of the standard indicators of inequality, is now the most unequal longstanding democracy in a developed country in the world, as tables we will present in this review will make abundantly clear. And yet the preoccupation of many Americanists with America’s distinctive governmental institutions—Congress, the presidency, the Supreme Court—obscures this inequality and what it means for the U.S. political system. It thus seems to us that Americanists’ ability to analyze American politics would be enhanced by locating these problems in a larger, comparative context. Such

a reconceptualization of American politics could help to broaden our discipline and enhance the quality of its generalizing theories. It might also have beneficial political consequences, for the political will to overcome inequality-inducing features of the U.S. political system might be increased if more American politicians, citizens, and analysts were to understand just how equality inhibiting many U.S. political structures and political practices actually are. Yet such a reenvisioning also would require surmounting some powerful barriers that have arisen between subfields in U.S. political science.”

This issue of *Perspectives* is one sign that such a reenvisioning is underway.

All three of our research articles address the themes of power and inequality in American democracy. Our lead article, Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page’s “Testing Three Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens,” requires little introduction. This piece is striking for its combination of empirical modesty and boldness of results. Gilens and Page proceed from the rather straightforward observation that the study of U.S. politics has been characterized by disagreement about the distribution of power. They focus attention on three particularly important approaches—elite theory, interest group pluralism, and median voter theory—and seek to adjudicate their disagreements. Their purpose, as they describe it, is fairly conventional: “to test the differing predictions of these theories against each other within a single statistical model that permits one to analyze the independent effects of each set of actors upon policy outcomes.” The distinguishing feature of their piece is principally methodological: “Prior to the availability of the data set that we analyze here, no one we are aware of has succeeded at assessing interest-group influence over a comprehensive set of issues, while taking into account the impact of either the public at large or economic elites—let alone analyzing all three types of potential influences simultaneously.” Gilens and Page deploy an impressive and extensive data set, encompassing nearly 1800 policy decisions, and subject their data to careful multivariate analysis. While their data are innovative and their methods sophisticated, in approach their piece is a work of normal science. At the same time, their conclusions are radical: “The central point that emerges from our research is that economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while mass-based interest groups and average citizens have little or no independent influence . . . In the United States . . . the majority does *not* rule—at least not in the causal sense of actually determining policy outcomes. When a majority of citizens disagrees with economic elites or with organized interests, they generally lose. Moreover, because of the strong status quo bias built into the U.S. political system, even when fairly large majorities of Americans favor

policy change, they generally do not get it . . . Americans do enjoy many features central to democratic governance, such as regular elections, freedom of speech and association, and a widespread (if still contested) franchise. But we believe that if policymaking is dominated by powerful business organizations and a small number of affluent Americans, then America's claims to being a democratic society are seriously threatened." "Seriously threatened" is not the same as "false," something lost in the media furor surrounding the piece ("Princeton Study: US No Longer an Actual Democracy"; "Study: US is an Oligarchy, Not a Democracy"). All the same, by demonstrating the extent to which economic inequality translates into political inequality, Gilens and Page place in question central legitimacy claims of the U.S. political system.

Alexander Hertel-Fernandez addresses a similar theme in his "Who Passes Business's 'Model Bills'? Legislative Capacity, Interest Group Support, and Reliance on Corporate Policy Proposals," a case study of the conservative American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC). As he writes: "This paper examines ALEC's influence, arguing that the group provides an important window into business power in American politics, a topic that has long generated debates within political science. The primary reason ALEC makes for an interesting case is that it is a major avenue through which companies pursue policy change . . . the structure of ALEC is relatively unusual, providing a case of lobbying that is distinct from other business associations or labor groups since ALEC does not give political contributions or engage in electoral politics. Because of this, ALEC offers a chance to look beyond political campaigning and donations to other mechanisms that businesses use to influence the policymaking process." Hertel-Fernandez combines case study methods with survey research and statistical analysis of variation in legislative influence among the 50 U.S. states. Particularly notable is his ingenious use of leaked internal ALEC documents, which furnish evidence of both strategies of influence and legislative results, and his exceptionally careful discussion of the strengths and limits of this evidence. He thus shows that: "business interests can take advantage of low policy capacity in state legislatures, offering private policy resources to legislators. By providing pre-written model bills, talking points, and extensive research assistance, businesses can attract support from harried, part-time state officials who are in need of precisely such services. Business influence through low policy capacity should be magnified for lawmakers who are already supportive of business interests. This sort of power is different from the pathways typically described in the business politics literature, which often revolve around campaign donations and other financial inducements, or the structural power business enjoys in a capitalist economy. I argue that leveraging weak state policy capacity is precisely the

strategy that ALEC has employed to influence legislation."

Christina Wolbrecht and Michael Hartney's "Ideas about Interests': Explaining the Changing Partisan Politics of Education" addresses an interesting puzzle about post-1980's education politics in the United States: "Why did Republicans move toward what has traditionally been a Democratic party domain (ambitious education policy-making), while Democrats have shifted toward new and even traditionally-Republican policies, such as school choice? Particularly given historic levels of party polarization, how can we explain this partisan convergence on education policy?" Drawing from Kathleen Bawn et al's "A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands, and Nominations in American Politics" (published in the September 2012 issue of *Perspectives*), the authors combine original content analysis and policy histories to both describe and explain how issue redefinition has shaped and been shaped by "shifting policy preferences of important members of both parties' coalitions." Central to their account is the mobilization of segments of the business community behind education reform at the state level and, increasingly, at the federal level as well. "These groups tend to favor aggressive education reform, particularly standards and accountability, and are important sources of research and advocacy, as well as an alternative voice for education professionals." Also important is the role of civil rights organizations, which became "important instigators and developers of new education policy alternatives, particularly related to standards and accountability. As with business interests, the contribution of CROs to education issue redefinition was a response to relevant experiences and developments—particularly the growing evidence of stagnation and achievement gaps for students of color and attacks on the social welfare state" (here they draw in part on Jesse Hessler Rhodes's "Progressive Policymaking in a Conservative Age: Civil Rights and the Politics of Federal Education Standards, Testing, and Accountability," published in the September 2011 issue of *Perspectives*). As a result: "teachers unions face a context less conducive to their uncontested influence . . . By altering the terms of the debate, issue redefinition has made the ability of teachers unions to persuade Democratic party elites to their position an increasingly challenging task, while the shift in the preferences and expanded participation of other coalition groups (that is, the crumbling of the education policy monopoly) has created a more competitive political environment." Wolbrecht and Hartney furnish a nuanced account of a complex policy process in which the interplay of interest group leaders, policy intellectuals and entrepreneurs, and party leaderships contributes to the promotion of neoliberal educational reform. As they write: "Our emphasis on the role of ideas does not contradict the basic premise that what is at stake in policy debates are real conflicts over real

interests with real consequences. . . . Yet, interests are not objective; they must be discovered, understood, and negotiated. The defining of issues—problems and alternatives—is key to that process of interest discovery and understanding. Or, as perhaps the ultimate authority on party politics, E. E. Schattschneider, wrote, ‘it is futile to determine whether men [sic] are stimulated politically by interests or by ideas, for people have ideas about interests.’”

All three articles highlight different aspects of the *politics* of inequality and the ways that inequality is sustained by public policy. The picture of U.S. politics that emerges from them is far from the “free play of interests” claimed by the pluralists of the early 1960’s. At the same time, none of the authors implies that policy outcomes are in any simple sense determined by the *ex ante* distribution of power. As Matt Stoller observed in his commentary on Gilens and Page on the blog *Naked Capitalism*: “The study does not say that the US is an oligarchy, wherein the wealthy control politics with an iron fist. If it were, then things like Social Security, Medicare, food stamps, veterans’ programs, housing finance programs, etc. wouldn’t exist. What the study actually says is that American voters are disorganized and their individualized preferences don’t matter unless voters group themselves into mass membership organizations. Then, if people belong to mass membership organizations, their preferences do matter, but less so than business groups and the wealthy . . . The lesson here is to organize. Citizens can matter, but only if they make themselves matter. Change won’t be distributed like consumer products, wherein high polling numbers just seamlessly translate into policy change . . . the decline of labor unions doesn’t just reduce economic bargaining power, it reduces the political representation of ordinary citizens.” Stoller thus insists on a historical approach that is attentive to the ebbs and flows of political contestation and change.

Ira Katznelson’s *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* offers such a historical perspective. The book analyzes the significance of the New Deal, as a watershed moment in U.S. political history, as a form of “social democracy, American style” that allowed liberal democracy to prevail in competition with Soviet communism and fascism, and as the “origin” of key features of contemporary politics in the United States. The book is a contribution to the study of U.S. politics, but also to the study of comparative politics, international relations, political theory, and comparative history. Our symposium on the book features a range of perspectives by Sheri Berman, Edward G. Carmines, Cathy Cohen, Kimberly Crenshaw, George Lawson, David Mayhew, and William Scheurman.

If the New Deal was one important moment of U.S. political contestation and reform, the U.S. civil rights movement was perhaps the most politically and symbolically important American social movement of the 20th

century. Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” was a central text of the movement, and arguably one of the most important political texts of the century. Jonathan Rieder *Gospel of Freedom: Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Letter from Birmingham Jail and the Struggle That Changed a Nation* offers a rich and sustained account of the role of King’s letter as a contribution to thinking about race and politics, religion and politics, civil disobedience, political ethics, and the struggle for social justice. Our symposium on the book features commentaries by Juliet Hooker and Erica Chenoweth.

Lawrence Jacobs’s Reflections essay on “Health Reform and the Future of American Politics (and Political Science)” engages a third moment of change, one that continues to be contested—The Affordable Care Act of 2010 (ACA), and the reforms to health care policy known as “Obamacare.” Jacobs argues that the ACA is “a landmark in American social policy that . . . introduces new developmental paths that unsettle or, in certain respects, offset the familiar patterns of selectivity, deference to private markets, and ‘drift’ that tend to produce government inaction as economic insecurity increases.” Jacobs does not deny that health care reform, and political reform more generally, faces powerful political obstacles of the sort discussed in the articles by Gilens and Page, Wollbrecht and Hartney, and Hertel-Fernandez. But he points out that these obstacles are sometimes surmounted, circumvented, or chipped away through creative political action. And he suggests that political scientists can be much more attentive to these processes of contesting power. He thus concludes: “The new politics ushered in by the ACA invites a renewal in the study of American politics to span disciplinary cubbyholes; to situate substantive policy into the over-time struggle for political power and institutional position; and to return to the enduring themes of political economy—the elaboration of social rights that interrupt the dependence of citizens on private markets, the insertion of ‘the public’ into previously privatized discourses and decisions, and the fostering of encompassing forms of political representation.”

This theme is also sounded in Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson’s “After the ‘Master Theory’: Downs, Schattschneider, and the Rebirth of Policy-Focused Analysis.” This journal has featured work by Hacker and Pierson before, most notably in our September 2011 symposium on their book *Winner Take-All Politics*. Their “Reflections” essay can be read as a summation of the general approach to U.S. politics featured in this issue; it can also be read as a kind of *manifesto* for historically-oriented, policy-focused research. Hacker and Pierson contend that the study of U.S. politics has long been shaped by the approach to elections classically developed by Anthony Downs in his 1957 *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. American politics is thus seen “as a game among undifferentiated competitors, played out largely through elections, with outcomes

reflecting how formal rules translate election results into legislative votes. In this perspective, voters, campaigns, elections, and the ideological distribution of legislators merit extensive scrutiny. Other features of the political environment—most notably, the policies these legislators help create and the interest groups that struggle over these policies—are deemed largely peripheral.” Hacker and Pierson argue that in recent years a growing body of research—which they label “policy-focused political science—has challenged this approach. Drawing on the landmark work of E. E. Schattschneider, especially his 1960 *The Semi-Sovereign People*, Hacker and Pierson highlight key features of this approach, arguing that: “The payoffs of a policy-focused perspective include a more accurate portrayal of the institutional environment of modern politics, an appreciation for the fundamental importance of organized groups, a better understanding of the dynamics of policy change, and a more accurate mapping of interests, strategies, and influence.” They conclude by returning to the theme of economic inequality, suggesting that an adequate grasp of growing inequality requires a focus on “organized interests” and mobilizations of bias, and that this is increasingly acknowledged by some of the top scholars who have long worked in a Downsian vein.

In 2003, then-APSA President Theda Skocpol appointed a Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy. The Task Force, chaired by Lawrence Jacobs, included a strikingly large number of contributors to this issue of *Perspectives* and a larger number of contributors to recent issues. The Task Force’s 2004 Report, *American Democracy in an Age of Rising Inequality*, highlighted many of the themes featured in this issue of our journal. In the January 2006 issue of our sister publication, *PS: Political Science & Politics*, Jacobs and Skocpol followed up with a call for “Restoring the Tradition of Rigor and Relevance to Political Science.” Their conclusion: political scientists, as professionals, “have broader responsibilities to use our research capacities and teaching opportunities to scrutinize the health of our democracy . . . It is time again for more political scientists to pursue rigor in the service of the public good.”

Such work requires professional incentives and institutional supports. *Perspectives on Politics* was founded in order to furnish one kind of support. By promoting “A Political Science Public Sphere,” our journal seeks to be a space for serious and accessible political science research and writing on matters of public consequence. At the same time, in order for this work to have traction beyond the profession and beyond the academy, it is important for political scientists to be creative, not simply in developing research projects, but in communicating their work to broader publics. This is now widely appreciated in our discipline. It was noted in the 2013 Report of the APSA Publications Planning Ad Hoc Committee chaired by Jennifer

Hochschild, and it is the central mission of the APSA Task Force on Public Engagement currently chaired by Skip Lupia.

This issue of *Perspectives* contains two important discussions of the challenges of such broader communication and public engagement.

The first is our Symposium on Roy Germano’s “Analytic Filmmaking: A New Approach to Research and Publication in the Social Sciences.” Germano’s Abstract succinctly describes his essay: “New digital video technologies are transforming how people everywhere document, publish, and consume information. As knowledge production becomes increasingly oriented towards digital/visual modes of expression, scholars will need new approaches for conducting and publishing research. The purpose of this article is to advance a systematic approach to scholarship called *analytic filmmaking*. I argue that when filming and editing are guided by rigorous social scientific standards, digital video can be a compelling medium for illustrating causal processes, communicating theory-driven explanations, and presenting new empirical findings. I furthermore argue that analytic films offer policymakers and the public an effective way to glean insights from and engage with scholarly research. Throughout the article I draw on examples from my own work to demonstrate the principles of analytic filmmaking in practice and to point out how analytic films complement written scholarship.” Because Germano’s piece provocatively engages so many important epistemic and pedagogical questions, we have invited responses from Sunita Parikh, Dvora Yanow, Jeffrey L. Gould, Henry Farrell, and Davide Panagia.

Last, but surely not least, is Theda Skocpol’s “How the Scholars Strategy Network Helps Academics Gain Public Influence.” Given the growing recognition of the importance of greater public engagement, we have decided to institute a new format, called “Praxis,” featuring reflective essays by political scientists on their experiences trying to promote more publicly engaged scholarship. It is fitting that Skocpol’s piece inaugurate this new format, because of her history of promoting such engagement, some of which is noted above, and because of her work, as APSA President, in helping to get *Perspectives* off the ground. As Skocpol describes: “SSN is approaching 500 scholar-members, ranging from graduate students to university professors in all fields and disciplines. Most of the energy and creativity SSN deploys comes from these members and from teams of leaders who direct 19 regional chapters spread across the country plus working groups focused on issues such as voting rights, health reform implementation, women in government and politics, and the causes and consequences of mass incarceration.” This is a very important enterprise, about which our readers ought to know more. In future issues we will feature pieces on a range of other efforts to project political science into the broader public world.

*A note on this issue:* All of this issue’s articles, and most of the Reflections and Praxis essays, came to us in the course

of “normal” journal operations. At the same time, when it became clear that a good deal of work on U.S. politics was in the queue, and that this work fit well together, we began to plan this special issue on “Rethinking American Democracy?” As with all of our special issues, this one came together because of the excellent work of my extraordinary editorial staff: James Moskowitz, Laura Bucci, Adrian Florea, Rachel Gears, Peter Giordano, Rafael Khachaturian, and Brendon Westler. Laura, a terrific advanced graduate student specializing in U.S. politics, has been especially important in helping to plan this issue. Laura oversees our American Politics book review section. As you will note, for this special issue we have decided to abandon our standard four field review

structure, and to publish a wide range of reviews from all of the standard subfields under the rubric of “Rethinking U.S. Politics.” It should come as no surprise to our readers that there are many books written by scholars of international relations, comparative politics, and political theory that are at least in part about the United States or are relevant to understanding U.S. politics. For while the United States is no doubt a country of great political importance—and while it furnishes the home, and in some respects the intellectual “grounding,” of the American Political Science Association and its members (our primary readership)—in the end, the United States is one country among many, in a political world that eludes the subdisciplinary categories to which we often reduce it.

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# Statement of Mission and Procedures

*Perspectives on Politics* seeks to provide a space for broad and synthetic discussion within the political science profession and between the profession and the broader scholarly and reading publics. Such discussion necessarily draws on and contributes to the scholarship published in the more specialized journals that dominate our discipline. At the same time, *Perspectives* seeks to promote a complementary form of broad public discussion and synergistic understanding within the profession that is essential to advancing scholarship and promoting academic community.

*Perspectives* seeks to nurture a **political science public sphere**, publicizing important scholarly topics, ideas, and innovations, linking scholarly authors and readers, and promoting broad reflexive discussion among political scientists about the work that we do and why this work matters.

*Perspectives* publishes work in a number of formats that mirror the ways that political scientists actually write:

**Research articles:** As a top-tier journal of political science, *Perspectives* accepts scholarly research article submissions and publishes the very best submissions that make it through our double-blind system of peer review and revision. The only thing that differentiates *Perspectives* research articles from other peer-reviewed articles at top journals is that we focus our attention only on work that in some way bridges subfield and methodological divides, and tries to address a broad readership of political scientists about matters of consequence. This typically means that the excellent articles we publish have been extensively revised in sustained dialogue with the editor—me—to

address not simply questions of scholarship but questions of intellectual breadth and readability.

“Reflections” are more reflexive, provocative, or programmatic essays that address important political science questions in interesting ways but are not necessarily as systematic and focused as research articles. These essays often originate as research article submissions, though sometimes they derive from proposals developed in consultation with the editor in chief. Unlike research articles, these essays are not evaluated according to a strict, double-blind peer review process. But they are typically vetted informally with editorial board members or other colleagues, and they are always subjected to critical assessment and careful line-editing by the editor and editorial staff.

Scholarly symposia, critical book dialogues, book review essays, and conventional book reviews are developed and commissioned by the editor in chief, based on authorial queries and ideas, editorial board suggestions, and staff conversations.

*Everything* published in *Perspectives* is carefully vetted and edited. Given our distinctive mission, we work hard to use our range of formats to organize interesting conversations about important issues and events, and to call attention to certain broad themes beyond our profession’s normal subfield categories.

For further details on writing formats and submission guidelines, see our website at <http://www.apsanet.org/perspectives/>