

APSA as amplifier:

How to encourage and promote public voices within political science

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APSA needs to communicate the value of political science research more effectively, but we should also beware the temptation to believe that the association can agree on or deliver a single message that will overcome our problems and win over skeptics in Congress or the press. It is unlikely that any such message exists. Moreover, APSA is not necessarily the best or only means for delivering or disseminating messages about political science. Disciplinary associations face organizational and political constraints that may make them less effective than other means of public outreach. These constraints do not mean that we should be passive, however. APSA should instead support efforts at public engagement by creating incentives for outreach by individual members, including encouraging political scientists to view outreach as a form of disciplinary service, and amplifying those voices that emerge from within the discipline and succeed in the marketplace of ideas. This bottom-up approach will better reflect the pluralism of the field and allow for more creativity and agility in the approaches undertaken.

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There is widespread consensus within the profession that political science should engage more effectively with the public, journalists, and policymakers in the United States, especially after numerous attempts by Congress to reduce or eliminate political science funding by the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the recent success of the Coburn amendment in temporarily restricting the purposes for which NSF funds could be used in political science research. Many scholars have looked to the American Political Science Association (APSA) to improve the image of political science and communicate its value to these stakeholders. The hope, it often seems, is that we can identify a singular message about the value of political science that APSA can use to win over our discipline's critics.

However, research in political science and cognate disciplines suggests that the search for a winning message is likely to be fruitless. While APSA could more effectively promote the merits of political science and its relevance to contemporary problems, it is unlikely that any single message exists that would both satisfy all the different constituencies within the association and mollify the discipline's external critics.

Moreover, APSA and other membership associations face well-known organizational and political constraints that make it difficult to reach a consensus on specific messages or to communicate such messages in an effective manner. Rather than trying to create official messages, APSA should therefore seek to amplify voices and contributions to public life from within political science – an approach that has the potential to be both less divisive internally and more effective than top-down messaging. We provide a brief case study along these lines from political science blogs, which have expanded the role and prominence of the discipline in current debates despite operating independently without any consensus on methods, approaches, or message.

The challenge, however, is that career incentives within the profession fail to sufficiently encourage and facilitate this kind of engagement. We therefore provide a series of proposals for how APSA could more effectively encourage contributions to public life from within the profession and support those attempting such contributions, including promoting the view that public outreach is an important component of disciplinary service and ought to be recognized as such during merit review and promotion decisions. In this way, APSA could help encourage its members to engage in outreach without trying to explicitly dictate the form or content of that outreach.

The payoffs to these efforts for APSA and its members can be significant. By providing new incentives, opportunities, and recognition to political scientists who engage in public outreach and leveraging the efforts of the most effective communicators in the field, APSA can improve the status and profile of the discipline in public life; expand the scope of the funding, speaking, consulting, and publishing opportunities available to scholars in the

field; bring political science research to new audiences among the public and journalists; improve the quality of information available to policy makers; and raise the profile of scholars' home departments and universities.

The necessity of a bottom-up approach

Many political scientists are rightfully frustrated that the value of political science has not been communicated more effectively, but we should be wary of the temptation to believe that APSA can develop some unidentified message that will solve this problem. As we know from research in American politics, this idea, however tempting, lacks empirical support. For instance, commentators have frequently suggested that President Obama could shift the national debate and change policy outcomes by using the bully pulpit or even just adopting different language (e.g., Westen 2012, Brooks 2013, Kuttner 2013). However, the data show that presidents have great difficulty changing public opinion or attracting Congressional support when they go public (e.g., Edwards 2003, Lee 2009). Likewise, research on public opinion and motivated reasoning suggests that persuasion efforts are often ineffective when conflicting messages are available or people are predisposed to resist their content (e.g., Zaller 1992, Taber and Lodge 2006). It is important not to overstate the likely effects of messaging about political science on key audiences and stakeholders even if the messages reach their intended targets.

We would also caution against the assumption that disciplinary associations themselves are responsible for or even especially influential in shaping perceptions of a discipline. Economics is not more prominent and influential in public discourse than political science because of communication from the American Economic Association, but because members of the discipline and smaller, more nimble organizations within economics like the National Bureau of Economic Research have offered policy-relevant advice and commentary based on rigorous empirical and theoretical research. A similar principle is likely to apply to political science and the role of APSA in its reputation and influence.

In particular, political science research suggests that APSA will struggle to adopt a unified message because of the differing views of its many stakeholders and governance structures that allow minority factions to block change. For instance, states with internally heterogeneous or divergent populations often divide power among levels of government (Stepan 1999) or create systems with greater number of veto players rather than unitary parliamentary systems (Mainwaring and Shugart 2002), which can increase governmental tendencies toward inaction (Tsebelis 2002). Likewise, principal-agent theory suggests that significant agency loss often occurs under delegation to an agent like an association (see, e.g., Miller 2005), especially when multiple principals with divergent preferences or incentives are involved (Gailmard 2009; see also Gailmard and Patty 2012).

To the extent that disciplinary associations are effective in promoting their disciplines, it is by leveraging the collective wisdom and contributions of the field. For instance, associations support the publication of journals that select the best research from the field for publication through a distributed process of thousands of article submissions and peer reviews. We should embrace a similar network-style approach to improving the prominence and influence of political science in public life.

Rather than launching a bureaucratic process to develop and broadcast a unified message, APSA should seek to amplify the diverse set of voices within political science while also creating incentives for new voices to emerge. Such a bottom-up approach would encourage more nimble and flexible responses to events and circumstances from entrepreneurial individuals and groups within the field. It is difficult to determine the best messages for communicating with the public or the most promising formats for public engagement. Instead of trying to solve these problems from the top down, we should rely on the response from audiences within and outside political science, which will create a natural evolutionary process that identifies the most compelling voices and the most effective means of communication over time. In our view, the scholars who are most successful at reaching audiences and communicating effectively will maintain engagement over time and encourage others to employ similar approaches. Other efforts will necessarily be less successful, causing those scholars to scale back their involvement, opt out of the process, or try different approaches. APSA can assist in this process by making sure that political scientists who want to engage publically have the opportunity and incentives to do so. Amplifying the efforts of those scholars who wish to engage, and especially those who are able to engage the public most effectively, offers the best long-term hope for success.

A case study: Political science blogs

The growth of political science blogs suggests the potential value of a more decentralized strategy. Over the past ten years, political scientists have used blogs to become regular contributors to public debate (Farrell and Sides 2010). Blogs, of course, are not the only means of contributing to the larger discourse, but they offer advantages such as editorial control and the ability to write and publish quickly that make them an appealing alternative to formats like the traditional op-ed (Sides 2011).

Political science blogs are as varied as the discipline. Almost all regularly engage with current events in politics and present ideas and analysis from scholarly research. Some blogs cover political science writ large while others focus on particular subfields, countries, or regions. Some blogs also provide normative evaluations of political events and policies or comment on non-political topics like academia, popular culture, and sports. This variety

reflects the diverse perspectives, personalities, and goals of different blogs and bloggers. There is not, nor should there be, one template for political science blogging (Farley 2013).

Political science blogs and bloggers have also demonstrated their potential as vehicles for scholarly communication to a broader audience. Some political scientists blog or regularly write as individuals for larger media outlets, including Dan Drezner at the *Washington Post*, Brendan Nyhan (one of the authors of this article) and Lynn Vavreck at the *New York Times*, Seth Masket at *Pacific Standard*, and Jon Bernstein at *Bloomberg View*. Several group political scientist blogs such as *Lawyers, Guns, and Money*, *Crooked Timber*, and the *Duck of Minerva* have built substantial and loyal audiences as independent sites. Individual political scientists like Andrew Gelman and Rick Hasen also maintain popular blogs, while others have become regular contributors to blogs hosted by research institutes like the Program on New Approaches to Regional Security (PONARS) and the Brookings Institution. One political science blog, *The Monkey Cage* (where Sides and Tucker contribute), became part of the *Washington Post* in 2013 after nearly six years as an independent blog.

These blogs may not convince every reader – or member of Congress – of the value of political science. (Indeed, there is likely disagreement about the value of political science among these bloggers themselves.) Nevertheless, blogs do effectively amplify the discipline’s voice. Most importantly, their success illustrates how a diverse group of scholars from within the discipline can influence public debate without any centralized coordination or a unified message.

Policy recommendations

How can political science promote contributions from within the discipline that will increase its profile and contribution to public life? We offer four recommendations.

1. Support blogging by ungating research

The recent report of the APSA Council of the Publications Planning Ad Hoc Committee (2014) is a useful starting point for considering how to promote public engagement with political science research. We strongly support the recommendation to create a “easy, smooth, fast, and egalitarian process to allow bloggers to temporarily ungate any APSA journal article about which the blogger is writing.” This process allows political science bloggers to determine in a distributed fashion which articles are most important, relevant, or topical and to bring them to the attention of a public audience outside of academia. The proposed option to identify a set of blogs that have the discretion to ungate articles without further approval is especially creative and would allow those blogs to quickly make relevant research available, thereby increasing their stature and influence. We (Sides and

Tucker) have been pleasantly surprised at publishers' willingness to ungate articles for posts at The Monkey Cage, but the process is time-consuming and requires substantial startup costs. If APSA could play a coordinating role in securing these agreements from publishers or in providing a staff member whose responsibilities included rapidly facilitating these arrangements, it would be a valuable contribution. We would additionally encourage APSA to expand the list of sites beyond disciplinary blogs to those that often discuss social science research, such as Vox, the Upshot, Wonkblog, and FiveThirtyEight.

By contrast, we are dubious about the benefits of certifying outside blogs as "official" as the report suggests. Having APSA or other disciplinary organizations endorse some blogs and not others is likely to create divisions and conflicts that are not useful. Moreover, official recognition could unnecessarily implicate the associations in controversies involving the content of those blogs. There are more subtle ways to support the most effective blogs (such as facilitating ungateing arrangements with publishers) that avoid these complications.

Rather than endorse existing blogs, APSA or other disciplinary associations could conceivably create new blogs. If so, they should seek to design a process that is as decentralized and demand-driven as possible. First, any such sponsored blog should be created as a new website rather than certifying existing blogs as "official," which should hopefully minimize the potential for crowdout or conflict over certification. Second, political scientists or other contributors should be recruited to compete for the blog by guest-blogging for an interim period. This demonstration period will allow the authors to demonstrate their commitment to the task and skills in the medium. In addition, it will provide performance indicators that make it possible for APSA to evaluate the content of the blog and the success of the authors in engaging with external and internal audiences. Third, APSA should seek to learn from the experiences of other organizations that have developed academic blogs, such as PONARS and the London School of Economics and Political Science, about what techniques and approaches are most effective.

2. Provide training and resources to develop public voices

APSA could seek to provide training and resources to help political scientists learn how to write for a wider audience, which could help improve the quality and reach of new blogs or op-eds from scholars who have previously not participated in public life. This training could consist of panels at conferences, pre-conference short courses, mentoring, and/or video tutorials. APSA could also compile perspectives and "lessons learned" from existing bloggers within the discipline. All of these resources could then be featured on a special part of the APSA website and published in *PS*, helping to disseminate lessons learned efficiently to interested scholars who need advice on how to pursue public writing.

APSA could also learn from or collaborate with existing projects that seek to improve how scholars communicate with the public. For example, the Bridging the Gap project (<http://www.american.edu/sis/BTG/>) holds a summer workshop for international relations scholars that include presentations by editors and bloggers as well as practice writing op-eds and blog posts (for more, see Bruce Jentleson's white paper in this task force report). The OpEd Project (<http://www.theopedproject.org>) is another resource for training scholars, particularly those from underrepresented groups, on how to speak up publicly and communicate more effectively (see also Khalilah Brown-Dean's white paper).

3. Offer incentives and recognition for contributions to public life

APSA should create exposure and status incentives to encourage scholars to step forward and communicate with the broader public. To be sure, public communication may already bring some kinds of recognition already, including raising one's profile among a larger set of disciplinary peers, but such benefits may not be enough for many scholars. One idea is for APSA and its sections as well as affiliated professional associations to give prizes for contributions to public debate. These could reflect not only writing – such as on blogs and op-eds – but other kinds of public engagement, such as service within government. A model for such awards already exists in the prizes given by Sage and the international relations blog Duck of Minerva for the best blogs and blog posts.

Another idea is to use virtual communication among scholars to promote public engagement. One model could be a public engagement newsletter modeled on the *Political Methodologist*, which is a publication of the Political Methodology Section that is widely read among members of the section. The newsletter could help to disseminate best practices for how to engage with the wider public and recognize leaders within the discipline who have taken on the challenge of public engagement. Alternatively, APSA could encourage affiliated sections to promote public communication in their newsletters and to recognize section members who do so.

4. Encourage the recognition of research-oriented public engagement as service.

Though it may be difficult, the most important step that APSA could take would be to encourage members to recognize public engagement as a legitimate form of academic service in hiring, tenure, and promotion decisions. We do not mean to suggest that public engagement can or should substitute for research or teaching. But given that service to a department, university, and/or the discipline is often a tenure criterion, it does seem reasonable to consider public engagement as a form of service. As we noted above, outreach and engagement – like other forms of service – create positive spillovers for

departments and universities. In this case, they can help raise the profile of departments and universities at the local, state, and national level while helping to meet growing demands for evidence of research impact among external stakeholders such as donors. In particular, writing on blogs and other electronic media can provide useful material for universities' outreach to alumni through social media or other mechanisms.

While disagreement may exist about precisely how much public engagement should count in such decisions, we must counter the mistaken idea that disseminating your ideas means you are not a "real" scholar. Many political scientists fear that public engagement could actually *hurt* their chances of tenure or promotion. Like any form of service, public engagement needs to be balanced against the competing demands of research and teaching, but we should strive instead to have it be seen as a *positive* form of service such as being a peer reviewer for a press or journal, serving on a panel to evaluate grant proposals, or sitting on a university or disciplinary committee.

Changing disciplinary norms is of course difficult, but we offer one suggestion as a start. Those of us who are involved in providing written evaluations of our colleagues – third-year reviews, tenure letters, promotion files, letters of recommendation, etc. – should seek to include examples of public engagement in these evaluations as components of disciplinary service. If a colleague's blog post is cited in a court case or a newspaper article, for instance, their contribution should be recognized as a valuable form of service. Fortunately, it is becoming increasingly easy to measure the effects of public engagement in these evaluations by estimating the number of website visitors, articles published, citations in the mainstream media, etc. These measurable indicators of scholarly impact should be included in tenure and promotion reports alongside more traditional metrics. If public engagement were recognized positively in these evaluations more frequently, it could help to change the culture and incentives of the discipline over time. Political scientists who are involved in administration or university committees should also seek to have these measures included among the contributions that are evaluated during tenure and promotion decisions. Again, while we do not propose that public engagement be treated as an alternative to research, it should be recognized as a legitimate form of scholarly service.

Conclusion

We have argued for a bottom-up approach to communicating the value of political science research that is supported by efforts to change the incentives that scholars face to engage in public communication and improving the tools they can use to do so. APSA can be most effective in this process by providing training, resources (which could include sponsoring new blogs), and support to scholars who wish to engage with the public. Though we have proposed recognizing these activities as service, it is worth noting the extent to which

public engagement can also *strengthen* research by challenging us to sharpen our ideas, ask new questions, or consider new avenues of inquiry. By seeking to communicate research findings more effectively, political science will very likely improve the quality of that research as well.

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