



# American Journal of Political Science

Annual Report to the  
Executive Council of the  
Midwest Political Science Association

April 9, 2021

Kathleen Dolan and Jennifer L. Lawless  
*Co-Editors in Chief*

Elizabeth Cohen  
Dan Reiter  
Graeme Robertson  
Jonathan Woon  
*Associate Editors*

Julia Salvatore  
*Managing Editor*

## Introduction

The following pages update key data and report on our second year as co-editors of the *American Journal of Political Science*. The report, which summarizes journal operations from January 1, 2020 – December 31, 2020, also includes a few miscellaneous updates that are relevant to the Association, Board, and user community.

## Journal Performance

Two years into our term – and the most recent year almost completely amid the pandemic – *AJPS* remains as strong as ever in terms of both visibility and impact.

More specifically, the *AJPS* 2019 five-year impact factor (based on citations of papers published in *AJPS* between 2014 and 2018) is 6.991. Using this metric, *AJPS* maintained its spot as the most highly-ranked journal in the discipline. For some context, *International Organization* ranked second, with an impact factor of 6.094, the *American Political Science Review* placed fourth (5.716), and the *Journal of Politics* came in at number 33 (3.234).

In 2020, the *AJPS* Google Scholar h5-index score held steady at 69 for the second year in a row. This is compared to a score of 68 in 2018 and scores of 64 in both 2017 and 2016. This indicates that 69 articles have been cited at least 69 times during the five-year period from June 2015 through June 2020. This score is the highest achieved by any political science journal included in the Google Scholar metric. By comparison, the *American Political Science Review* and the *Journal of Politics* scores are 58 and 54 respectively. Among all social science journals in 2020, *AJPS* ranks 10<sup>th</sup>.

We should also note that our social media visibility continues to rise. As of August 2020, *AJPS* had 14,961 Twitter followers, which represents a 25% increase from last year at this time. We also have 6,109 Facebook followers, which represents a 9% increase during the same period. Part of the growth is likely due to the fact that we have used the *AJPS Editor's Blog* to host a series of posts that provide information to the user community about various aspects of the manuscript submission process as well as gendered patterns of submissions. One of those posts was picked up by Inside Higher Education, as part of a piece on whether female professors are bearing the brunt of Covid (see: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/21/early-journal-submission-data-suggest-covid-19-tanking-womens-research-productivity>).

## Submission and Turnaround Time

From January 1, 2020 to December 31, 2020, we received 1,161 submissions – an average of 3.7 submissions per day that the journal was open (nearly identical to last year). As usual, Comparative Politics (37%) and American Politics (26%) dominated the submission pool. Political Theory (10%), International Relations (13%), Methodology and Formal Theory (13%) lagged behind. Compared to previous years, though, these numbers do represent an uptick in theory, IR, and methods submissions, so we are confident that we will continue to strike more of a subfield balance as the term goes on.

Despite a comparable number of submissions, the mean turnaround time (from date of submission to first decision) improved to 43 days in 2020. This is the fastest turnaround time the journal has seen in 15 years. Roughly one week of this review time is taken up by authors correcting submissions because of failed technical checks and resubmitting the paper, and then our editorial assistants re-conducting the technical check.

<b>Table 1. Manuscript Submissions and Turnaround Time</b>		
<b>Year</b>	<b>Submissions</b>	<b>Turnaround Time</b>
2000	530	46
2001	586	39
2002	657	51
2003	803	36
2004	783	36
2005	691	41
2006	694	67
2007	583	130
2008	531	118
2009	479	113
2010	760	101
2011	665	91
2012	750	107
2013	696	93
2014	874	73
2015	876	45
2016	928	54
2017	906	54
2018	1,035	55
2019	1,185	46
2020	1,161	43

*Note:* Turnaround time is reported in days from initial submission to initial decision.

## **Editorial Decisions**

The overall acceptance rate at *AJPS* remains low: 6.8% from January 1 to December 31, 2020 (nearly identical to 6.7% last year). This rate increases to 10% if we remove desk rejects from the denominator. We sent roughly two-thirds of manuscripts out for review, making our desk rejection percentages somewhat lower than other top journals in the discipline.

Our editorial decisions we made in the second year of our term look very similar to those we

made in the first year. More specifically, roughly 10% of manuscripts receive an invitation to revise and submit, and the overwhelming majority of those manuscripts are ultimately accepted (typically after just one round of revisions). Careful reviews and our detailed letters and instructions to authors have allowed us to ensure that second round R&Rs are rare (see Table 2).

<b>Table 2. Editorial Decisions, 2020</b>			
	<b>Initial Decision</b>	<b>First Revision</b>	<b>Second Revision</b>
Desk Reject	37.2 %		
Reject	52.5	22.1 %	6.3 %
Revise and Resubmit	10.2	18.9	6.3
Accept	0.0	59.0	87.5
N	1155	122	16

## Reviews and Reviewers

From January 1 to December 31, 2020, the editors sent 3,851 reviewer invitations and received 2,228 reviewer reports. Of the reviewers who responded affirmatively to the invitation, 75% completed a review; the other 25% were “uninvited” because we were able to dispose of the manuscript with two reviews. To decline, we require two reviews. To extend an invitation for a revise and resubmit, we require at least three. In general, the reviews were lengthy, detailed, and professional in tone. The mean number of days between sending out a reviewer invitation and receiving a review was 34 days. Remarkably, this number was the same in 2019, so our reviewers have been just as efficient and reliable amid Covid as they had been before.

The reviewers’ recommendations were largely consistent with manuscript decisions. Roughly half (47.3%) recommended an outright rejection; nearly one-third (31.9%) supported an invitation to revise and resubmit; and the remainder supported publication of the initial submission. It’s important to be cautious when considering these proportions, though, as reviewers often click “R&R” despite the fact that the substance of their review points toward a clear decline.

## Conflicts of Interest

In 2020, authors reported a conflict of interest with the editorial team on 21 manuscripts. On an additional 29 manuscripts, a member of the editorial team spotted a conflict.

All 50 of the conflicts involved authors who are colleagues at the same institution, current collaborators, or are/were involved on a dissertation committee with one or more of the editors. In those cases, a different editor was assigned to shepherd the manuscript through the review process. As such it was not necessary to approach the MPSA Publishing Ethics

Committee for any cases this year.

## Miscellaneous Updates

**COVID:** Submissions have remained strong during COVID. Because of overburdened reviewers, we continue to work on expanding our reviewer pool and releasing reviewers when we receive two negative reviews on a manuscript, allowing us to preserve a willing reviewer for another submission.

**Desk Rejects:** We participated in a forthcoming symposium on desk rejects for *PS*. Although we presented the preliminary data in our mid-year report, we do want to call attention to a few key pieces of information we included in our piece.

First, we do not pre-determine the number or percentage of submissions to desk reject. Rather, we approach each manuscript with an eye toward determining whether it is suitable for review at a top-tier, general audience journal. That assessment led us to desk reject 377 of the 1,408 submissions we received in our first year as editors. This figure, not driven by a quota or target number, should quell concerns among those who believe that the premier journals in the discipline desk reject as many manuscripts as they send out for review.<sup>1</sup>

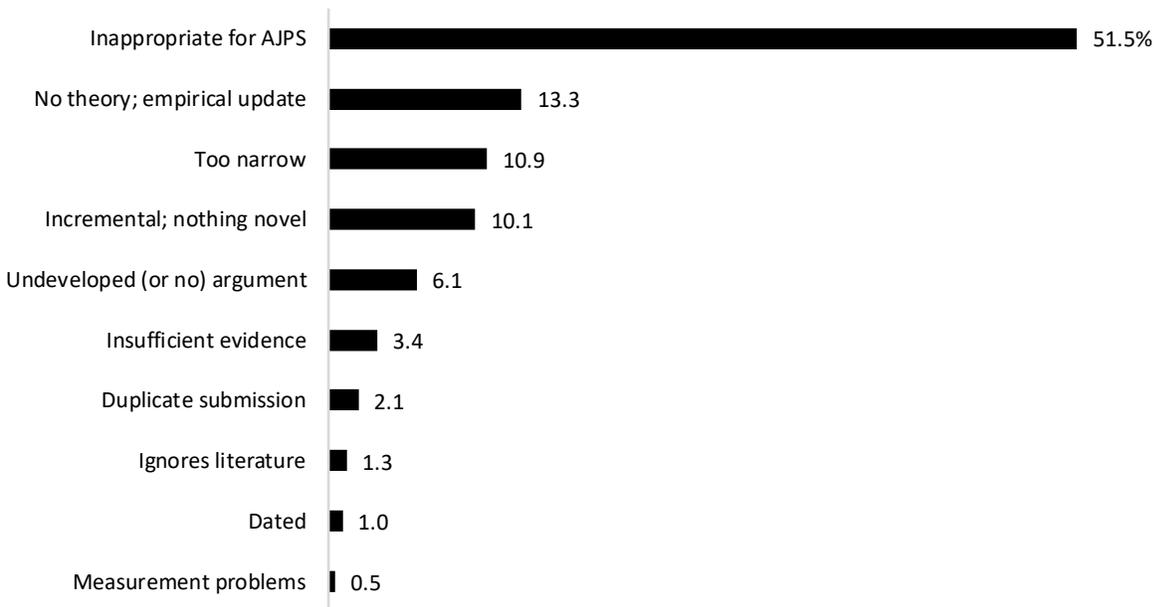
Second, we employ a complex process that includes several people and subfield experts before desk rejecting a submission. The first step in the submission process is a technical check, during which a highly-trained team of doctoral students reviews submissions to ensure that they meet formatting and anonymity guidelines. Prior to considering formatting and anonymity, though, these editorial assistants flag manuscripts that do not appear to meet the baseline criteria for a manuscript at *AJPS* – manuscripts that are journalistic or opinion pieces, review essays, or those that contain no data or theoretical argument. As Co-Editors-in-Chief, we review the flagged manuscripts and determine whether each is, in fact, inappropriate for *AJPS*. Because this decision precedes the formatting and anonymity aspects of the technical check, we can issue it quickly (typically within three to five days). Of the 377 manuscripts we desk rejected, more than half (194) fell into this category (see Figure 1). The majority of desk rejections we issue, therefore, involves manuscripts that are simply not political science as we commonly understand it.

Manuscripts that make it through the complete technical check are then assigned to subfield experts: the co-editors for American Politics and the relevant associate editors for Comparative Politics, International Relations, Political Theory, and Formal Theory and Methods. At this stage of the process, the subfield expert considers whether the manuscript makes a theoretical and/or empirical contribution adequate to give it a chance to receive positive external reviews. In the context of a journal that accepted less than 10% of the manuscripts sent out for review, it doesn't make sense for us to put under review a manuscript that clearly does not meet the substantive criteria for potential success. During the first year of our term, 183 manuscripts fell into this category.

---

<sup>1</sup> Our desk reject rate is comparable to that of previous *AJPS* editorial teams. Dating back to 2015, the annual percentage of manuscripts that received a desk rejection varied from 21 to 27 percent. The slow upward trend is far less dramatic than the 60% increase in submissions during the same period of time.

**Figure 1. Reasons for Desk Rejects at *AJPS***



*Notes:* Data are based on the 377 manuscripts we desk rejected from June 1, 2019 – May 31, 2020. Bars represent the reason for declining to send the manuscript out for review.

Some manuscripts were essentially empirical exercises with no animating theoretical foundation or clear research question. Others offered mismatched theory and data. Some manuscripts submitted in 2020 took on interesting and relevant political questions, but relied on dated evidence that did not adequately test the author’s hypotheses. Many submissions failed to break new ground. And still others were duplicate submissions; our policy precludes resubmitting a revised version of a manuscript that was previously rejected, even by a previous editorial team.

We recognize that critics of desk rejects often point out that the practice – regardless of how judiciously it is employed – carries with it two undesirable consequences: (1) It leaves authors without the kind of significant feedback that might help strengthen their work; and (2) It has the potential to undermine issues of equity by disproportionately hurting scholars who are not well-resourced and/or from traditionally under-represented groups. These criticisms are often made without the benefit of available data. So we weigh in on them with data from our first year at *AJPS*.

Turning first to the feedback issue, the exponential growth in submissions, along with the launch of a number of new journals since 2010, means that reviewer fatigue is a real and growing problem. At *AJPS*, we are relatively fortunate that our reviewer-refusal rate doesn’t appear to be as high as it is at many other journals. But when people do decline our invitations, the primary reason is that they are already overcommitted in the number of reviews they have to produce. If we don’t see a manuscript as substantively strong enough to have even a small chance of receiving positive reviews, a desk rejection allows us to “save” reviewers for a manuscript that has a better chance of success. But it also allows the authors to move immediately to put the manuscript under review at a more appropriate

journal, saving them time on the publication clock. Our desk reject policy, in other words, is for the sake of authors as much as for the sake of reviewers.

As far as equity is concerned, critics of desk rejects suggest that the practice disproportionately hurts certain scholars – namely those outside the R1 universe, junior scholars, female scholars, and scholars of color. The logic is that members of these groups are less likely to be nested in networks where they can gain feedback and critiques of their work. Accordingly, we hand-coded all desk rejected manuscripts for a series of equity-related characteristics about the author(s).<sup>2</sup>

And we find no clear evidence that authors who might be considered by some to be from disadvantaged groups were any more likely than others to be desk rejected. Solo-authored papers constituted the majority of desk rejects (54%), but not by a substantial margin. Half the papers we desk rejected were authored by at least one scholar from an R1 institution. More than four out of every 10 desk rejected manuscripts (43%) had at least one tenured author. And just 3% percent of desk rejects included a Black author. Sex is the one variable where we do have information on the entire pool of submissions. And here, women comprise about one-third of submitting authors, as well as one-third of desk rejected authors. Again, although we must be cautious when interpreting these data and careful not to make direct comparisons to the overall pool of submitted manuscripts, these numbers do not suggest that any one category of scholars is bearing the brunt of the desk reject process.

The practice of desk rejecting journal submissions raises a host of important issues that relate to one of the central dictates of our discipline: the need to publish in peer-reviewed outlets. The pressure scholars face to publish their work contributes to the escalating submission patterns at top journals, the proliferation of the number and range of journals, and reviewer fatigue. The elephant in the room is the degree to which our disciplinary norms have socialized scholars to use the journal submission process to receive feedback on their work.

**Verification:** The verification process has now been underway at *AJPS* for more than six years. And based on our experience dealing with both quantitative and qualitative verification over the course of the last two years, we want to begin a conversation about the process and evaluate its strengths. We have begun these discussions among the editorial team and plan at the April meeting to focus on the extent to which Board members believe that verification is meeting its goals or potentially harming our competitive position in the discipline. After collecting that information, we will launch a survey of MPSA members about their attitudes toward verification as well as a more specific survey of published authors who have undergone the process. We have no plans to propose or enact change at this time. We do believe, however, that a systematic evaluation of the process is warranted.



---

<sup>2</sup> These data, of course, can only speak to the representation of authors within the pool of desk rejects. They do not tell us anything about whether women, or untenured faculty members, or scholars from outside the U.S. are over-represented in the desk reject pool as a proportion of their presence in the pool of submissions. In our year as co-editors, we have learned the limitations of the editorial management systems that most journals use and how little information we gather about the people who submit manuscripts.

## Appendix: Editorial Team

### Co-Editors in Chief (and Field Editors for American Politics):

- Kathleen Dolan, University of Wisconsin Milwaukee
- Jennifer L. Lawless, University of Virginia

### Associate Editors:

- Elizabeth Cohen, Syracuse University
- Dan Reiter, Emory University
- Graeme Robertson, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
- Jonathan Woon, University of Pittsburgh

### Editorial Board:

Antoine Banks, University of Maryland	Anthony Lopez, Washington State University
Brandon Bartels, George Washington University	David Lublin, American University
Shaun Bowler, University of California, Riverside	Ellen Lust, University of Gothenburg
David Broockman, University of California, Berkeley	Elizabeth Markovits, Mount Holyoke College
Sarah Brooks, Ohio State University	Rahsaan Maxwell, University of North Carolina
Ethan Bueno de Mesquita, University of Chicago	Alison McQueen, Stanford University
Michael Colaresi, University of Pittsburgh	Ken Meier, American University
James Druckman, Northwestern University	Terry Moe, Stanford University
Leonard Feldman, Hunter College	M. Victoria Murillo, Columbia University
Richard Fox, Loyola Marymount University	Zoe Oxley, Union College
Bernard Fraga, University of Indiana	Efren Perez, University of California, Los Angeles
Kim Fridkin, Arizona State University	Jeremy Pope, Brigham Young University
Timothy Frye, Columbia University	Markus Prior, Princeton University
Scott Gehlbach, University of Chicago	Molly Roberts, University of California, San Diego
Hahrie Han, Johns Hopkins University	Melvin Rogers, Brown University
Danny Hayes, George Washington University	Deondra Rose, Duke University
Sunshine Hillygus, Duke University	Kira Sanbonmatsu, Rutgers University
Magda Hinojosa, Arizona State University	Melissa Schwartzberg, New York University
Mala Htun, University of New Mexico	Paru Shah, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee
Valerie Hudson, Texas A&M University	David Siegel, Duke University
Susan Hyde, University of California, Berkeley	Randy Stevenson, Rice University
Robert Jervis, Columbia University	Tracy Sulkin, University of Illinois
Kristin Kanthak, University of Pittsburgh	Wendy Tam Cho, University of Illinois
Kimuli Kasara, Columbia University	Sean Theriault, University of Texas
Joshua Kertzer, Harvard University	Debra Thompson, University of Oregon
Jack Knight, Duke University	Michael Tomz, Stanford University
Sarah Kreps, Cornell University	Lee Walker, University of North Texas
Mona Lena Krook, Rutgers University	Jessica Weeks, University of Wisconsin, Madison
Ashley Leeds, Rice University	Tepei Yamamoto, MIT