

PERESTROIKA!

**The Raucous Rebellion
in Political Science**

EDITED BY

Kristen Renwick Monroe

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS

New Haven and London

The Emperor Had No Clothes

The Politics of Taking Back the APSR

Sven Steinmo

Teaching to the Test

Few political scientists would advocate introducing a national standardized test to measure faculty performance or potential job candidates in political science. Such a test would threaten both our academic freedoms and the quality of our graduate education, because it would create incentives to “teach to the test.” I believe that much of the frustration and anger expressed through the Perestroika movement was in part evoked by the fact that the *American Political Science Review* (APSR) has become something analogous to a standardized test in many political science departments across the country. I further believe that the increasing methodological and intellectual narrowness of this journal did in fact undermine the quality of our graduate training as well as intellectual freedom within our profession.

The complaints against the APSR are well known. The facts of the journal’s methodological or quantitative bias are documented in the chapter of this volume by David Pion-Berlin and Dan Cleary. But so what? There are lots of specialized journals in political science. Why should it bother me or anyone else that the APSR is so narrow or specialized? Why not just be content to publish elsewhere? There are, after all, plenty of outlets for good work. The answer, of course, is obvious: the APSR is *the* journal.

How many times have you heard “We have to train our graduate students so that they can publish in the APSR” or the corollary, “We need to hire someone who can teach our graduate students to publish in the APSR”? These are arguments for “teaching to the test.” We have all heard advocates of this position argue that we should interview or hire candidate *X* over candidate *Y* *simply* because candidate *X* is more competent in the particular methodologies favored by the APSR. Indeed an even more pernicious argument (yet one all too common) is that we *should not* interview or hire candidate *Y* or *Z* because he or she cannot teach the kinds of methodologies that must be used to publish in the APSR—*no matter how important the candidate’s work or how profound his or her ideas.*

Of course Professor Robert Jervis is correct when he admonishes his colleagues not to fall into this kind of trap (see Jervis chapter in this volume). But unfortunately the implication that political science departments should simply pay less attention to publication in the APSR and instead look to the intrinsic merit of our colleagues’ work is not likely to be achieved in many departments in this country. Why? In most departments, publication in the APSR counts for more than publication in any other journal because we have no objective standards of merit in social science. Thus when making a case for tenure or promotion before deans and committees who are not political scientists, we are often drawn to easy markers. The APSR is such a marker. Similarly, when political science departments struggle for scarce resources within their universities, the simplest and most powerful indicator of departmental merit is often the number of publications in the national association’s officially sanctioned journal. No private journal or regional journal has this power.

Because the APSR had become the equivalent of a national standardized test and published only some types of political science, scholars who chose to pursue other types of political science were competitively disadvantaged compared to those who “wrote to the test.” Rational actors understood this. Thus, when faced with choices about graduate training, we all confronted powerful incentives to add more and more sophisticated methodological training to our programs.

Given limited resources and pressures to graduate our PhDs more quickly, the decision to teach more methodology came with costs: program after program in the United States cut back on language requirements, theory requirements, and field survey requirements, and—and in my view most frightening—many departments began rolling back or eliminating comprehensive field exams. In short, methodological sophistication has come at the cost of intellectual and substantive depth and breadth. Is this because political scientists agree that “breadth” requirements are bad—that political scientists do not need broad training? Hardly. Rather, even advocates of breadth and depth want our students to do well in the job market. We know that as job candidates our students will face the same questions and issues that we fight over in our own departments. One way or the other, they too will be confronted with the question “Can you teach to the test?” In short, as the technical requirements for publication in the APSR have increased, the breadth requirements in our PhD programs have decreased. In my view, we have impoverished our programs—not to mention our students and our discipline.

If the APSR was neutral to methodological, theoretical, and epistemological orientations and did indeed publish the best work across the many subfields of political science, many like myself would have much less to worry about. But this clearly has not been the case.

From Apathy to Anger

Perhaps there was little new or unique in these complaints about the APSR and its effects on our profession (see Samuel Beer’s chapter in this volume). Very

clearly, many people have long resented the narrowness of the *APSR* and the impact of that narrowness on our profession as a whole. According to an official APSA study conducted in 1998, nearly half of all political scientists had serious complaints about the *APSR*.¹ Certainly the Perestroika movement that erupted in October 2000 was at least in part motivated by similar frustrations with this journal. The obvious question was “Why had nothing been done about it?” And, beyond that, “Why, have so many political scientists continued to subsidize a journal that is not relevant to their research or teaching, and may even undermine their profession?”

By the late 1990s I personally had grown very frustrated and angry with this state of affairs. By then I had several friends and colleagues who had dropped out of their professional association as a specific protest against the *APSR*, and several others who had told me that they simply threw the journal away when it arrived in their mailboxes. The final straw for me came while participating on a search committee in 1997. I was particularly attracted to a specific candidate who studied American political development (APD). The candidate had just finished his PhD, had extraordinarily positive letters of recommendations from some of the top Americanists in the world, and already had a book manuscript accepted by Princeton University Press. I argued that we should interview this candidate, but was outvoted by my colleagues on the committee. Their argument for rejecting this candidate out of hand was quite simple: “He will never publish in the *APSR*.” One colleague went on to argue, “It may be OK for you comparativists to not publish in the *APSR*. But for Americanists it is essential.” When I asked how my colleague knew this young candidate would “never” publish in the *APSR*, he responded, “The *APSR* doesn’t publish that kind of work.” Of course I knew he was right. The point was not lost on me. The rejection of this candidate had nothing to do with his intellectual or scholarly merit; it was simply that his qualitative work in APD was “not the kind of work” that is publishable in the APSA’s professional journal. In short, the *APSR*’s methodological bias eliminated this candidate—and many others—from the pool of acceptable candidates in American politics at the University of Colorado. I was despondent and furious.²

At this point I decided to try to figure out how and why we as an association had gotten ourselves into this situation. If so many people were upset with the editorial policies of the *APSR*, and if the *APSR* is as influential and important as I believe it is, why doesn’t it change? Why, I asked many colleagues and friends, don’t we do something about this?

The virtually universal response was “Any effort at reform would be wasted effort.” This argument held that the *APSR* had long been the domain of highly specialized, very quantitative types of political scientists—and there was simply nothing that could be done about it. History seemed to prove this fact. When pressed, however, no one who made this argument seemed to know where the journal’s policies were made, how editorial decisions were made, or how they could be changed. It was simply assumed that nothing could be

done. At best there was enormous apathy, at worst a sense of conspiracy. The common attitude seemed to be “*They* don’t publish ‘our’ kind of work. And *they* never will. . . . You are simply wasting your time to try to change this long-standing fact.” When I asked who “they” were, the only substantive answer I could get was “The editor” or “The editorial board.” I went on to ask who chose the editorial board and discovered that the editor chooses the board.³ The next obvious question, of course, was “Who chooses the editor?”

Taking Back the *APSR*

In December 1998 I sent an e-mail message to a small number of colleagues requesting that they nominate me for a position on the Executive Council of the APSA. When one colleague, Mark Blyth, asked, “Why in the hell would you want me to do that?” I told him, “To take back the *APSR*.” He told me that if I would write up a short campaign platform, he’d send it around and attempt to generate some more support. I wrote the following:

December 16, 1998

“Take Back the *APSR*” is about getting a journal that is more representative of the actual reading/publishing interests in the profession. There is massive dissatisfaction with the journal today (according to a study done by the APSA this summer). It is a no brainer as to why. So, I say, Take It Back. Give it to the members rather than to a particular methodological/theoretical group. The issue is that the *APSR* is run as a closed shop. If I understand correctly, and I think I do, under current rules the *APSR* board is self-selecting. I would love to be on the board, but there is no point of access under current rules as I understand them. So, ever the institutionalist, I say, get on the APSA Council and propose changing the rules. It seems to me incredible that an association of political scientists would allow their main journal to be governed by such undemocratic processes—especially when there is such dissatisfaction with the way it is run today.

I have two specific alternative proposals for the *APSR*: First, open the board to a democratic process. Let all members select the board. This, I believe, would force the *APSR* to be more representative in its editorial policies. Alternatively, allow APSA members to opt out of getting the *APSR* (and opt out of subsidizing it). Instead each member could choose to receive an alternative journal (which could be worked out by contract with a host of journals). This latter alternative would “let a thousand flowers bloom,” and reduce the subsidy we all give to a particular type of political science.

Let me be perfectly clear. I am not suggesting that we make it “easier” to publish in the *APSR*. Instead, I am saying that we should have an *APSR* that satisfies THE READERSHIP better than the current one does. I know many, many, political scientists who do not read the journal (which they must buy nonetheless) and many who resent subsidizing a journal they get no use from. On that note, by the way, the “Book Review” section could easily be put together with *PS*, which is useful to a lot more members of the association.

I really don't know if the voting for Council makes a difference. But in the *PS* this month (page 884) there is a ballot. So, use it. We'll see what happens.

Sven Steinmo

Blyth sent this "platform" around to those on his e-mail list that he usually reserves for jokes (perhaps he thought I really was just joking). But he added:

Personally, I think this is a wonderful idea. We all know about collective action problems, so let's not even go there. Please take the time to find the requisite form in this month's *PS* and nominate Sven Steinmo, University of Colorado, Boulder, to the APSA Council. Things will only get better if we try. Please feel free to forward this to anyone you might think would be sympathetic.

Sincerely, Mark

The response was really quite astounding. Though this e-mail/platform never had anything like the visibility of the Perestroika letter sent around approximately two years later, it did have an impact. I was told that I received more than seventy individual nominations to the APSA Executive Council and that this was a record for the association. Much to my surprise, I was nominated by the Nominating Committee that spring and began my term in the fall of 1999.

The Emperor Had No Clothes

My firm expectation was that when I finally did get into the "corridors of power" I would be ignored or discounted. Like many eventual Perestroikans, I simply assumed that the association was effectively run by a cabal of elites who managed the profession (and their journal) to suit their own needs and intellectual preferences. I assumed that if anything was to be done, it would require a systematic and sustained effort against the well-organized and coherent opposition of intransigent elites. I fully assumed I would fail.

What I actually found, however, was quite different. The APSA Executive Council was not populated by any coherent group. In fact, it was quickly obvious that the Council was instead made up of people with a very diverse set of interests from across the profession. I soon learned that the Nominating Committee goes to great pains to include representatives from all over the profession. I was genuinely surprised. My colleagues sitting around the Council table in fact were very diverse (much more so than a typical political science department) in terms of age, race, gender, sexual orientation, and so on, as well as size and status of school, region of the country, and substantive or theoretical orientation.

I soon came to the opinion that a key problem in the association—and a key problem for the governance of the *APSR*—was precisely that there was so

much diversity on the so-called Executive Council that it was difficult for this committee to do much beyond approve the suggestions presented to them by the APSA president, his or her subcommittees, and the association's staff. The real work and power, I discovered, were to be found not on the Council, but instead on the ad hoc or working committees, as well as on the APSA staff. Visions of smoke-filled rooms and episodes of *Yes, Minister* came immediately to mind. The APSA Council looked remarkably like a classic Parliament (a.k.a. a rubber stamp).

But even rubber stamp parliaments are not powerless. They can, at a minimum, withhold their stamp. Perhaps more important, they can be mechanisms for bringing policy ideas or voter discontent to the executive.⁴ Because I had been nominated to the Council with a specific agenda, I decided to poll other members of the Council to see how they felt about the *APSR*. Somewhat to my surprise, I found that the general discontent with the *APSR* was widely shared by those on the Executive Council. By my count, at least, a majority of Council members supported the idea of making the *APSR* a broader and more intellectually pluralistic journal. Indeed a large percentage of the APSA Executive Council members admitted to me quite frankly that they too did not read, were not interested in, and were quite frustrated with the *APSR*. Even the incoming APSA president, Bob Keohane, admitted to a small group of us at a breakfast meeting in 1999 that he was very sympathetic to our complaints and that a central reason that he had helped start the journal *International Organization* had been his frustrations with the *APSR*.

Probably because of my activism on this issue, President Keohane asked me to serve on the Strategic Planning Committee, which was charged to examine a host of broad policy issues and practices of the association. We were specifically mandated to examine APSA publications.⁵ Of course I assumed that it would be on this committee that the *APSR* reform initiative would be killed. Committees are, after all, the deathbeds of many good ideas. Several of the committee members, moreover, were quantitatively oriented political scientists who had published a number of articles in the *APSR*. Much to my surprise, however, even on this committee, and even among several of the members who had published in the *APSR*, there was little support for a narrow, methodologically driven professional journal. It is probably fair to say that some members of this committee were initially unaware of the deep frustrations of many APSA members with the journal, but it would be equally fair to say that they were remarkably open to the concerns that I along with several other members on the committee raised. No one attempted to defend an editorial policy that de facto excluded some types of political science on the basis of methodology, theory, epistemology, or orientation. To be sure, some committee members initially doubted that such a bias existed (or believed that, if it did exist, it was the fault of those who did not send their work to the *APSR* for review).

It was precisely at this time (winter of 2000) that the Perestroika storm erupted. What began as a single e-mail message soon blossomed into a major movement. Articulated by many of the profession's most highly acclaimed

scholars, the enormous frustration within the profession was impossible to ignore. Though certainly the efforts to reform the *APSR* were already well in motion by the time Perestroika took off, there can be no denying that this movement added a huge momentum, legitimacy, and urgency to our reform efforts.

In the end, the Strategic Planning Committee concluded as follows: "There are problems with the *APSR*. . . . The problems are sufficiently worrisome as to suggest corrective actions be taken at this time, so that the *APSR* can be the true flagship journal for our discipline that it aspires to be." Noting that member disaffection with the journal was a serious problem for the association, the committee specifically argued, "The central source of this dissatisfaction is rooted in the widespread perception that the work published in the *APSR* represents the best cutting-edge scholarship of some fields of the discipline and of some theoretical and methodological approaches, but not of others. To the extent these perceptions are valid, the *APSR* can not be considered the discipline's flagship journal."⁶ No one would defend an intellectually narrow journal. The emperor had no clothes.

Reforming the *APSR*

The Strategic Planning Committee made few specific policy suggestions, in part because we felt that these substantive policy decisions should be made by the Council and in part because the Council was concurrently in the process of selecting a new editor for the journal. This was a delicate and difficult process in its own right, and we were loath to complicate this process with a set of very specific mandates. The committee concluded that it would be better to present the issues strongly to the Council and allow them to integrate consideration of these issues into the process of selecting of the next *APSR* editor. Clearly our report and the growing pressure from the Perestroika movement placed substantial pressure on the selection committee to find a new editor who would be open and responsive to the demands for greater intellectual, theoretical, and methodological diversity.

In my opinion, the selection committee recommended an ideal candidate to change the *APSR*: Lee Sigelman. Professor Sigelman is a broad-minded, intellectually open, and remarkably tolerant scholar. Equally important, he took the concerns of those in the Perestroika movement and the *APSR* reform movement very seriously indeed. He addressed these concerns very specifically in his comments to the Council in 2001. I believe that he is now making, and will continue to make, significant progress toward improving and broadening the *APSR*.⁷

I did not believe, however, that simply choosing a new editor was enough. The problems and concerns many had expressed vis-à-vis the *APSR* had not been the product simply of narrow editorial policies. Moreover, no matter how sincere the current editor was (and I believed he was quite sincere), he would be in his position for only a few years. Structural changes were also necessary.

In 2001 the APSA Council made three additional and extraordinarily important policy decisions, each intended to bring about greater intellectual diversity in the publications of the APSA. First, the *APSR* editorial board must now be specifically approved by the APSA Council. The editor is specifically charged to demonstrate the intellectual and methodological diversity of the editorial board he or she proposes. Second, the Council initiated a new journal, *Perspectives on Politics* (*POP*), with the intention that it publish broad review essays and surveys of the discipline.⁸ Finally, the Council also has moved to delink APSA membership from *APSR* subscription.⁹ The logic here is that if the *APSR* (or, for that matter, *POP*) is subjected to market pressures it (or they) will be forced to be more responsive to its (or their) readership.

Taken together, these reforms imply a sea change for the *APSR*. As things now stand, the editor is specifically mandated to broaden the intellectual and methodological diversity of the articles published in the *APSR*. Second, the editorial board will henceforth be selected by a fundamentally more open and democratic process than in the past. Finally, APSA members will have the option of not receiving the *APSR* if it does not serve them.

The Politics of Political Science: Lessons Learned

The most obvious lesson that I have drawn from my own personal experience is that the APSA can be a remarkably responsive organization. This organization, in my experience, is *not* run by a cabal of elites—either from the East Coast elite universities or from the Midwest public schools. Instead, a critical problem for the association and for its members is apathy.

I can also say with conviction that the *APSR* does not currently exercise a methodological bias in its editorial policies. But the journal can publish only work that is sent in for review. The journal's long history still hangs over it, and many scholars apparently do not send in their work to the *Review* for fear that it will not be treated fairly. If constructivists, interpretivists, case study analysts, and so on wish to see much more of "their" type of work published in the *APSR*, they must (we must) send it in for review. The *APSR* *should* be a highly competitive journal. It *should* be difficult to publish in this journal—but this fact should not dissuade nonquantitative scholars from taking a shot at it.¹⁰

Finally, we must continue to apply political pressure to the APSA and its journals to value intellectual diversity—both in the association's publications and at its annual meetings. The Perestroika movement in particular has had a powerful impact in the last couple of years. But there should be no doubt that the battle for intellectual diversity is far from over. To be sure, those with a much narrower vision of what should constitute political "science" have been set on their heels, but they are not likely to recede into the night. If the struggle for intellectual diversity is to be won, it must be sustained politically for years and years to come.

I began this chapter suggesting that the *APSR* had become something analogous to a national standardized test in political science and that this test was

clearly biased in favor of a very narrow version of political science. I believe the *APSR* is now a more open and diverse professional journal than it was just a few years ago. It is less “standardized.” Only time will tell, however, if the changes discussed here will have similar consequences for the profession as a whole. I certainly hope so.

Notes

1. In 1998 the APSA conducted a random survey of past and present membership. The key findings of this survey were that for the most part members were largely satisfied with or ignorant of the majority of the association’s endeavors—with one glaring exception. This survey revealed enormous frustration with and anger toward the *APSR*. Nearly half of respondents expressed negative attitudes—and often very negative attitudes—toward the *APSR*. No other function, program, or publication of the APSA evoked anything like the outpouring of ill will that was expressed toward the *APSR*.

2. We went on to hire a young candidate who had published in the *APSR*. Nothing in my comments here or elsewhere should be interpreted to suggest that I believe that publishing in the *APSR* was a mark of poor scholarship. I was (and continue to be) an enthusiastic supporter of the candidates we eventually did hire. My point here is that the methodological bias in the publishing output of the *APSR* eliminated a number of candidates from consideration—irrespective of these candidates’ intellectual or scholarly merit. I am quite confident that my department is in no way unique in this regard.

3. It is significant that at that time the editor was given complete freedom to choose any editorial board he or she preferred. Surprisingly, the editor did not even have to submit his or her board nominations for approval to the APSA Executive Council.

4. Reforming the APSA governance itself has not been a major priority on my agenda. But it has become clear to me that one of the problems for the APSA in terms of democratic governance is that Council members are appointed for two-year terms. Given the enormous number of complicated issues that the Council votes on at each meeting, it is very unusual for Council members to take strong stands on issues. Few members come to the Council with a specific policy agenda. More often than not, new members are overwhelmed by each meeting’s agenda during their first year and are loath to introduce new issues or complications during their second year when they are unable to follow these issues through. Moreover, given the very tight agenda facing the Council at each of its biannual meetings, there is very little opportunity to bring new issues to the table—especially when these issues (such as changing the *APSR*) require a great deal of consideration and are likely to evoke considerable controversy . . . and when it is already 4 p.m. and Council members want to get out of the room.

5. For a discussion of the origins of the Strategic Planning Committee and its early deliberations, see Catherine Rudder, “Executive Director’s Report, 2000,” <http://209.235.241.4/PS/sept00/rudder.cfm>. For the full report of the Strategic Planning Committee, see APSA Strategic Planning Committee, “Planning Our Future,” <http://209.235.241.4/new/planning/finalreport.cfm>.

6. APSA Strategic Planning Committee, “Planning Our Future,” 18.

7. Professor Sigelman has initiated a series of reforms and changes in editorial policy, including taking great care to construct a broadly diverse editorial board and creating an executive committee that is specifically charged to review his editorial policies and decisions. For a list of his editorial policies, see “Letter from the Editor” in the March 2002 issue of the *APSR*.

8. Perhaps I should note that I was not in favor of this new journal initially. My skepticism grew out of the fear that the creation of such a journal could take the pressure off the *APSR* to be broader and more intellectually diverse. Although it would not necessarily be the case that there would be a division of labor between the *APSR* and *POP* along methodological or epistemological lines (and I see nothing in the policies of the current editors of these two journals that should lead in this direction), I believe we must vigorously guard against this development in the future.

9. The Council subsequently decided to table this decision. According to the minutes of the fall 2003 Council meeting, “The rationale for the [journal choice] recommendation was the newness of *Perspectives on Politics*, and the recent changes made to the *APSR*. Susanne Rudolph noted the original discussion regarding journal choice was not about money or discounts, but was a critique of the *APSR* prior to Lee Sigelman’s editorship. Since then, under the leadership of Lee Sigelman, many changes have been made to the format and review structure of the journal. The benefits of such changes have not yet been realized, so it would be unwise to implement journal choice at this time.” This policy is to be reviewed at future Council meetings.

10. The *APSR*’s Executive Board conducted a two-day in-house examination of *APSR* editorial policies in March 2003. The members of the committee created for this purpose paid particular attention to the issue of bias in the selection of reviewers or the interpretation of reviews. Given the enormous volume of manuscripts the *APSR* deals with, we were in fact quite impressed with Mr. Sigelman’s efforts to be impartial and objective as well as his efforts to overcome the legacies he had inherited. We found no evidence of any kind of systematic methodological or epistemological bias on the part of the editor or the reviewers (somewhat surprisingly, the toughest reviewers are those who share the author’s epistemology). The fact remains, however, that the *APSR* is simply a difficult journal to get into. That is as it should be.