

Notes from the Editors

APSR Reviewers and the Review Process during the Global Pandemic

In the two years since our team assumed the editorship of the *American Political Science Review*, the United States and world have experienced a series of tumultuous local, national, and world events. Like many other political scientists, we not only study the politics of such events but have also had our lives touched by them. Millions of people have died during the global COVID-19 pandemic, which also disrupted work and education around the world. As journalistic accounts (Flaherty 2020) and early research make clear (Kim and Patterson 2022; Shalaby, Allam, and Buttorff 2021), our experiences of pandemic-related disruptions are not unique. Through our regular correspondence with hundreds of authors and reviewers, we hear painful narratives about COVID diagnoses, hospitalizations, family crises and loss, and childcare and eldercare demands, as well as exits from the profession. We also hear from reviewers who feel distracted, angry, dispirited, and unable to do their work because of the personal and devastating consequences of current political events.

Therefore, we want to begin this Notes from the Editors by thanking the 3,938 reviewers who have completed or are completing 5,331 reviews of the 1,877 new manuscript submissions our team has sent out for review since June 1, 2020. Many of these reviewers have reviewed revised manuscripts as well, in some cases more than once. To our reviewers we say:

We are grateful for and amazed by your generosity to the authors, to the members of our team, and to the discipline in sharing your expertise as part of the review process, particularly given the difficulties of the last two years. We may not always agree with your recommendations, and you may not always agree with our decisions, but this work could not be done without your contributions to the journal and discipline. Thank you.

At our APSA 2022 reception, we recognized reviewers who have provided exceptional service since June 2020. In the rest of this Notes from the Editors, we describe who is typically invited to review and who ultimately reviews manuscripts for the journal, with some attention to the probable effects of the global pandemic on various aspects of the review process.

WHO IS INVITED TO REVIEW FOR THE APSR?

In our Vision Statement (APSA N.d.), we articulated six principles that guide our work. Among these principles is a commitment to pursue “substantive, representational, and methodological diversity” in the work that we publish and to “increase the diversity of submissions, authors, reviewers, and citations along lines

including race, gender, sexuality, ability, national origin, and type of institution.”

In pursuit of these objectives, we always seek to invite reviewers who are experts in the substance or methodology of a particular manuscript. This implies that as our submissions become more substantively or methodologically diverse, so should our invited reviewers. Like previous teams, we also seek to expand our pool of reviewers by inviting junior scholars and others with no prior *APSR* reviewing experience to review for the journal. The two most recent *APSR* editorial teams (2016–2020, 2020–2024) each articulated goals related to expanding the reach and relevance of the journal, either with geographic (APSA 2016) or substantive and methodological (APSA 2020) diversity. As a result, 53.1% of reviewers who submitted reviews for the prior Mannheim team¹ (2016–2020) were new reviewers and had not completed a review for the journal in the previous eight years. We’ve continued to build on their efforts; 41.3% of our reviewers have not reviewed for the journal for any of the last three editorial teams (2008–2020). In addition, a significant majority of *APSR* reviewers has *not* recently published in the journal. Under the leadership of the prior editorial team, only 7.1% of reviewers had published in the *APSR* during the previous eight years. Similarly, only 10.8% of our reviewers published in the *APSR* under the two previous editorial teams.

Our ability to measure our progress toward more specific goals of diversifying the reviewer pool is limited by the demographic information that the *APSR* collects. The reviewer database does not include data about things like gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or race. The database also does not keep historical profile information and therefore may also not accurately reflect reviewer rank, affiliation, or areas of specialization if the reviewer was initially added several years ago and has not updated their profile recently.

With these caveats in mind, we provide an overview of *APSR* reviewers that were invited by our team and recent teams in Table 1. The most notable shift under our team is the increase (from 30.2% under the previous team) in the proportion of invited reviewers who are women (37.0%),² which is similar to the

¹ The Lead Editor and some Associate Editors were affiliated with University of Mannheim, whereas other Associate Editors were affiliated with the London School of Economics and Political Science, University College London, and University of Cologne.

² Gender coding is approximate and based on probabilistic coding of first names using Genderize API, which uses self-identified gender from social media to predict gender.

TABLE 1. Reviewer Characteristics and Review Statistics for New Submissions with Initial Decisions

Indicator	UCLA	UNT	Mannheim	Current
<i>N</i> manuscripts w/initial decisions	2,250	2,792	2,813	1,665
<i>N</i> reviewers invited	11,597	17,585	14,338	10,326
Invited per manuscript	5.15	6.30	5.10	6.20
Women as % of invited	20.33	29.75	30.16	36.97
Men as % of invited	78.82	69.17	68.68	60.95
Europe resident as % of invited	13.87	17.90	24.66	21.69
North American resident as % of invited	82.67	77.28	70.07	72.08
Other regions as % of invited	3.46	4.82	5.27	6.18
<i>N</i> Different countries	64	77	76	75
Completed per manuscript	2.67	3.02	2.90	2.93
Overall percent completed	51.85	48.02	56.88	47.24
% completed among women	51.99	46.02	52.78	43.77
% completed among men	51.77	48.87	58.83	49.59
% completed among European	55.31	47.01	58.68	44.60
% completed among North American	51.02	48.00	55.93	47.74
% completed among other regions	57.86	52.07	60.98	51.10
Median days from submission to under review	18	7	13	9
Median days from submission to reject after peer review	81	62	84	68
Median days from submission to revise and resubmit	132	92	129.5	86

Note: Gender coding is approximate and based on probabilistic coding of first names using Genderize API, which uses self-identified gender from social media to predict gender, and 1.27% of reviewers do not have a coded gender. Gender and region as percentage of invited may not sum to 100% due to missing values.

percentage of women in the APSA membership in February 2020 (36.8%; APSA 2020). Based on current reviewer profiles, we have also made modest progress in diversifying the geographical distribution of reviewers. We are inviting more reviewers from regions outside of North America and Europe than did any previous team.

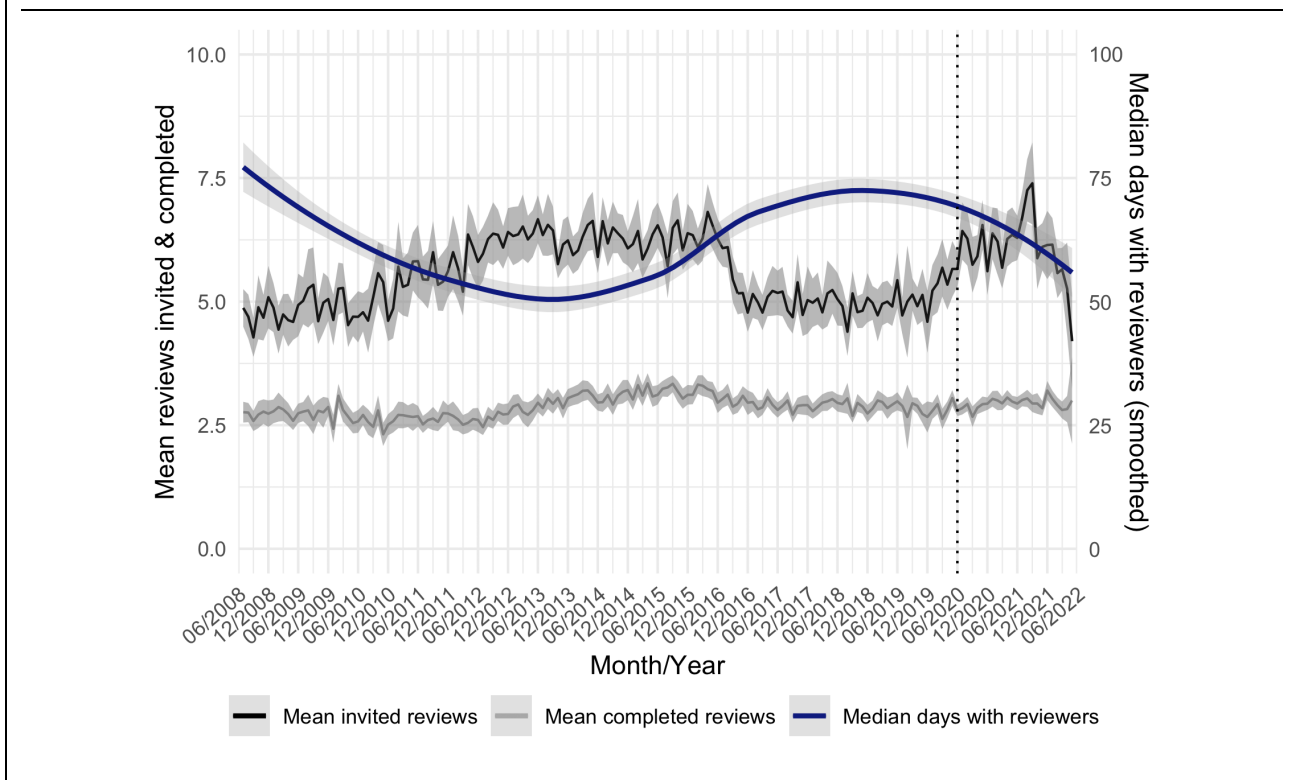
Before we discuss other aspects of the review process, we want to answer a question that is often asked by junior scholars about how to become a reviewer for the *APSR*. Many benefits accrue to scholars from participating in the review process (Miller et al. 2013, 120). If you are interested in reviewing for the *APSR*, we suggest that you create an account in our submission system, taking care to add your areas of specialization in your profile. This will increase the likelihood that the system recommends you for manuscripts in your areas of interest and expertise. If you already have an account, you should make sure your email, rank, affiliation, and specialization are all up to date.

WHO COMPLETES REVIEWS FOR THE *APSR* AND WHAT DOES OUR PROCESS LOOK LIKE?

Though concerns about reviewer fatigue and burden at the *APSR* and in political science predate the pandemic (Brannon et al. 2016; Breuning et al. 2015; Djupe 2015), the pandemic certainly laid bare and exacerbated challenges facing the peer-review system (Flaherty 2022; Warner 2022). Like others, we have also noticed that it

has become more difficult to secure timely reviews of new manuscripts as the pandemic progressed. According to the summary statistics in Table 1, our average number of completed reviews for *new* manuscripts with an initial decision is very similar to that of previous teams. However, the percentage of our invitations that lead to completed reviews (47.24%) is lower. Several factors contribute to that overall percentage, including instances when editors are able to make a decision with fewer completed reviews than those initially invited. We also report the completion rate by likely gender and region of residence. Although others have noted (based on 2013 data) that men and women accept and complete *APSR* review invitations at a similar rate (Breuning et al. 2015, 597), here we employ a slightly different definition that focuses on the percentage of invitations that have a completed review by the time a decision is made. By this metric, the gap in completion rates between men and women has increased, particularly during our tenure. Although the reasons that women complete a lower percentage of reviews are likely complex, the ongoing pandemic no doubt looms large.

Furthermore, we invited a larger average number of reviewers per manuscript than the Mannheim team did, but our rate is similar to that of the North Texas team. In Table 1, we also report the median number of days from submission to being under review or having an initial decision. Again, our times to “under review” (9 days) and to an initial decision to reject (68 days) or to invite a revision (86 days) are most similar to that of the North Texas team. Figure 1 illustrates an inverse relationship between the number of invited reviewers

FIGURE 1. APSR Invitations, Completed Reviews, and Days under Review, 2008–2022

and the time to an initial decision after review. When editors initially invite more reviewers per manuscript or add new reviewers when original reviewers have not completed their reviews in a timely fashion, average times to decision tend to be shorter.

As suggested at the outset, reviewers often, but not always, mention specific personal circumstances that explain why they are declining a review invitation or why their completed review is delayed. To capture potential shifts in reviewer behavior due to the pandemic, we coded whether reviewers mentioned certain keywords in their private comments to the editors. In Table 2, we report the percentage of private comments to the editors that include one or more of the keywords related to illness, family, or school.³ Although these are simple measures, they are applied across all reviewer comments to all editorial teams and should therefore be consistent, even if they underestimate reasons for reviewer behavior. Mentions of family are common and steady, particularly among those who decline reviews, including during the last two years. Mention of illness is generally more often cited as a reason to decline an invitation to review than to explain a late review and was mentioned more in the last two years than before.

³ *Ill* includes *health*, *sick*, *ill*, *hospita*, *corona*, *covid*. *Family* includes words commonly used to describe children, parents, partners, siblings, maternity, paternity, as well as *elder* and *care*. *School* includes *school*, *day* and *care*, *child* and *care*, and multiple words for children with home.

The most dramatic shift involves references to schooling (i.e., children being out of school, daycares or pre-schools closed, etc.), which have increased in the last two years. The most extreme “shutdowns” of daycares and schools during the pandemic began during the final months of the Mannheim team’s leadership and may also account for the increase in references to school-related keywords by those who declined invitations to review. Although these statistics likely underestimate the overall impact of the pandemic, particularly the effect of school and daycare closures and increased caregiver responsibilities, they are consistent with recent descriptions of how the pandemic is disrupting our community (e.g., Flaherty 2020; 2022; Kim and Patterson 2022; Shalaby, Allam, and Buttorff 2021).

In spite of these many disruptions and widespread reviewer fatigue, we are pleased to report that our colleagues have stepped up to review our manuscripts in record numbers, allowing us to report fewer days required to get pieces under review, to reject after review, or to offer a revise and resubmit. Admittedly, this was accomplished by calling on larger numbers of our colleagues as reviewers for each piece we consider. We are grateful to our reviewers for making this possible, especially under the circumstances of the last few years. It is obvious that family and health pressures have presented significant challenges throughout the review process. Furthermore, although there is much that we do not know, we are making some progress toward diversifying our reviewer pool. Additional data-gathering efforts would allow us to say more about the

TABLE 2. Percentage of Confidential Comments to the Editors that Include Keywords

Keywords, Review, Reviewer	UCLA	UNT	Mannheim	Current
Family, Completed, Man	0.31	0.28	0.28	0.34
Family, Completed, Woman	0.34	0.32	0.63	1.11
Family, Declined, Man	1.59	1.62	2.11	4.15
Family, Declined, Woman	5.07	4.30	5.58	6.39
Ill, Completed, Man	0.77	0.55	0.79	0.96
Ill, Completed, Woman	0.67	0.82	0.57	1.32
Ill, Declined, Man	1.12	1.00	1.01	1.96
Ill, Declined, Woman	2.03	1.43	1.31	2.23
School, Completed, Man	0.28	0.18	0.25	0.36
School, Completed, Woman	0.34	0.22	0.26	0.50
School, Declined, Man	0.52	0.45	0.64	1.77
School, Declined, Woman	0.29	0.43	1.40	2.79

Note: Gender coding is approximate and based on probabilistic coding of first names using Genderize API, which uses self-identified gender from social media to predict gender, and 1.27% of reviewers do not have a coded gender. Keywords for Ill, Family, and School are percentage of private comments to the editors from reviewers (when they decline a review request or complete a review) that contain at least one of the keyword stems or combination of keyword stems for that category.

subfield, rank, methodological and epistemological orientation, and the races, ethnicities, gender and gender identities, and sexual orientations of those who review for the *APSR*. In the meantime, however, we want to reiterate our gratitude to those who have supported the journal with their reviews over the last two years.

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