

Politics and Religion's Resilience During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars predicted that this transboundary crisis would cause enormous change and disruption, not only to global health but also to many areas of productivity, including academic life (Donina and Antonowicz 2022; Lewis 2021; Witze 2020). Although the impact has been widespread and devastating to public health, it has not triggered the dramatic changes to the academy that might have been predicted, particularly in the areas of scholarship.

This article analyzes the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the publishing process at *Politics and Religion*—a political science journal established in 2008 by the Religion and Politics section of the American Political Science Association. An international journal, *Politics and Religion* publishes religion and politics scholarship from all political science subfields, as well as some interdisciplinary research. The journal seeks to publish quality scholarship on religion and politics from around the world, featuring US and international scholars. During the past 15 years, *Politics and Religion* has established a reputation as a leading outlet for religion and politics scholarship.

We acknowledge that the pandemic certainly caused significant disruption to scholars and the process of scholarship, thereby taxing researchers, editors, and reviewers (Lewis 2021). Yet, our analyses indicate that the effects on the output and processes of *Politics and Religion* were not immediate and did not substantially alter the gender distribution of submission authors. Rather, the pandemic effects on the journal processes were delayed and ongoing. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic appear to have altered the research process, which slowed the rate of submissions in 2022 and 2023 and also contributed to an increasing tax on reviewer capacity. Nevertheless, the publication processes have been resilient to the pandemic crisis, a pattern that is similar across the journals discussed in this symposium.

THE PANDEMIC'S DELAYED IMPACT ON ARTICLE SUBMISSIONS

To assess the pandemic's impact on the publishing process at *Politics and Religion*, we begin with the first step in the process: article submissions. Figure 1 shows *Politics and Religion's*

article and research note submissions by both month and year for 2012–2022, covering each year that the journal has used the online Editorial Manager system. To make the years encompassing the pandemic easier to assess, the colored lines in figure 1 identify the years 2019–2022.

As a relatively new journal, the number of submissions at *Politics and Religion* was increasing between 2012 and 2019, reaching about 150 to 160 article submissions in the year before the pandemic began. In early 2020, pre-COVID-19, submissions were lagging 2019's pace. However, between the beginning of the pandemic shutdowns in March 2020 and Fall 2020, submissions exceeded the pace of the previous year. In fact, the slope of submissions in 2020 suggests that the pandemic shutdown spurred submissions to the journal as other commitments were curtailed. During the first six months of the pandemic, from March to September 2020, the journal received its most article submissions in any six-month period (i.e., 107). This was a 25%+ increase from the same period in 2019 or 2021, and it exceeded the total number of submissions in all of 2014. Other journals, including those represented in this symposium, experienced a similar spike during the early months of the pandemic. The *American Journal of Political Science*, for example, noted a 27% increase in manuscripts in April 2020 (Midwest Political Science Association Admin 2020), and this trend extended beyond political science journals (Squazzoni et al. 2021).

At *Politics and Religion*, the rate of submissions flattened somewhat at the end of 2020, with total submissions that year essentially finishing equally as high as they had been in 2019, despite a slow start to the year. Other journals also reported this continuity in submission rates between 2019 and 2020 (Dolan and Lawless 2021).

In 2021, submissions continued to track the 2019 and 2020 rates at a steadier pace. For *Politics and Religion*, the total number of submissions was almost identical in 2019, 2020, and 2021, peaking at about 160 submissions. As shown in figure 1, the 2021 slope is almost linear, without the spikes and slowdowns shown in 2020. In reviewing article and research note submissions, it is clear that during the first 18 months of the pandemic, there was no slowdown in submissions. Scholars were submitting as much research to the journal as they had before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Whereas 2020 and 2021 showed little effect on submission rates, there was a significant slowdown in 2022 and in the first

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part of 2023, which is a slight difference from other journals discussed in this symposium. In 2022, there was an almost 15% decrease in manuscript submissions, and this trend continued in early 2023. The journal transitioned to a new editorial team in January 2022. Although this is noteworthy, we expect that the editorial transition would more likely affect the processing of manuscripts and decision rates rather than initial submissions. Two options comprise a more likely explanation for the reduced

interviews should be conducted with scholars to assess authors' perceptions about these constraints.

THE GENERAL STABILITY OF SUBMISSIONS BY WOMEN DURING THE PANDEMIC

Although submission rates remained steady (and even increased) during 2020 and 2021, before declining in 2022 and early 2023, it is possible that the data are concealing

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levels of submissions. First, the pandemic led to scholarly fatigue, which had delayed effects on journal submissions. Second, the pandemic constrained the ability to conduct research, particularly work that required travel, in-person fieldwork, and feedback from in-person conferences. Scholars would have been able to submit research in 2020 and 2021 based on pre-pandemic travel, but restricted travel reduced research output in 2022 and likely in 2023. Initial surveys of researchers suggested that they initiated significantly fewer new projects during the pandemic (Lewis 2021). However, additional surveys and

certain demographic disparities, notably gender differences. Prior research has shown that the gender gap in journal authorship increased during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic due to increased family responsibilities that women disproportionately bear (Bell and Fong 2021; Squazzoni et al. 2021; Viglione 2020). Other scholars, by contrast, have not found clear effects of the pandemic on the gender gap of authors; rather, they find that the effects vary by discipline, with some being more resilient (Jemielniak, Slawska, and Wilamowski 2023; see also Ryan et al. 2023).

Figure 1

Article and Research Note Submissions per Month at *Politics and Religion*, 2012–2022

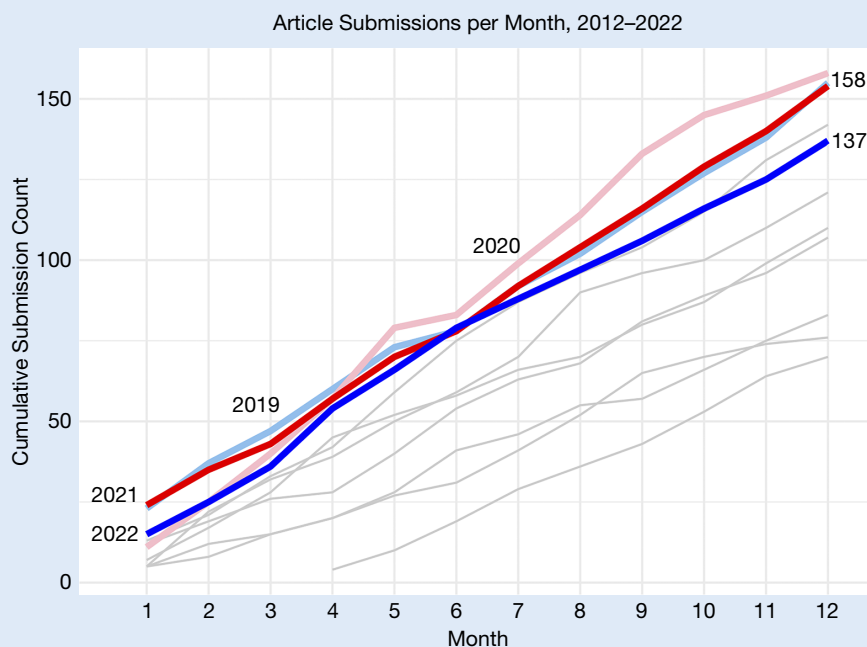
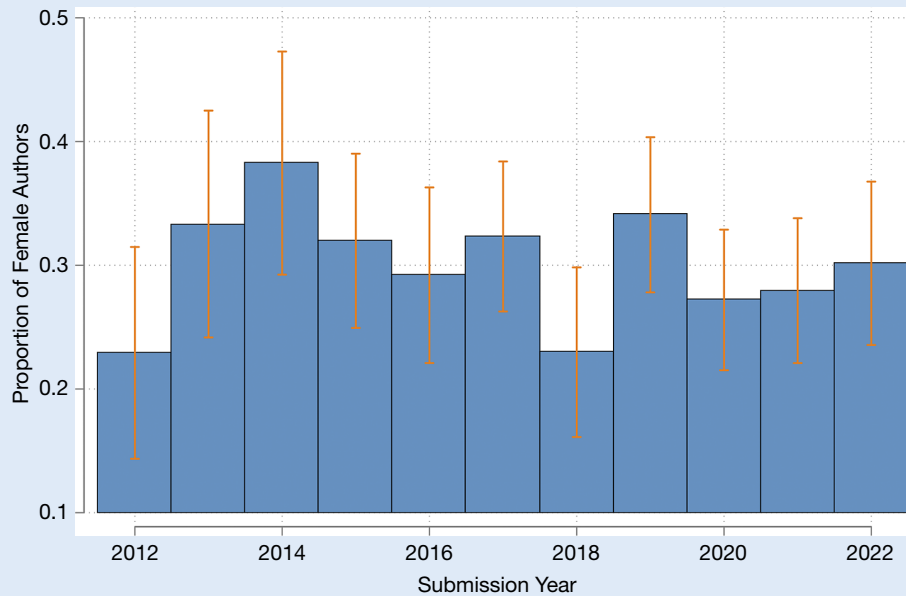


Figure 2

Proportion of Estimated Female Authors on Article and Research Note Submissions by Year at *Politics and Religion*



Orange bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

We sought to analyze the effects of the pandemic on the gender gap at *Politics and Religion*. Unfortunately, it was not straightforward to investigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the gender of authors submitting to the journal. *Politics and Religion* only recently initiated a questionnaire that asked authors to identify their gender. To assess gender over time, we had to construct estimates by following other studies and using a data package to predict authors' gender based on their first name (Fine and Shen 2018; Holman, Stuart-Fox, and Hauser 2018). We downloaded the names of all of the authors who submitted articles and research notes to the journal from 2012 to 2022 and then ran them through the database genderize.io to predict the gender of each author. For most names, the genderize.io tool predicted a binary male or female gender with a high degree of confidence. When confidence was less than 75% or if the gender prediction came back as unknown, we searched individual names using Google to attempt to identify an author's gender. For the 10-year period, we were able to predict 97% of the authors' gender with a high degree of confidence.

From 2012 to 2022, two facts are clear. First, submissions to *Politics and Religion* were disproportionately written by men, with an average of 70% male authors. Second, the gender composition of submissions was fairly consistent, even during the COVID-19 pandemic: there were only small fluctuations, with no statistically significant differences. Figure 2 displays the yearly proportion of female authors for all articles and research notes submitted to the journal. During the timespan, women averaged 30% of all authors; the percentage ranged from 22% in 2012 to 38% in 2014, but it generally hovered around 30%. In 2019, 34% of all authors were women. This percentage declined to 28% in 2020 and 2021, but it is not a statistically significant difference.

The percentages of women authors in 2020 and 2021 also were greater than the percentage in 2018 (i.e., 23%).

The data are similar when they are restricted to only first authors. Women accounted for 29% of first authors during the timespan. In 2019, 31% of first authors were women, which declined slightly to 27% in 2020 and 2021. In 2022, 30% of first authors were women. Again, none of these changes are statistically significant. There also were no substantial rate changes in the gender of author submissions at the onset of the pandemic. Women comprised 28% of first authors for submissions between March 1 and June 30, 2020—essentially equal to the yearly average. In general, at *Politics and Religion* we found general resilience in the submission rates by gender—a positive finding that is substantiated by the findings of editors at other journals.

THE PANDEMIC'S DELAYED IMPACT ON REVIEWER RESPONSE

Despite the global disruption, journal turnaround times were steady during the pandemic, as shown in figure 3. Between 2017 and 2019, *Politics and Religion* experienced a significant decrease in the number of days to first decision, ranging between 50 and 70 days. Initially, the pandemic did not slow the processing time because the days to a first decision actually decreased in 2020, compared to 2019—although this was similar to 2017 and 2018. In fact, in the shutdown period of the COVID-19 pandemic, processing time was quite fast. Between March 1 and May 31, 2020, the average time to a first decision was less than 47 days.

The number of days to a first decision increased in 2021 and 2022, however, averaging about 70 days. This was more than a 35% increase from 2020 but on par with 2019. There are a few

Figure 3

Average Days to First Decision on Article and Research Note Submissions by Year at *Politics and Religion*

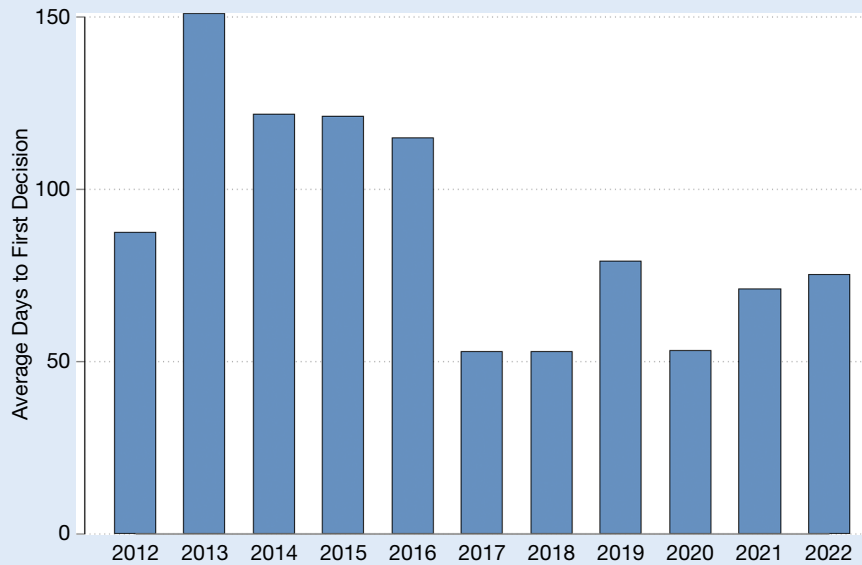
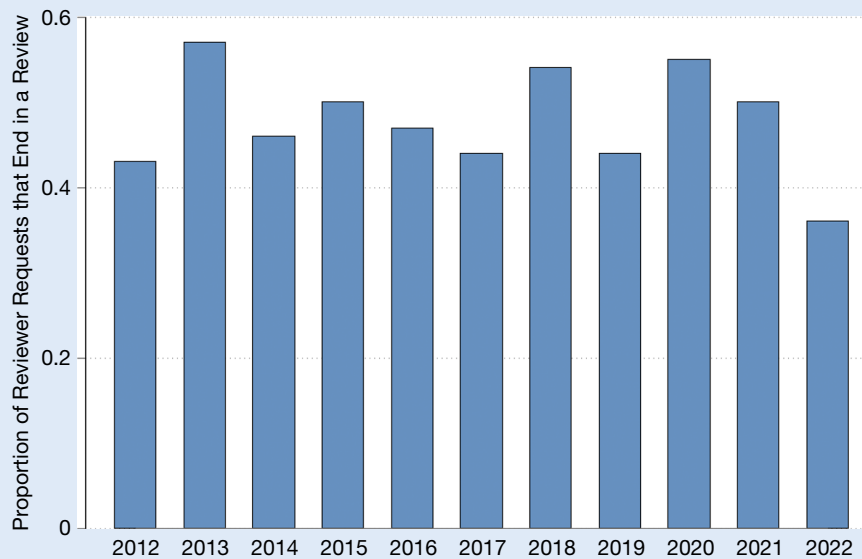


Figure 4

Proportion of Review Requests That End in a Review by Year at *Politics and Religion*



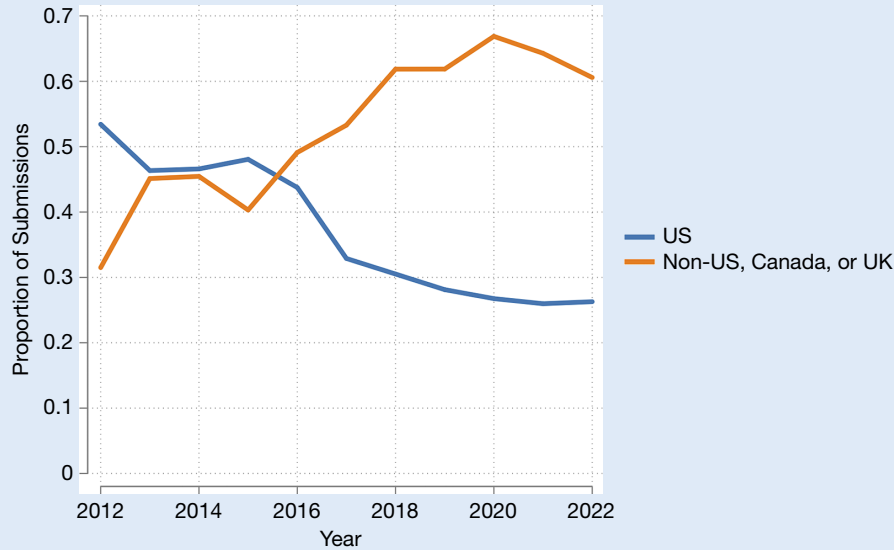
reasons why the time to decision may have increased in 2021 and 2022. First, 2021 and 2022 were transition years for *Politics and Religion*. In 2021, the previous editorial team ended its five-year term and a new editorial team transitioned into the role in 2022. These transitions may be linked to longer processing times because the previous team was ending a relatively long

term and the new team needed to become familiar with the process of managing the journal.

Second, and perhaps more important than the editorial transition, however, is that 2022 had the lowest acceptance and completion rates for reviewer requests, as shown in figure 4. Only 36% of review requests resulted in a completed review.

Figure 5

Proportion of Article and Research Note Submissions by Country Group per Year at *Politics and Religion*



Reviewer acceptance and completion rates declined by almost 40% in 2022 compared to 2020, due almost solely to not accepting requests. These acceptance and completion rates were the lowest in the history of *Politics and Religion*, and they are lower than the rates of other political science journals (Bruening et al. 2015; Djupe 2015; Dolan and Lawless 2022). These low levels in part may be an indication of the new editorial team tapping a different subset of scholars; that is, editorial teams tend to tap similar networks of reviewers during their term, and new teams bring variation (Djupe 2015). That said, we think it is clear evidence of pandemic-related fatigue, especially because it follows a similar pattern as the submissions. When reviewers decline requests, many mention being overwhelmed, being behind on their work, and facing personal or family illness as factors contributing to the need to decline. Prior scholarship on reviewer fatigue found that scholars lead busy professional lives and “face many demands on their time” (Bruening et al. 2015, 599; see also Lupia and Aldrich 2014). The COVID-19 pandemic, and especially the return to more “normal” professional responsibilities in 2022 after numerous pandemic challenges, likely affected reviewers. In fact, in this symposium, the *American Political Science Review* reported a similar decline in reviewer responsiveness. Unfortunately, when reviewers decline requests more often, journal processing times are likely to slow down.

Although reviewer acceptance and completion rates decreased at *Politics and Religion*, the good news is that once individuals accepted the review request, their time to completion was similar to if not somewhat faster than prior years (i.e., 22 days). Nevertheless, it was more difficult to find reviewers to accept an assignment, resulting in challenges in processing manuscripts. After two years, the pandemic is

affecting the publishing process through decreased submissions and decreased reviewer acceptances at *Politics and Religion*.

THE CONTINUED ACCELERATION OF INTERNATIONAL SUBMISSIONS AND ENGAGEMENT DURING THE PANDEMIC

In addition to delayed changes in submission and reviewer acceptance rates, the geography of submissions to *Politics and Religion* changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, we are not certain that these changes can be attributed to the pandemic. Between 2017 and 2019, the proportion of submissions from outside of North America and the United Kingdom was growing, as shown in figure 5. In 2012, this percentage was slightly less than 30%; by 2019, more than half of the submissions came from outside of North America and the United Kingdom. During the pandemic, that number spiked to almost 70% of submissions. This increase in non-North American and non-UK submissions remained high (i.e., more than 60%) for 2021 and 2022. Global submissions expanded during the pandemic. US submissions, by contrast, contracted in both percentages and raw numbers after the pandemic. Between 2012 and 2019, the journal averaged 45 manuscript submissions from scholars in the United States. Since COVID-19, the total number of US submissions has been below average: 42 in 2020, 40 in 2021, and 36 in 2022. We are not certain if the pandemic attributed to a higher proportion of non-US submissions or if this is part of a longer trend toward more global submissions. However, the trend is noteworthy and warrants future analysis after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The way readers engaged with *Politics and Religion* also continued to change during the COVID-19 pandemic. The journal was trending toward more digital downloads, with

those numbers increasing between 2017 and 2019. Downloads hit new highs in 2020 and then spiked in 2021. This coincided with changes by the publisher, Cambridge University Press, but it signals a shift in consumption patterns. The COVID-19 pandemic likely has spurred downloads, but this trend also should be analyzed using post-pandemic data.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic posed various challenges to academic life, and research was no exception. The data from the political science journal *Politics and Religion* highlight a trend of delayed effects on journal processing times. The pandemic initially spurred journal submission, with minimal effects on the days to decision. Although authors were able to move their established research projects to submission and publication during the pandemic, the disruption also appears to have slowed the development of new projects. More study of researchers is needed to verify this assumption, but it is clear that the pandemic resulted in delayed publishing effects at *Politics and Religion*, including fewer submissions, lower levels of reviewer acceptance, and slower processing times. That said, the gender gap in the journal's submissions was generally resilient, with rates of women authorship during the pandemic being similar to previous rates. More research is critical for examining the impact that the pandemic had on the various components of the research and publishing processes, as well as how this played out among demographic subgroups. What is clear, however, is that whereas the COVID-19 pandemic had important, potentially lasting effects on scholarly publishing, academic output has remained resilient.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the *PS: Political Science & Politics* Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/AFK6FC>.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

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