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Reflections on Building an Active State Association

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Regional and State Association News

Reflections on Building an Active State Association

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This essay results from the gathering of state political science representatives that was initiated by the APSA at its meeting in Chicago in September 1992. At the invitation of the national office, we have put together some thoughts on running a state political science association. It is our hope that our experiences in New York can provide useful insights and guidelines for other state associations. A major constraint on professional activity today is the restricted financial support that many political scientists confront. State associations can provide an economical means for political scientists to meet professionally, and the more vigorous the association, the more that can be derived from these meetings.

The New York State Political Science Association (NYSPSA) has a long and proud history of lively, collegial annual meetings. In April of 1996, we shall be celebrating the fiftieth year of its existence. In recent years, our annual meetings, which are scheduled from noon on Friday through Saturday afternoon, have shown a steady increase in attendance and participation. Our April, 1992, meeting hosted by Buffalo State College had 59 panels and approximately 320 participants. The preliminary program for the 1993 meeting to be held at CUNY-Hunter College with David Johnston, Columbia University, as program chair lists 63 panels.

In achieving this longevity and attendance, the association has been helped by several advantages stemming from being located in New York State. New York State has a

large number of political scientists. It has a wide variety of universities, colleges, and two-year institutions. Geographically, there are a number of major metropolitan centers scattered throughout the state. Properly utilized, all of these factors can contribute significantly to maintaining interest and activity in the state association. Although our location in New York State has provided us with advantages that other states will have only in varying degrees, we believe that there is no insurmountable reason why most state associations cannot make use of many of the techniques that we have employed and learn from the experiences that we have had. It is in this spirit that we offer a summary of how the New York State association has operated in the last decade.

Structure

The structure of the NYSPSA is fairly standard. Its primary goals are to facilitate continuity, or institutional memory, and to provide wide representation. The Executive Council is the governing body throughout the year. It is composed of ten section heads, a secretary-treasurer, vice-president and program chair, president, and past president. The Executive Council meets twice a year, in January, to prepare for the annual spring meeting, and again at the annual meeting to assess the conference. Section chairs serve two-year terms with two terms the maximum. The terms overlap, so that at any one time there are several members

of the Council who have experience in the association. Every effort is made to elect active, responsible people to the Council and to insure that upstate/downstate, small school/large school, and gender/other demographic groups are represented on the Council. During the year, the secretary-treasurer, program chair, president, and past president act as an executive committee to funnel nominations to the Council and to deal with details. At the annual meeting a short business meeting in conjunction with a reception is the point at which the membership, i.e., those who have registered and paid for the meeting, elect the new slate of officers.

Annual Meeting

As with other regional and state associations, the annual meeting is the primary focus of activity. The NYSPSA rotates its meeting sites among New York City, Albany, and western New York. Whenever possible, we try to involve faculty and students at the host institutions in the program preparation. The association has occasionally used hotels for meeting sites, but we are fortunate in having a number of colleges and universities that have been willing to host meetings. In the past several years, Buffalo State College, SUNY at Albany, The New School for Social Research, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, and the CUNY Graduate Center have provided facilities for the annual meeting. Par-

ticularly important in providing a site is accessibility, proximity to reasonably priced hotels, and rooms or spaces for informal discussions and get-togethers over the coffee and pastries provided by NYSPSA. Often panel participants want to continue their discussions beyond their allotted times and it is most helpful to have places for participants to pursue their conversations.

Advertising. In preparation for the annual meeting, probably the single most important rule is that it pays to advertise. The association has compiled a mailing list of approximately 2,500 names. This list is composed of past participants, names provided by the APSA, and names from other sources. These names are contained on computer files and labels are easily printed from them. The mailing of the call for papers goes out to the entire list, usually in late August or early September for the annual meeting in April. Additionally, announcements are sent to *PS*, *Polity*, and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, as well as other information outlets. In particular, we have found that the newsletters for the various sections of APSA are very good about printing announcements of our meetings. The entire cost of this phase of conference preparation is minimal, approximately \$200. In our case, the program chair's institution normally bears this cost.

The Preliminary Program. The next phase of conference preparation can be a bit nerve wracking. The call for papers establishes a deadline for paper submissions and encourages others to volunteer as discussants and chairs. Usually, the deadline is set in late November after the meeting of the Northeastern Political Science Association so that section chairs have an opportunity to contact people at that regional meeting. Responses to the call for papers vary from section to section. Section chairs are encouraged to initiate contact with individuals whom they believe can help put together panels. As the time for putting the panels together for the program chair draws near, section heads call each other, the program chair, and the president for names of possible participants. In this respect, our list of past participants with addresses and phone num-

bers is particularly helpful. With regard to obtaining chairs and discussants, it is often possible to persuade papergivers on other panels to help out in this capacity as well. The section chairs then send their proposed panels to the program chair, and at the January meeting final adjustments are made.

The NYSPSA strives for a fairly uniform format for its panels. Essentially, most of the panels are composed of three to four paper presenters, a chair and one or two discussants, and it is expected that each panel will have participants from several institutions. The number of paper presenters is determined primarily by two considerations. First, every effort is made to enable as many as possible to participate. For this reason, no one may present more than one paper. Second, if there are fewer than three scheduled presenters, a no-show for whatever reason seriously weakens the panel. The NYSPSA also expects panel chairs and discussants to be different from the panel's paper presenters. Again, at least two reasons support this practice. The first is that we have found that it is unreasonable to expect a paper presenter acting also as chair to be able to control fairly the apportionment of time among everyone on a panel. The second consideration is that NYSPSA depends on panel chairs in consultation with discussants to recommend papers for best paper awards, and impartiality in this regard dictates that the chair not be a paper presenter on the same panel. Also, NYSPSA does not allow graduate students to serve as chairs because doing so may place them in an awkward position vis-a-vis their faculty mentors.

Roundtable panels and the undergraduate panels are exceptions to the standard panel format. Sections will often have at least one roundtable, which is chaired and composed of perhaps four additional discussants. More than one roundtable per section is discouraged, but roundtables do have their advantages in terms of getting specialists on a topic together easily and in terms of dealing with late-breaking events. Additionally, NYSPSA normally has at least one undergraduate panel. This panel is

chaired by a faculty member and faculty serve as discussants. Undergraduates with papers from any field are placed on this panel. Usually, four or five papers are presented. (Graduate students are integrated into the regular panels with faculty and practitioner papers.)

After the January meeting, the largest share of the work falls on the shoulders of the program chair. It is this individual's task to finalize the preliminary program. This requires command of a myriad of details, not the least of which is insuring that individuals are not scheduled for two panels at the same time. Also, every effort is made to space panels so that those, for example, with an interest in comparative politics are not faced with the choice of attending two panels in their area in the same time slot. The preliminary program is printed at the school of the program chair and mailed to everyone on the mailing list. This is expensive, but the NYSPSA pays for this item. Thus, at this point everyone on the mailing list has received a call for papers and the preliminary program. Nonetheless, despite this wide circulation of information, the basic axiom that size of attendance at a conference is directly related to the number of participants still holds true.

The Final Program. Meanwhile the section chairs have also been busy. After the January meeting they have informed their participants that their papers have been accepted or that they will be serving as chairs or discussants. Normally, the section chairs will send all panel members copies of the panels with addresses and phone numbers for each participant and at this time also confirm the day and time assigned to the panel. It is especially important in terms of holding down the number of no-shows that the section chairs space their communication with panel members over a period of time. In this manner, participants will be getting reminders every three or four weeks about the conference. This gives those who will not be able to complete their papers ample opportunity to back out.

After the initial acceptance notification, the section head will follow in a few weeks with the procedures for

panel participation. We have found these guidelines to be invaluable for well-run panels. They originated with Douglas I. Hodgkin of Bates College at the Northeastern Political Science Association and were modified by John Harman. These procedures have been proven workable over several conferences, and they help to insure that everyone is playing by the same rules. Essentially, they explain how time is to be apportioned among panel participants, describe the roles of the various participants, and warn paper presenters not to read their papers.

Finally, it is incumbent on the section chairs to remind paper presenters for the second time, approximately three weeks before the conference, that they must have their papers to all panel participants at least two weeks to ten days before the conference. The section chair will inform presenters that failure to meet this deadline will eliminate their papers from consideration for awards and that discussants have no obligation whatsoever to comment at all on their papers.

Section chairs may, of course, forward some of this information to the panel chairs and ask them to contact their panel members. The important points are to get the information out and to keep participants aware of the forthcoming conference.

In the meantime, the final program is being printed in the same manner as the preliminary program. The primary difference between the programs, in addition to correcting details, is that the final program contains room assignments and information on special events. The final program is given to those who register for the conference, and, of course, all participants are expected to register. To encourage attendance, the association has deliberately maintained low registration fees with an "early bird" registration discount incentive. Students pay a lower special rate.

General Considerations

Much of the foregoing is pretty much standard fare for state and regional associations. Here we want to share how some of our experi-

ences have shaped ways in which we may do things somewhat differently from other associations. In these remarks, it is important to emphasize that we make every effort to be inclusive in our activities both in the organizational structure and at the annual meetings. Our goal is to provide an environment for the meeting that is both congenial and informative. We want political scientists to be able to talk together about issues in their field and to be encouraged to continue these conversations after the annual meetings.

Some associations have sought to build attendance by using a major scholar as a speaker. We found this approach to be counter-productive. Keeping in mind that a major reason political scientists attend the conference is the opportunity for them to talk together informally with their colleagues, the idea of taking a significant chunk of time to listen to an address has not proven attractive. We have found that an address by a major political figure, a governor or a presidential candidate, will draw attendance, but generally after the evening reception and a short business meeting, the evening is left free for the attendees.

In our experience all conference attendees gain when leading scholars from major institutions are at the conference as participants. This enables the maximum number of political scientists to engage in the give-and-take of panel discussions and informal conversation after the panels. Moreover, there are incentives for such people to attend. First, the conference offers their graduate students the opportunity to engage in a major activity of the discipline—conference participation—at minimal cost and in a setting that is usually less intimidating than those of the national and regional meetings. This activity can also facilitate contacts for those students who will soon be on the job market. Second, many of these scholars have texts on the market, and their interaction with political scientists from a variety of schools presumably will increase the visibility of their texts. Third, the NYSPSA conference gives all scholars an opportunity to test out new ideas in a collegial atmosphere with a minimum of rancor or unpleasant-

ness. The NYSPSA has been fortunate in the support that it has received from major schools and major scholars in the field, and its former presidents include many scholars who have contributed significantly to the discipline.

More tangible incentives for participation have been the awards for best papers in the categories of faculty or practitioner, graduate student, and undergraduate student. These awards carry a cash prize, and the announcement of the winners is also published in *PS*. To have been recognized by one's peers is always something worth noting on the curriculum vitae and during faculty evaluation time. In this respect, the quality of papers at the conference has generally been quite good. In fact, numerous publications have resulted from these papers. In terms of our memory alone, papers from NYSPSA conferences have been published in *PS*, *Polity*, *Perspectives on Political Science*, various law journals, *Women & Politics*, the *Public Administration Review*, and the *International Political Science Review*. There have undoubtedly been many other publications resulting from the NYSPSA meetings, but the major point here is that the opportunity to work together in areas of common interest inevitably will encourage political scientists toward publication, and those who have facility in doing this generally are helpful to those just getting underway.

Also of importance to the NYSPSA in terms of incentives for participation have been the disciplinary niches that the association has been able to utilize. For example, the NYSPSA, drawing on the state's long border with Canada, has a section devoted to Canadian politics. The Canadians have found this an especially attractive opportunity to discuss ideas for which they have a limited number of forums in Canada. As can be imagined, these sessions have often been among the liveliest at the meetings. Other state associations cannot as easily draw on a Canadian connection, but every state has unique issues and niches that an enterprising state association can capitalize on. Again, in many instances, those interested in an area

are eager to have a place to discuss the issues of common concern to them. In the case of the NYSPSA, the Society of Greek Political Thought, local chapters of the American Society for Public Administration, and the Model European Community Association also have on occasion used the annual meeting as the opportunity to assemble several panels.

In summary, we wish to emphasize

that the success of the NYSPSA has been due to generous and continuous efforts by a wide range of political scientists and institutions. The association has encouraged broad representation in its structure and expansive participation at the annual meeting. Every effort is made to make the annual meeting a pleasant and professional experience. In our work at the state level we have always found the APSA to be helpful in

providing advice, mailing information, and publicity. We strongly support the national association's work with the state associations. The exchange of ideas and information among state associations can only be helpful to everyone. In this spirit, we offer our services and support to other state associations, actual or potential, who may need more information than the general outline provided here.

An Update of Regional and State Associations

The following association has updated its information since the March issue of *PS*.

Organization	Officers	Publications	Meetings
ILLINOIS POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION	President: John Kornacki, Dirksen Center Past President: Don Schultz, Army War College Secretary-Treasurer: Robert C. McIntire, Millikin University Program Chair: John Wenum, Illinois Wesleyan University		