

PERSPECTIVES ON POLITICS

Philosophy

[Note: The text below was written by Jeffrey C. Isaac, the former editor-in-chief, and it continues to represent the basic philosophy of the current editorial team.]

Perspectives on Politics seeks to provide a space for broad and synthetic discussion within the political science profession and between the profession and the broader scholarly and reading publics. Such discussion necessarily draws on and contributes to the scholarship published in the more specialized journals that dominate our discipline. At the same time, *Perspectives* seeks to promote a complementary form of broad public discussion and synergistic understanding within the profession that is essential to advancing scholarship and promoting academic community.

Perspectives seeks to nurture a political science public sphere, publicizing important scholarly topics, ideas, and innovations, linking scholarly authors and readers, and promoting broad reflexive discussion among political scientists about the work that we do and why this work matters.

Like its sister publication, the *American Political Science Review*, *Perspectives* publishes high-quality scholarship in political science. But while the APSR publishes scholarly research that is oriented to and judged according to the protocols of specialized scholarly discourses and subfields, *Perspectives* seeks to reach more broadly. *Perspectives* aims to publish scholarly work that asks “big” questions and that proposes bold and interesting conjectures in compelling ways even if they have not yet been definitively tested. We seek to encourage thinking outside the box, and to press authors, and readers, at least a bit beyond their normal academic comfort zones. We are interested in excellent and well-crafted articles that are written for a broad audience of political scientists and that speak to questions of broad public interest in ways that can be generally understood, appreciated, and engaged.

Perspectives is an important part of a broader process of rethinking that has taken place in American political science in recent years. A similar process has unfolded in other social science disciplines as well. Such rethinking is endemic to scholarly and academic inquiry, and the history of political science is punctuated by efforts to take stock, reconsider, and reorient the field (a theme nicely illustrated in Raymond Seidelman and Jim Farr’s 1993 collection, *Discipline and History*). As Robert Putnam pointed out in his 2002 APSA Presidential Address, “The Public Role of Political Science,” the most recent rethinking has centered on the importance of greater

breadth and public relevance in political science. We agree with Putnam that the promotion of such breadth and relevance is not an alternative to scholarly expertise but a complement to it. The intellectual advantages of scholarly specialization have been well understood at least since Max Weber's "Science as a Vocation." But the drawbacks of such specialization have also been well known, especially the tendency towards academic narrowness and insularity. Specialized discourses and methods produce greater scholarly expertise, but they do not necessarily generate comprehension of the big orienting questions central to political science as a social science. In order for political science to thrive and grow as a form of scholarly inquiry, political scientists need to keep in focus these orienting questions—the foundations of political order and disorder; the productivity and destructiveness of organized violence; the relationship between politics, economics, and society; the distribution of inclusion and exclusion, power and vulnerability, as this relates to race, class, gender, ethnicity, and other identities; the dynamics of democratic politics and the forms of democratic citizenship; the limits of the nation-state—and to share their particular "takes" on these questions (or aspects of them). It is therefore essential to the scientific aspirations of political science that there be venues for such broad, integrated, and synthetic discussion.

Such venues are not simply important for intellectual reasons. Political science is both a mode (or modes) of inquiry and a set of professional and institutional practices related to employment, tenure, and promotion, and the business of the university as this is conducted on campuses across the U.S. and indeed across the world. Political scientists need a common language—a version of what the liberal political philosopher John Rawls called "public reason"—not simply in order to do science, but in order to get along as members of departments, tenure and recruitment committees, disciplinary associations, etc. We political scientists have minds, but also bodies! Collegiality, professional development, and most of all civil and constructive discussion and debate are central to the range of activities in which political scientists engage, and they enhance the quality of our lives and those of our students as much as they do the quality of our scholarly output.

Finally, broad and relevant discussion is important to the communities and constituencies beyond the academy to whom political scientists are necessarily connected. We draw on these communities and constituencies as sources of the themes we analyze. We also draw on them for the resources that support institutions of higher learning and advanced research, and for the civil freedoms that we exercise in the course of our intellectual work. And we contribute to these communities and constituencies, as teachers, as experts, as producers of social scientific research and scholarship, and as writers more generally. There is an ethical responsibility, especially in a democratic society, for the social sciences—and especially for political science—to take seriously our connections to this broader public world and the human challenges and opportunities these connections present. In promoting such seriousness, *Perspectives* seeks to foster mutually enlightening discussion between political science and the broader public worlds inhabited by journalists, politicians, military leaders, NGOs, citizen organizations, etc. *Perspectives* provides an institutional space for a kind of broad and synthetic discussion that enriches more specialized scholarly and theoretical discussion at conferences and in peer-reviewed journals and books and that also enhances the more general intellectual and public character and relevance of the profession.

There is nothing else like *Perspectives* in political science. Its creation was an important development in the discipline, one that paralleled similar efforts in other fields (e.g., the American Economic Association's *Journal of Economic Perspectives* and the American

Sociological Association's *Contemporary Sociology*). In its short history, *Perspectives* has largely succeeded in developing a new kind of public sphere within the political science discipline. In promoting such a public sphere, *Perspectives* fills a gap between the broad professional and informational functions of PS and the more specialized scholarly functions of the APSR.

Perspectives contributes to both professional collegiality and scholarly progress by virtue of being serious in a broadly intellectual way. While committed to disciplinary reflexivity, it has avoided what one colleague has called professional "navel gazing." And while committed to the highest standards of scholarly quality, it has avoided excessive scholarly specialization. It has done this **by remaining centered on the common substantive problems of politics that animate most political scientists, whatever the methodological and theoretical differences that might separate us.**

We aim to continue this problem-centered orientation, with one crucial caveat—that what counts as a "problem" is itself a deeply political question, and one great promise of political science is its capacity to illuminate how what counts as a "problem" has come to so count, and how this can itself be rendered problematic, through scholarly analysis and critique and/or through political contestation.

In this sense, the ideal *Perspectives* article can be about virtually any topic, whether conventionally defined as "political" (e.g., elections, political parties, civil wars, judicial decision making) or not (e.g., music, cinema, psychology, physical geography). What defines the "ideal" *Perspectives* article is less the topic than the way of framing it. Consider the following examples:

- An article on legislative bargaining may draw on narrative or statistical or formal methods, or some combination. But it should be focused on the dynamics of legislative bargaining in actual legislatures, why these are politically important, how they relate to regime types or policy regimes or the problems associated with democratization. And while the piece might draw on and represent an important contribution to the relatively specialized discourse of "legislative studies," it ought to speak to broad political questions in ways that reach beyond legislative studies (our discipline is heavily populated with articles that prefer reaching more narrowly and speaking to more specialized audiences, and excellent legislative studies pieces in that vein are probably better off submitted to venues such as *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, *Comparative Political Studies*, or the *Journal of Theoretical Politics* than to *Perspectives*).
- An article on Montesquieu's Spirit of the Laws may employ historical or formalist or genealogical methods of textual analysis. But it should be focused on how the text articulates important political understandings of relevance to such questions as the justification and structuring of liberal political authority, or the way scholars of comparative politics conceptualize regime types, or the social foundations of political power. And while the piece might draw on and represent an important contribution to the history of political thought, it ought to speak to broad political questions that reach beyond that domain of scholarship (and authors of fine work that is more narrowly historical or deconstructive or esoteric in approach are probably better off submitting those pieces to *History of Political Thought* or *Political Theory* than to *Perspectives*).
- An article on war can develop a realist or a liberal or a constructivist or a neo-Marxist approach. But it should be focused on how to understand the causes, dynamics, and consequences of actual wars, and how war is shaped by and in turn shapes other important political phenomena (whether democratic enfranchisement or ethnic violence or state-building or challenges of political leadership and political responsibility). And while the piece might draw from and contribute to the formal analysis of conflict or the discourse analysis of treaties, it ought to reach beyond those literatures, and speak to questions of broad interest to political science (and excellent scholarship more centered in

- specialized IR literatures is probably better off submitted to venues such as *Journal of Conflict Resolution* or *International Organization* or *Millennium* than to *Perspectives*).
- An article on film can employ content analysis or semiotics, and can be framed around theories of “media effects” or “identity politics.” But it should focus on how specific films or genres of film relate to questions of power or citizenship or political identity or the state, and how a better understanding of film allows us to better understand the sorts of phenomena of interest to students of social movements or elections or poverty. And while the piece might draw from or contribute to cultural studies or public opinion research, it should reach beyond these more specialized discourses and illuminate general political questions of interest to a broad range of political scientists (otherwise, such work is probably better submitted to *Political Communication* or the online journal *Theory & Event* than to *Perspectives*).
 - An article on “behavioralism” or “constructivism” or “rational choice” can approach these themes in historical or philosophical or methodological terms. But hopefully it will offer broad and serious reflection and commentary on general intellectual or disciplinary trends that are of interest to a wide range of political scientists. And in offering insight into the methods, frameworks, and concepts that we often rather unreflexively employ in our work, it will hopefully also offer some constructive suggestions about how to produce better research capable of better understanding substantive problems of politics.

Perspectives is part of a broad network of scholarly communication and publication in political science. We do not seek to duplicate or to surpass the kinds of more specialized research that is published in the other important journals in our discipline. We simply, but crucially, wish to promote another, broader type of publication to join the chorus of voices and perhaps even to deepen its harmonic and rhythmic possibilities. It is our hope that every political scientist—regardless of methodological disposition or theoretical allegiance or subfield focus—will agree that this kind of publication is important and that framing one’s work in this way does not detract from other more methodologically rigorous or esoteric or specialized formats, but complements these formats, and thereby adds something important to the discipline as a whole. In this sense, while we have an “ideal” conception of a distinctive Perspective article, we do not have an “ideal” conception of a kind of political science or political scientist. ***Perspectives* is ecumenical, and aims to encourage the broadest possible range of political scientists to participate, as the political scientists they are, in the broad discourse of our discipline.** This may involve stepping a bit outside of one’s normal comfort zone—but only a bit, for the “comfort zones” serve important intellectual and social purposes.

Further, *Perspectives* is most definitely a scholarly journal. There are many ways of writing about and engaging politics, and we intend to encourage vigorous discussion of these diverse ways. We also intend to encourage creative ways of thinking about the interfaces between scholarship and public life, and to lower many of the boundaries conventionally separating these domains. At the same time, we do not wish to eliminate these boundaries, nor the important intellectual distinctions that they often mark. There is a difference between writing a theoretical analysis of the challenges, dilemmas, and alternative strategies of a social movement, on the one hand, and writing opinion pieces or political essays advocating for or disparaging a social movement. Both are no doubt important forms of writing practiced by political scientists. But only the first kind belongs in *Perspectives*. There exists a wide range of journals of opinion, from *New Left Review* to *Dissent* to *American Prospect* to the *Public Interest* to *Policy Review* to *First Things*. Such venues help to constitute a robust public political sphere, and in this domain scholars, functioning as intellectuals and citizens, are free to advocate, to criticize, to denounce, to enjoin, to mobilize, and to strategize. Articles and essays about how liberals can best defeat conservatives or how conservatives can best defeat liberals or how the women’s movement can

devise better strategies for fighting gender inequality or how conservative activists can devise better strategies for defeating the women's movement are addressed primarily to distinct, politically defined audiences. And they belong in those organs of opinion that publish for these defined audiences, or in broader journals of opinion. *Perspectives* is not such a journal of opinion. The point is not that *Perspectives* pieces should or can be "value free." It is that *Perspectives* pieces seek to draw on scholarly literatures and to employ the critical methods of scholarly conjecture and refutation, in order to articulate better and deeper understandings of political life. Such understandings are clearly relevant to advocacy. But they are not the same thing as advocacy. And even when political scientists write in an explicitly or implicitly normative mode, they are doing more than simply advocating or emoting, and are presumably developing arguments that at least in large part draw on and contribute to bodies of scholarship.

Perspectives on Politics is a scholarly political science journal. What we seek, above all, is genuine, robust, broad, and intellectually serious communication about political science, within political science, and between political science and other scholarly and public discourses.

Effective communication is the key to success in any human endeavor, but especially to the enterprise of editing and publishing. The very purpose of publishing is to bring new ideas, discoveries, perspectives, and conversations into broad public view, so that they can be topics of ongoing, constructive dialogue. Publishing is communication. And the single most important key to the success of any serious journal—and *Perspectives* aims to be and be considered such a journal—is prompt, clear, and constructive communication with the colleagues who are our writers, our reviewers, and our primary readership, audience, and constituency. If we can sustain this kind of communication—and I am certain we can—then we will succeed in enhancing the already substantial credibility of the journal, raising its profile as a source of first-rate scholarship and innovative and exciting dialogue.