

The Political Methodologist

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Professional Development

Introducing the Advice to Junior Faculty Column: Advice from Gary King

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Junior faculty members of the Society for Political Methodology can find themselves in real need of mentorship and advice from senior colleagues perhaps even more so than graduate students. Some junior faculty members are the only political methodologists in their home departments. Others are not so alone, but do not always feel safe to ask questions about their career considerations of their own senior colleagues; doing so in their first year or two on the job, when they have yet to forge relationships with those colleagues,

may be especially daunting. In response to these concerns, SPM Long Range Planning Committee proposed an advice column in *The Political Methodologist* as one venue for increased mentorship of junior faculty by senior SPM members.

To ensure the relevance of the column to our junior faculty members, I contacted a diverse set of junior faculty SPM members to solicit suggested questions or topics. I

tried to get feedback from members at different points on the tenure clock, at different types of institutions, and of differing methodological interests. The responses indicated that our junior members have a variety of concerns they would like to hear the more senior members discuss from publishing concerns such as what makes one's work a real contribution to the field and where to publish it, to questions about how to justify what we do to our colleagues and students, to questions of navigating our workloads. Using this feedback, I developed a list of questions to be addressed by senior faculty members over the next several issues of *TPM*. We hope you find these mentoring conversations in print informative and useful. Suggestions for future topics and reactions are always welcome.

Publishing considerations

I have both substantive and methodological research interests. For tenure review purposes, however, I wonder whether I should produce more research on substantive topics or spend more time on purely methodological topics? How are junior scholars who do both substantive and methodological work evaluated in tenure reviews, including in external tenure letters from methodologists?

Optimally, you should choose based on where you are likely to have the biggest impact. In most cases, this is the area you like the most, or are most interested in, since making a big impact will normally take a great deal of devotion in terms of time and effort. It matters much less exactly which combination of interests you choose than doing what you choose to do well. Of course, very few people know what their big research hits will be before working on them, and so it's best to push forward wherever you think you may make a difference, including on several projects at the same time. You are contributing to a collective enterprise, rather than working entirely on your own, which means you can contribute via methods, substance, or some of both. In the end, political science is a substantive discipline, and so there tends to be great suspicion of anyone (theoretical or empirical) who does not take the substance very seriously. So if you contribute primarily to methods, then be sure your methods are tuned to the specifics of the substantive political problem at hand. But similarly, if you only pursue substance, it is in your interest—both in terms of the likelihood of learning the most and, for that reason, in being attractive to prospective employers—to have the most cutting edge tools available.

I have a paper that was just rejected from *Political Analysis*, but the decision seemed like a close call, and the reviews suggest the paper

could be revised for another outlet. What journals, perhaps in other disciplines, other than *Political Analysis* would be a good fit for work that tackles econometric issues? How receptive are these journals to our work? And do we need to frame or otherwise write the paper any differently than we would for *Political Analysis*?

Some other journals you might consider include the Workshop in the *American Journal of Political Science*, *Sociological Methods and Research*, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *Historical Methods*, *Psychometrika*, *Journal of Statistical Software*, and many others. I would also look to the substantive journals; these can help you reach potential users of the methods you describe or produce.

But FYI, one of the great things about *Political Analysis* is that the editors tend to work closely *with* authors—rather than only judging their work from a distance. This means that if it really is a close call, the editor of *PA* will often help you get your paper in shape for publication. But even if every paper you write could get accepted at *PA* on the first round, you shouldn't publish all your work there. Publishing in different venues shows tenure review committees that your work can pass muster with editorial boards with different standards, and it helps you reach new audiences. And if you're having a hard time with reviewers, remember that there are numerous scholarly journals. If you studiously try to improve your paper after a negative review, unless something in your paper is wrong, you are likely to get it published at some point. Sometimes it just takes perseverance. Don't let a paper sit in your drawer; send it out.

I'm not sure I know what it takes to make a contribution to the field of political methodology. I've noticed that there seem to be a lot of conversations among political methodologists these days about creating new methodological techniques, rather than simply borrowing and adapting techniques from other disciplines. Do these conversations imply that I will get little or no credit for smartly importing techniques? If I will get credit for importing, what are the criteria for making that importation a real contribution to our field?

You'll get credit if your work makes a difference for applied political scientists, no matter what it was you did. Your question, of course, implies a large dose of math envy. If you import methods, you'll be outclassed, it seems, by those inventing new methods, but those people feel outclassed by those who come up with new classes of methods, and they, in turn, worry about being outclassed by "real" statisticians who may develop new ways of deriving new

classes of methods. If you pay close enough attention to professors in statistics departments, you will learn that they also have inferiority complexes because their math skills are dwarfed by mathematical statisticians, and the mathematical statisticians worry about the “true” mathematicians. And the mathematicians have their own hierarchy.

No matter what you do, you will run into impressions like these. My view, and I think that of most political methodologists, is that this hierarchy is not appropriate for us (even though some political scientists use it too). Technical skills are very important in our technical subfield, and so go out and scoop up all the skills you can. But in the end, what matters in our substantive discipline is making a difference to the practice of political science. So I like technical work, but I care the most about work that improves how much real political scientists learn and can learn from political data. Sometimes, you can make a huge difference by importing a method from another field, and explaining it clearly in our language so political scientists can benefit. Sometimes, you may need to explain the method and write some software so that its easy for researchers in our field to use. Other times, you may need to adapt that method in some ways to our problems. And still other times, you may need to develop a new method from scratch. You can also make a huge difference by collecting a new set of data and making it available, promulgating informatics techniques that preserve and distribute data, and being among the first to apply a new method. It’s great when statisticians and methodologists cite the work of political methodologists, build off of it, and even contribute methods that help us solve problems for political scientists. But I would do whatever you are capable of that makes the biggest difference for the field. We all benefit by having a subfield that includes all of these types of contributions: you need not do everything yourself.

Teaching issues/workload considerations

What is your advice on adding new techniques that you have not yet worked with, but would be willing to learn along with the students, to an advanced political analysis class? Are there benefits? Pitfalls? Could it undermine my authority in the classroom? Can I really learn along with the students, or do I need to learn first and teach later?

I wouldn’t agree to teach something I didn’t know well *ex ante*. Methods, and math in general, is just plain harder than learning about some area of government and politics. Think about it this way. Suppose you had to give a lecture on the American presidency in 10 days, and you were to learn the exact topic only 5 days from now. How worried would you be? I doubt any political scientist would be terribly worried. Even if you don’t know much about

whatever the topic turns out to be, I’m sure you’re confident that a good evening of reading will be enough to figure it out. But suppose we did the same for a statistical or mathematical topic; its just not the same. Another way to think about this is that, as a student, statistics is the only area within political science where you can’t really understand what the class is about until after you’ve completed it. If you want to learn something new and teach it to your students, either do it before you write the syllabus or change the syllabus during the year after you’ve figured it out.

Although my department seems generally to allow junior faculty to teach the same three or four classes every year, I have been asked to prepare more new classes because of our department’s methodological training needs. While I am sensitive to the fact that I was hired because of these needs, I also feel the requests are unfair, as they make my teaching workload unequal to my junior colleagues and, frankly, I worry about being able to meet the research expectations for tenure with the additional effort I need to put into teaching. How would you suggest I deal with this situation?

Teaching a methods course requires considerably more preparation time than most substantive courses, even though one is not more important than the other of course. A methods course requires hundreds of hours of work carefully choreographing lectures, preparing slides, writing handouts, and giving assignments. In contrast, a discussion course on your substantive area of interest probably may require very little preparation. This difference in workload could hardly be more stark, and it’s important that your chair understand this. So don’t be a pest, but try to educate your chair.

But that said, I would (and I do!) try to teach methods courses. There’s a lot more startup costs, but if you prepare carefully the first year, preparation in subsequent years can be somewhat less onerous. (And a note to your chair: this is not like teaching introductory calculus, since our subfield is among the most dynamic in the discipline; those lecture notes and slides will need to be updated every year!) However, teaching students how to do research and how to think and learn about the world can make an enormous difference for your students, and so tends to be more gratifying for you too. And as important, what you will learn from the experience of learning to explain difficult statistical concepts to novices will likely be very important to your work and your career.

Justifying our work to others

I keep getting asked by intelligent and well-meaning colleagues whether someone could

teach a one semester statistics class that would teach students everything they really need to know about statistics. You must get this question all the time. How do you respond? How do you think I should respond?

If there is such a course, please do sign me up! Its unlikely because in our subfield, knowledge is cumulative. As a consequence, scientific progress has been spectacular in our field and those that depend on us for methodological advice and innovations. But also as a consequence, what we teach requires more and more sophistication, and our courses are therefore taught in a sequence, where it really is true that you can't understand the second course without the first. Although we do have prerequisites in the rest of political science, its not difficult to skip the introductory American government course and jump to the course on Congress for example; that's much more rare in methods and less likely to work.

In introductory courses, how would you suggest dealing with the following sort of student protest: I just want to run regressions. And I can just say 'regress' in Stata. Why should I care about matrix algebra or calculus? How does learning about $\text{Var}(\dots)$ help me type 'regress' more effectively or better? I mean, I don't know matrix algebra and I'd need a whole course just to learn it, and I'm not going to be a methodologist, and my advisers all got jobs and they don't know any matrix algebra and they just type 'regress'? (Note that I'm concerned both with

providing an effective and sensible response, and with navigating around saying something impolitic about my senior colleagues.)

Many academics use the same methods their whole career that they learned in graduate school; if you want to do that, fine, you already know what you need to know. But the really successful empirical social scientists tend to update much more frequently. When we teach *our* students, we try to teach not only the latest and greatest methods. We also try to give them the tools to learn a new method when it becomes available. Given the fast-paced and accelerating progress in political methodology, we know that a great new method will be invented right after our students graduate this year (and next, and next...). We don't want their knowledge to be obsolete immediately upon graduation. And so we do teach them the latest and greatest, but we also try to teach them the fundamentals of how methods are created. When that new method is created and is relevant to our students' work, we want them to have the tools in hand to be able to read, understand, evaluate, implement, and use the new method in their work. To do that, they may even need to know some matrix algebra!

The advantage of this kind of response is that it is not only completely accurate, but it also helps explain to your colleague that political methodology is not like learning French or fulfilling some other support role. It is an important, dynamic field making great progress, and making things possible that were never before contemplated. You ought to be able to convey this so that they will value you, your contribution to your students, and the importance of your subfield.

