

What is a Political Methodologist?

Introduction to the Symposium: What is a Political Methodologist?

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What is a political methodologist? At a 2016 APSA panel on diversity and mentoring in political methodology, female panelists and attendees reported being told by advisers that they “weren’t a methodologist” during their formative years despite their interest and expertise in quantitative analysis. At the same time, the Society for Political Methodology (SPM) has struggled for years to increase participation by women and minorities in its annual conference and to increase diversity among those who hold faculty appointments in methodology. Reports from the APSA panel (and many other anecdotal accounts) suggest that the SPM’s struggle to recruit more women may be due in part to the ambiguity surrounding what it means to be a methodologist.

Given this problematic ambiguity, we believe that methodologists need to explicitly and publicly discuss what it takes to succeed in the subfield and how graduate students are socialized into it. This discussion will help students decide whether they have the relevant qualifications and interests to participate in the methods community. It may prevent advisers from discouraging well-qualified women. If there are multiple pathways by which a person can be recognized as a contributor to the methods community, explicitly distinguishing these pathways would help potential students and junior faculty members recognize roles that they can play. It would also be helpful to discuss particular barriers to entry to the methods community that are created for people from underrepresented groups.

This symposium answers the need for a discussion about what it means to be a political methodologist. Our contributors address the ambiguities associated with the term “methodologist” in order to dispel misperceptions among both advisers and students about who is and who is not a methodologist. They explore pathways and pitfalls associated with becoming a methodologist, providing guidance for individuals who are interested in becoming a methodologist and for advisers who want to mentor aspiring methodologists. One of our objectives for the symposium is to improve diversity in the methods community by removing perceived or real barriers to

entry by underrepresented groups that are embedded in misconceptions about what makes someone a methodologist.

In the symposium, six methodologists (two senior faculty, two mid-career faculty, and two junior faculty) address the question “What is a political methodologist?” In organizing this symposium, we asked each contributor to consider:

1. the qualifications that a new entrant to the field must have in order to obtain academic employment in a dedicated methodology position, a hybrid substantive-methods position, and/or a position teaching some methods courses;
2. the research interests and areas of expertise that distinguish methodologists from other quantitative political scientists;
3. how graduate students can socialize themselves into the political methodology community; and
4. the challenges graduate students may face in becoming a methodologist (and how these challenges may be overcome).

By answering these questions, we hope to address challenges to diversity in the political methodology community. First, having a clear understanding of what a methodologist is will help established scholars and aspiring political methodologists alike to objectively evaluate who is and is not a methodologist. We believe that explicitly identified research interests and areas of expertise are a better way to distinguish methodologists from other quantitative political scientists when compared to demographic, attitudinal, and adviser-inferred definitions of the role, and that displacing these definitions helps create more opportunities for women and members of underrepresented groups to identify (and be identified) as methodologists. Indeed, research indicates subjective evaluations of fit often lead individuals to conclude that women are not well positioned to fill roles in historically male-dominated fields (Boring, Ottoboni, and Stark 2016; Cassese and Holman 2017; Foschi 2000; Moss-Racusin et al. 2012). By contrast, when evaluations focus on objective criteria, the contributions and qualifications of women are more likely to be recognized and valued (Goldin and Rouse 2000; Terrell et al. 2017).

Second, having transparent discussions and concrete suggestions about membership in the political methodology community serves to make the methods community available to a wider range of scholars. Although it may go without saying, understanding both the informal rules and norms of a community and the formal avenues for participation is key to becoming involved and succeeding in an organization. That said, out-group members are often excluded from informal networks and thus less likely to be exposed to unwritten rules and norms. For this reason, research demonstrates that women and minorities are more likely to succeed in organizations when the rules of the game are clearly documented and transparent (Czudnowski 1975; Reskin and McBrier 2000; Uhlmann and Cohen 2005).

Finally, identifying both the challenges to becoming a methodologist and strategies for overcoming these challenges better equips students and mentors to succeed. Further, if students are made aware that these challenges are not unique to them, they may be less likely to be discouraged from becoming a methodologist at the first sight of adversity. Given the pervasive stereotype that women are not good at math (Cvencek, Meltzoff, and Greenwald 2011), if women are unaware that the challenges they face are common to many students, they may be more likely than men to internalize them and be discouraged from pursuing their interests in methods.

Each of our six contributors has taken on the central question “what is a methodologist?” from a different angle, lending the symposium as a whole a comprehensive view of what it means to be a methodologist and providing insight on how the definition of a methodologist can either enable or hinder the intellectual growth and descriptive diversification of the field.

In their joint contribution to the symposium, Chris Achen and Sara McLaughlin Mitchell take a historical view, inquiring about how the past of the methodology field has informed and shaped its present state. They point out that the identity of *methodologist* is a young one, even relative to the short life of political science as an autonomous discipline; only in the

(VIM) conference or the Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP) conference. Not coincidentally, these venues also tend to be more descriptively representative of the diversity of the larger political science community. If POLMETH and the SPM remain relatively narrowly focused, it is not hard to imagine that the SPM and its institutions could become marginalized in a wider and more representative methodology community that emerges from these alternative venues.

As the symposium reveals, and presumably as part of the SPM’s uneven representation of those with methodological interests, there is substantial heterogeneity in how scholars distinguish “methodologists” from “non-methodologists.” For example, Thomas Leeper takes the view that methodologists are distinguished by their intellectual and teaching interests and that becoming a methodologist is primarily a matter of self-identification. Although he acknowledges the communities and activities around which methodologists are organized, for him the primary task of identifying as a methodologist is inward-facing, a matter of asking oneself “if you want to *evaluate* and *create* methods” instead of just understanding them. By contrast, while Justin Esarey acknowledges the distinctive research and teaching interests of methodologists, he emphasizes that being a methodologist is largely about participating in the methodology community.

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late 1970s and early 1980s were political scientists first hired into departments on methodology lines in non-negligible quantities. The relatively small and homogenous group of scholars who formed the nucleus of the nascent Society for Political Methodology (SPM), and their need to distinguish themselves and sustain the existence of the group, indirectly institutionalized aspects of the identity of a methodologist: white, male, focused on American politics, and keen on mathematical formalism. Now that methodology’s role in political science is secure, they argue that restricting methodologists to this archetypal identity will tend to restrict the growth and intellectual influence of the field going forward.

Molly Roberts’s essay highlights the modern consequences of the society’s historical legacy. According to her analysis, the Annual Meeting of the SPM (commonly known as POLMETH) still tends to disproportionately represent American politics scholars despite the fact that many of the most interesting methodological challenges to quantitative social science come from the comparative politics and international relations subfields. Scholars who are interested in these challenges tend not to participate in POLMETH or the SPM, but in alternative venues such as the Visions in Methodology

He argues that membership in the methods community is defined by attending key conferences (such as POLMETH), publishing in the community’s journals (such as *Political Analysis* or *Political Science Research and Methods*), and serving in offices of the Society for Political Methodology.

In addition to answering the questions posed by our symposium, the contributors address how some of these answers should change in the future in order to improve diversity in the community and expand its influence. Tiffany Barnes summarizes the APSA panel on diversity in the methods community that initially motivated this symposium. Her work summarizes the many suggestions made during that panel for increasing the diversity of the community. For example, panelists suggested that senior methodologists should actively identify and recruit talented people with methodological potential, rather than passively screening and accepting potential students who come to them on their own initiative. As another example, ensuring that methodological and substantive interests are explicitly interrelated in classes and projects (as opposed to considered separately) may help garner the initial interest of students who do not see themselves as methodologists at first, but may be interested in pursuing

methodological questions as part of a larger agenda. In addition to reiterating some of these suggestions, Molly Roberts further argues that the methods community needs to explicitly and actively embrace and encourage projects from comparativists and international relations scholars.

We hope that the overall message of this symposium is hopeful, even if some challenges faced by the methods community highlighted by the symposium are substantial. Although the data collected by Sara McLaughlin Mitchell and Christopher Achen on lack of gender and intellectual diversity in the SPM and POLMETH are troubling, Justin Esarey's data on gender representation among full-time faculty in statistics and mathematics departments shows that a deeply quantitative community focused intently on abstract inference *can* evolve over a relatively short time. At the individual level of a graduate student considering a career in methodology, Thomas Leeper's essay provides reassurance that there are many pathways to recognition as a methodologist—and that initial confusion and uncertainty are normal even for those who choose to join the community. *All* of our contributors emphasize that methodologists are political scientists first, and that a healthy interest in the substance of politics is no barrier—and in fact is a critical asset—for anyone who wishes to become a political methodologist. ■

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