

The Enduring Quest for Equity in Political Science: The Climate and Context for Women and Scholars of Color in the Era of Black Lives Matter and COVID-19

Introduction: The Import of Equity and Equality for All Political Scientists

Carol Mershon, *University of Virginia, USA*

This *PS: Political Science & Politics* symposium addresses the climate and context for political scientists at the departmental and university levels and within the discipline at large. Whereas our scope extends to all political scientists, we focus primarily on the experience of underrepresented scholars in the discipline. The symposium draws from the work conducted by these contributors to the American Political Science Association (APSA) Presidential Task Force appointed by APSA President Paula McClain on “Systemic Inequalities in the Discipline.”

In this introduction, I first discuss the significance of climate and context in academe and, specifically, political science. As part of the discussion, I distinguish between equity and equality. I then address how the symposium tackles those subjects, followed by a preview of the symposium contributions. I conclude by emphasizing that enhancing the climate for underrepresented members of the discipline is beneficial for all members of the discipline.

CLIMATE AND CONTEXT, EQUITY AND EQUALITY

How may “climate” and “context” be understood in political science? Climate is a matter of perception, which varies by context and an individual’s place and experience in the context.

The context, in turn, varies by—for example—the demographic and social attributes we bring to it and in work, our specialization and frame of reference as—in the case of academe—a department, university, or entire discipline (Fotaki 2013; Howe-Walsh and Turnbull 2016; Kelly and McCann 2014; Maranto and Griffin 2011; Mershon and Walsh 2015; 2016; Sandler and Hall 1986). Salient issues across time and space also define context. To illustrate, today—in the era of Black Lives Matter and the COVID-19 pandemic—the enduring quest for equality and equity in political science is more critical than ever.

More than 25 years ago, *PS* published an article establishing that women perceived and experienced a more inequitable environment in their department and home institution than men (Hesli and Burrell 1995). In 1999, the influential “Tenure in a Chilly Climate” appeared in *PS* (Anonymous and Anonymous 1999). Also in *PS*, Michelson and Lavariega Monforti (2021) dissected “Elusive Inclusion: Persistent Challenges Facing Women of Color in Political Science.” Carey and colleagues (2020) used survey experiments to probe the climate and context for women and minorities in the profession. To summarize their findings, Carey et al. (2020, 536) affirmed that “the primary reason for the lack of diversity among faculty is not a lack of desire to hire them, but the *accumulation of implicit and institutionalized biases*, and their related consequences, at later stages in the pipeline” (emphasis added). Thus, the impact of bias as a component of climate and context persists over time and undermines the experience—and even the presence—of women and scholars of color in the discipline. These cited examples comprise only a small subset of publications on inequity and inequality in the political science profession. As they illustrate, concern about climate and context for all members of the profession, especially among underrepresented political scientists, is both long-standing and timely.

APSA has spearheaded multiple efforts to evaluate the climate and context for political scientists. For example, in 2009, APSA fielded a survey including a battery of questions

asking respondents about relationships with their departmental colleagues. That survey yielded the overall finding that “women and racial/sexual minorities perceive their departments as less ‘friendly’ than men and non-minorities” (Claypool and Mershon 2016, 483; cf. Ghosh and Wang 2022). As a testament to continuing inequalities for underrepresented members of the profession, 11 senior women political scientists reported to APSA leadership in late 2015 that they had received complaints of sexual harassment at prior annual meetings (Sapiro and Campbell 2018). In 2016, APSA’s Ethics Committee decided on a three-part response: a survey of APSA members; the proposal to the APSA Council for a revamped Code of Conduct; and the institution of an Ombuds. The survey, fielded in 2017, revealed that almost one third of respondents had experienced some form of harassment at the four previous annual meetings, which was more common among women and junior members of the profession (Sapiro and Campbell 2018; cf. Ghosh and Wang 2022). The Code of Conduct is now regularly and prominently disseminated before annual meetings, as is the new APSA Anti-Harassment Policy. APSA established an Ombuds program in 2017 and has included it at all annual meetings since then. In 2018, the APSA Senior Director of Diversity and Inclusion launched the RESPECT Campaign (Respectful, Equitable, Safe, Professional, and Ethical Conduct Towards All). This program and its institutionalization at annual meetings aim to generate transformational change in the discipline’s climate. The RESPECT Campaign supports and complements APSA’s other central initiatives in the area.

In considering climate and context in political science, it is vital to distinguish between the concepts of equity and equality. Equality refers to sameness in status, treatment, and opportunities; equity denotes recognition of difference and thus allocates resources to individuals, based on their needs, to enable all to attain the same outcome. An overview of the symposium contributions indicates that it can advance both equity and equality in political science.

HOW THE SYMPOSIUM ADDRESSES ITS THEMES

The symposium directs attention to four subject areas, each with an article and a set of coauthors dedicated to investigating what is important for understanding and improving the climate and context for underrepresented political scientists. The subject areas are as follows:

- microaggression, bullying, and implicit bias
- exclusion and disproportionate service burdens
- best practices at the departmental and university levels
- recommendations for APSA

The entire team of collaborators in the symposium discussed alternative ways to approach climate and context in political science and settled on these four subject areas as the most significant. The team reached a consensus on which members would assume the responsibility for examining which area.

The four articles that comprise the symposium, as well as the introduction and the conclusion, start from the shared recognition that the effort to enhance the climate and context for women and scholars of color in political science is an enduring quest. The challenge of creating an equitable and inclusive climate is especially urgent in the era of COVID-19 and the outpouring of protest in the wake of George Floyd’s murder.

A PREVIEW OF THE SYMPOSIUM CONTRIBUTIONS

A preview of our four major themes begins with the study of microaggression, bullying, and implicit bias. As the authors of this article discuss, the effect of these forms of oppression is most severe for scholars of color, women, and other underrepresented groups. Ghosh and Wang (2022) conducted interviews and online surveys to ground their inquiry in both qualitative and quantitative evidence and to enrich available studies with the insights from original data. In gathering their data, they aimed to discover how widespread microaggression, bullying, and implicit bias might be in the profession. The survey produced distressing results. Almost 50% of survey respondents reported that they experienced implicit bias, microaggression, or bullying in their own department; almost 60% stated that they witnessed implicit bias at a professional meeting; and more than 66% asserted that they witnessed microaggression in a department with which they are familiar. The open-ended survey responses, like the interviews, disclosed examples of racism, sexism, homophobia, and other extensive forms of prejudice, some overt. The conclusion to Ghosh and Wang’s (2022) article on microaggression, bullying, and implicit bias highlights a “culture of apathy” that permits these problems to exist and persist. The authors recommend that, in response, APSA should establish mechanisms that can hold leaders in the profession responsible for combating the status quo and engendering reform.

Simien and Wallace (2022) investigate the exclusion and disproportionate service burdens faced by women and faculty of color in political science. Their article assesses extant literature, detailing a range of examples of structural inequities and analyzing the reasons underlying these inequities and their consequences. The discussion shows that despite exclusion, women academics and faculty of color—given their dearth—often perform less prestigious, time-consuming service. George Floyd’s death and the COVID-19 pandemic generated even weightier expectations for women and faculty of color in institutions of higher education in the United States. The authors promote a host of measures, such as hiring additional faculty of color; more equitable distributions of service related to diversity, equity, and inclusion; and more resources to support faculty who want to offer a programmatic response. They recommend measures such as paid leave for parents with childcare needs and teaching schedules that accommodate family responsibilities. They stress that family-friendly support requires institutionalization. Simien and Wallace (2022) also emphasize the importance of networks of mentors, specifying several examples in political science (e.g., #PSSistahScholar 2022; Smooth 2016), and they call for departmental funding to enable attendance and participation

in these mentoring networks. They conclude by calling for sustained dialogue, systems and policies designed to promote equity, and periodic reassessment of systems and policies to ensure that they operate as intended.

Michelson and Wilkinson's (2022) contribution appraises the available literature on the persistence of a "leaky pipeline" for women and people of color in political science. They also assess the documented strategies for creating a more inclusive and equitable academic climate at the departmental and university levels. In view of the literature, generating an improved climate should not be a puzzling goal. Yet the gap between knowledge on the one hand and investment and action on the other is obvious and enduring. How do we close the gap? The authors analyze best practices in hiring and retention of faculty at the departmental and university levels. As Michelson and Wilkinson (2022) observe, a recurring theme in extant research is that known strategies exist to mitigate bias in hiring and retention. To reach the goal of reducing bias and attaining equity and inclusion, the authors promote plans that specify measurable

wants to pursue, the authors urge APSA to invest more resources—staffing and financial—in diversity and inclusion programs to implement the recommended initiatives. Making visible the substantial labor that APSA personnel must do to support diversity and inclusion activities and initiatives is a key aspect of demonstrating institutional commitments to diversity and inclusion.

Rather than focus on recapitulating the contents of the symposium, the conclusion highlights achievements in bringing equity and inclusion into political science. It also identifies additional steps that can further advance movement toward the goals of equity and inclusion in departments and in the discipline writ large. Moreover, Mershon's (2022) conclusion demonstrates that a better climate for underrepresented scholars in the discipline translates to benefits for all political scientists. Research provides evidence that diverse, inclusive teams of decision makers make better decisions than homogeneous teams (Hong and Page 2004; Page 2007). When scholars of color, women, and other underrepresented individuals in political science are treated equitably and respect-

When scholars of color, women, and other underrepresented individuals in political science are treated equitably and respectfully and when they operate in diverse, equitable, and inclusive environments, not only do they thrive but also all of their colleagues thrive.

markers of progress, ongoing commitments to ensuring that departmental and institutional actions produce intended changes, and ways to adjust over time as needed. Furthermore, the authors highlight the part that APSA can play, advocating for APSA's creation and distribution of "shovel-ready" toolkits for departments that are seeking to recruit and retain faculty and graduate students who are members of historically marginalized communities. They also recommend that APSA maintain a website with links to supportive trainings and resources.

Ackerly and Franklin (2022) concentrate on recommendations for APSA. Their article indicates how APSA might better use its infrastructure of organized sections to advance the aims of equity and inclusion. Moreover, the authors highlight that a significant part of the political science community does not participate in APSA, and they endorse a targeted recruitment plan for Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic/Latinx universities and colleges, and Tribal colleges and universities. Students at these colleges and universities typically are from disadvantaged backgrounds and are relatively likely to be first-generation students. Ackerly and Franklin (2022) identify the strengthening of links to these institutions as a priority for APSA. They also identify the importance of fostering inclusive climates at the departmental level, and they draw inspiration from the recommendations of the Leadership in Academic Climate Excellence proposal produced at APSA's 2018 Hackathon (Ackerly et al. 2018). Given the wide range of diversity and inclusion initiatives that APSA is pursuing or

fully and when they operate in diverse, equitable, and inclusive environments, not only do they thrive but also all of their colleagues thrive.

This symposium presents the everyday experience of political scientists who are women, scholars of color, and other individuals who are underrepresented in the academy. The first article addresses this question: How pervasive are micro-aggression, bullying, and bias for underrepresented scholars in political science? The answer is, in a word, very.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author thanks Sally Bonsall and Shiran Ren for their research assistance.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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


REFERENCES

- Ackerly, Brooke, Jenna Bednar, Merike Blofield, Michael Chwe, Carlos Contreras, Jason Davis, Christina Ewig, Gisela Sin, David Singer, Hillel Soifer, Johanna Solomon, and Nora Webb Williams. 2018. "Leadership in Academic Climate and Excellence." *APSA Annual Hackathon*. Washington, DC: American Political Science Association.
- Ackerly, Brooke, and Sekou Franklin. 2022. "Climate and APSA." *PS: Political Science & Politics*. DOI: 10.1017/S1049096522001160.
- Anonymous and Anonymous. 1999. "Tenure in a Chilly Climate." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 32 (1): 91–99.
- Carey, John M., Kevin R. Carman, Katherine P. Clayton, Yusaku Horiuchi, Mala Htun, and Brittany Ortiz. 2020. "Who Wants to Hire a More Diverse Faculty?"

Profession Symposium: *The Enduring Quest for Equity in Political Science*


- A Conjoint Analysis of Faculty and Student Preferences for Gender and Racial/Ethnic Diversity." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 8 (3): 535–53.
- Claypool, Vicki Hesli, and Carol Mershon. 2016. "Does Diversity Matter? Evidence from a Survey of Political Science Faculty." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 4 (3): 483–98.
- Fotaki, Marianna. 2013. "No Woman Is Like a Man (in Academia): The Masculine Symbolic Order and the Unwanted Female Body." *Organization Studies* 34 (9): 1251–75.
- Ghosh, Cyril, and Hongying Wang. 2022. "Microaggression, Bullying, and Implicit Bias." *PS: Political Science & Politics*. DOI: [10.1017/S1049096522001159](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096522001159).
- Hesli, Vicki, and Barbara Burrell. 1995. "Faculty Rank among Political Scientists and Reports on the Academic Environment: The Differential Impact of Gender on Observed Patterns." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 28 (1): 101–11.
- Hong, Lu, and Scott E. Page. 2004. "Groups of Diverse Problem Solvers Can Outperform Groups of High-Ability Problem Solvers." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 101 (46): 16385–89.
- Howe-Walsh, Liza, and Sarah Turnbull. 2016. "Barriers to Women Leaders in Academia: Tales from Science and Technology." *Studies in Higher Education* 41 (3): 415–28.
- Kelly, Bridget Turner, and Kristin I. McCann. 2014. "Women Faculty of Color: Stories Behind the Statistics." *The Urban Review* 46 (4): 681–702.
- Maranto, Cheryl L., and Andrea E. C. Griffin. 2011. "The Antecedents of a 'Chilly Climate for Women Faculty in Higher Education.'" *Human Relations* 64 (2): 139–59.
- Mershon, Carol. 2022. "Conclusion: Recent Steps and the Road Ahead in the Enduring Quest for Equity in Political Science." *PS: Political Science & Politics*. DOI: [10.1017/S1049096522000890](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096522000890).
- Mershon, Carol, and Denise Walsh. 2015. "How Political Science Can Be More Diverse." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 48 (3): 459–63.
- Mershon, Carol, and Denise Walsh. 2016. "Diversity in Political Science: Why It Matters and How to Get It." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 4 (3): 462–6.
- Michelson, Melissa R., and Jessica L. Lavariega Monforti. 2021. "Elusive Inclusion: Persistent Challenges Facing Women of Color in Political Science." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 54 (1): 152–57.
- Michelson, Melissa R., and Betina Cutaia Wilkinson. 2022. "Best Practices in Diversifying Political Science." *PS: Political Science & Politics*. DOI: [10.1017/S1049096522000804](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096522000804).
- Page, Scott E. 2007. *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- #PSSistahScholar. 2022. *PSSistahScholar*, June 4. https://twitter.com/hashtag/PSSistahScholar?src=hashtag_click.
- Sandler, Bernice R., and Roberta M. Hall. 1986. "The Campus Climate Revisited: Chilly for Women Faculty, Administrators, and Graduate Students." *Project on the Status and Education of Women*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges.
- Sapiro, Virginia, and David Campbell. 2018. "Report on the 2017 APSA Survey on Sexual Harassment at Annual Meetings." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 51 (1): 197–206.
- Simien, Evelyn, and Sophia Jordán Wallace. 2022. "Exclusion and Disproportionate Service: Considering the Impacts for Women Academics and Faculty of Color in Political Science." *PS: Political Science & Politics*. DOI: [10.1017/S104909652200110X](https://doi.org/10.1017/S104909652200110X).
- Smooth, Wendy. 2016. "Intersectionality and Women's Advancement in the Discipline and Across the Academy." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 4 (3): 513–28.


SYMPOSIUM CONTRIBUTORS


Brooke A. Ackerly  is Professor of Political Science at Vanderbilt University. She publishes normative political theory on global justice, human rights, and climate change. Her theoretical work utilizes empirical research on activism and the lived experience of those affected by injustice (*Grounded Normative Theory*). She is the author of *Political Theory and Feminist Social Criticism* (2000), *Universal Human Rights in a World of Difference* (2008), *Doing Feminist Research with Jacqui True* (2010, 2019), and *Just Responsibility: A Human Rights Theory of Global Justice* (2018). She can be reached at Brooke.Ackerly@vanderbilt.edu.

Sekou Franklin is a Professor of Political Science at Middle Tennessee State University. He has published works on racial politics, social movements, criminal justice, and state and local politics. He is the author of *After the Rebellion: Social Movement Activism and Popular Mobilization among the Post-Civil Rights Generation* and co-author of *Losing Power: African Americans and Racial Polarization in*


Tennessee Politics. He can be reached at [Sekou.Franklin@mtsu.edu](mailto:Franklin@mtsu.edu).

Cyril Ghosh  is associate professor in the Department of Government and Politics at Wagner College. His research interests are in sexuality and politics, citizenship and immigration, and democratic inclusion. He may be reached at cyril.ghosh@gmail.com.

Carol Mershon  is Professor in the Department of Politics, University of Virginia. Her research investigates party systems, political institutions, and race, ethnicity, and indigeneity. She may be reached at cam6m@virginia.edu.

Melissa R. Michelson  is Dean of Arts & Sciences and Professor of Political Science at Menlo College. Her current research projects focus on how best to motivate turnout among college students and Black and Latinx voters, how to use drag performers to increase voter turnout, and how to reduce prejudice against members of the LGBTQ community. She can be reached at melissa.michelson@menlo.edu.

Evelyn M. Simien is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Connecticut. She can be reached at evelyn.simien@uconn.edu.

Sophia Jordán Wallace  is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Washington. She can be reached at sophiajw@uw.edu.

Hongying Wang is associate professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Waterloo in Canada. Her research interests are in international and comparative politics and political economy. She can be reached at h279wang@uwaterloo.ca.

Betina Cutaia Wilkinson is Associate Chair and Associate Professor of the Politics and International Affairs Department at Wake Forest University. Her research and teaching interests are in racial and ethnic politics, public opinion and public policy with a current focus on sports activism and Blacks' and Latinxs' experiences with the criminal justice system. She can be reached at wilkinbc@wfu.edu.