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## Discretion in Editorial Decision-Making: The Case of the Journal of Politics

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Micheal W. Giles,  
David Patterson  
and  
Francie Mizell  
Emory University

Refereed journals occupy a central role in the life of the profession. They provide the vehicle for the communication of ideas and information within the scholarly community. Moreover, publication in journals, particularly in the more important journals of the discipline, is taken as an indication of an individual's scholarly abilities and weighs heavily in annual evaluations and in decisions regarding tenure and promotion.

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*Do reviews provide generally clear and consistent guidance to editors?*

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While journals play such a prominent role in the profession and in the lives of its individual members, relatively little empirical evidence exists on the decision-making calculus which the journals employ (for an exception see Patterson, et al., 1987 *PS*). The mechanics of anonymous peer review are well-known, but the reliability of the reviewing process and the degree to which editorial discretion is exercised in the decisional process has more often been the basis for convention anecdotes than for serious analysis. Do reviews provide generally clear and consistent guidance to editors? Do editors' decisions adhere to or depart from the recommendations of the reviewers? The present study provides information on these important questions by examining the reviewing and decisional processes of *The Journal of Politics* for the

Table 1. Reviewers' Confidential Evaluations of Manuscripts

%	Evaluation
2.00	A major contribution: profound, theoretically important, very well conceived and executed.
9.30	The manuscript warrants publication: sound, solid contribution to the field it represents.
4.00	<i>Sufficiently sound and important to justify publication only if space is plentiful.</i>
18.41	The manuscript should be accepted subject to minor to moderate revisions as suggested below. With these revisions, the manuscript would be:
.01	A major contribution.
12.50	A sound and solid contribution.
5.90	Sufficiently sound if space is plentiful.
25.50	The manuscript does not warrant publication, but the author should be encouraged (with no commitment to publish) to revise and resubmit in line with the suggestions elaborated below.
39.90	Insufficiently sound or important to warrant publication.

N = 2,125 total reviews.

three years from December 1984 to January 1988.

During these three years, *The Journal* received and reached a final decision on 752 manuscripts. While a minimum of three reviewers were initially contacted for a report on each manuscript, three completed reviews were received and provided the basis for editorial decisions on only 632 manuscripts. Decisions were made on an additional 113 manuscripts based on two reviews. Decisions were made on relatively few manuscripts based on fewer than two reviews. For example, the presidential address to the Southern Political Science Association was published each year without review. Manuscripts for which fewer than two reviews were obtained are omitted from the analyses which follow.

In addition to written comments, a copy of which were returned to the author, each reviewer submitted to the editor a confidential evaluation, either with or without comments. This evaluation was made in terms of an eight-point scale. The distribution of these evaluations is presented in Table 1. As one might expect, this distribution is strongly skewed toward negative evaluations. Almost 40 percent of the reviews clearly recommended rejection, and another 25 percent saw the need

for major revision before the manuscript could be considered for publication. In contrast only about 11 percent of the reviews gave an unconditioned positive evaluation. The remainder of the reviews either conditioned their positive assessment by the need for some revision or by a caveat concerning the significance of the manuscript.

*Almost 40 percent of the reviews clearly recommended rejection. . . .*

While the overall pattern of evaluations is interesting the more important question concerns the consistency of evaluations among reviewers. Is the reviewing process reliable? Do reviewers assessing the same manuscript present the editor with consistent recommendations? To examine this question, the confidential evaluations have been recoded into two broad groupings-- "Positive" recommendations which include unconditioned positive evaluations and positive evaluations conditioned by the need for minor to moderate revision, and "Negative" recommendations which include clear rejections, indications of the

Table 2. Reviewers' Evaluations by Manuscript

%	N	Distribution of Reviews
4.8	36	Three positive reviews
1.5	11	Two positive reviews
10.6	79	Two positive reviews and one negative review
2.3	17	One positive review and one negative review
29.4	219	One positive review and two negative reviews
11.4	85	Two negative reviews
40.0	298	Three negative reviews
100.0	745	

need for major revisions, and positive comments conditioned by concerns over the significance of the work. The inclusion of the latter in the negative category reflects the fact that, given the constant limitations on space experienced by journals, such a recommendation is almost by definition negative. Approximately 25% (23.81) of the reviews fell into the positive category and approximately 75% into the negative.

*Approximately 60 percent of all manuscripts received completely consistent reviews.*

The distribution of evaluations by manuscript are shown in Table 2. These data provide support for the reliability of the reviewing process. Approximately 60 percent (57.7%) of all manuscripts received completely consistent reviews. The bulk of these consistent reviews were negative in their recommendation. Only 47 manuscripts (6.3%) in the three-year period received three positive recommendations or two positives without a negative. Given that 75% of all reviews were negative and only 25% were positive, it is possible that the relatively high frequency of consistently negative reviews and the comparatively low frequency of manuscripts receiving consistently positive reviews might simply reflect a probabilistic process over two or three trials. This does not appear to be

the case. Using the marginal probabilities toward positive and negative recommendations from Table 1, we would expect fewer consistently negative (331) or consistently positive (17) recommendations than are actually observed (analysis not shown). These differences are greater than would be expected by chance.

In sum, the data in Table 2 are consistent with the use by reviewers of some common underlying standards of evaluation. On the other hand, these data also indicate the presence of considerable disagreement among reviewers over the merits of manuscripts. For approximately 40% (42.3) of all manuscripts the reviews are inconsistent, either one reviewer recommends in favor of publication while his or her colleague(s) recommend against publication or vice versa. Evidently, the underlying standards of the profession are either rejected by a significant percentage of the reviewers or are sufficiently ambiguous as to provide considerable difference of opinion in their operation.

Given the significant number of manuscripts for which the editor receives inconsistent or mixed signals from the reviewers, how do these recommendations translate into decisions with regard to publication? This question is addressed in Table 3. Since the number of acceptances without a request for revision was very small (only 21 manuscripts), these manuscripts are combined with those offered the opportunity to revise and resubmit. These data provide clear evidence of the dominant role played by the reviewers' recommendations in the editor's decision-making. The probability of a positive decision (an acceptance or an offer to revise &

Table 3. Percent of Manuscripts Accepted or Offered an Opportunity to Revise and Resubmit by Reviewers' Summary Evaluations

%	N	Distribution of Reviews
100.0	36	Three positive reviews
100.0	11	Two positive reviews
81.0	64	Two positive reviews and one negative review
17.7	3	One positive review and one negative review
17.4	38	One positive review and two negative reviews
4.7	4	Two negative reviews
4.0	12	Three negative reviews
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resubmit) declines precipitously as the reviews become more negative. Most notably, manuscripts receiving consistently positive recommendations from the reviewers, uniformly received positive decisions from the editor. However, these data also reveal the discretion exercised by the editor. While the overwhelming majority of manuscripts receiving two positive and one negative recommendation, received a positive recommendation from the editor, 19 percent of these manuscripts were rejected by the editor.

*The underlying standards of the profession are either rejected by a significant percentage of the reviewers or are sufficiently ambiguous as to provide considerable difference of opinion in their operation.*

In these cases the editor either was convinced by the single negative reviewer or by his own reading of the manuscript that it did not merit further consideration. While the number of these manuscripts is very small (15 in all), if accepted, they

would have constituted approximately one article per issue over the three years.

*The exercise of editorial discretion does not appear to have either advantaged or disadvantaged women.*

Editorial discretion was also exercised in a positive direction. Indeed, approximately one-third of all manuscripts receiving an opportunity to revise and resubmit from the editor had a majority of negative recommendations from the reviewers. Among manuscripts receiving two negative and only one positive recommendation, the editor rendered a positive decision for 38 manuscripts. Even among manuscripts where three reviewers gave consistently negative recommendations, the editor rendered a positive decision for 12 manuscripts. It is important to remember that a negative recommendation from the reviewers does not mean "do not publish." In fact of the 36 negative reviews received by these 12 manuscripts, only 4 recommended against publication. Nine gave a "publish if space is plentiful" recommendation and the remaining 23 recommended that the author(s) be given the opportunity to revise and resubmit after major revisions. In summary, the editor exercised his discretion in these cases to select from among those manu-

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scripts which the reviewers deemed to have potential.

Given the operation of a significant amount of editorial discretion, the question arises as to whether identifiable groups were advantaged or disadvantaged in the process. The number of manuscripts which were authored by identifiable minorities were too few to allow analysis of this question. Likewise, the relatively small number of manuscripts submitted and accepted in some areas such as comparative politics and international relations did not allow for a meaningful analysis by subfield.

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### *Few manuscripts emerge from the reviewing process unscathed.*

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A sufficient number of manuscripts (84) for analysis were authored by women. Approximately 80 percent of the manuscripts authored by women were rejected compared to 78 percent of those manuscripts authored by men. This difference is not statistically significant. Thus, the exercise of editorial discretion does not appear to have either advantaged or disadvantaged women.

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## Discussion

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These data for *The Journal of Politics* provide interesting insights into the reviewing process. Of particular interest to younger scholars who have just begun to submit manuscripts to journals, is the near inevitability of at least one negative review. Few manuscripts emerge from the reviewing process unscathed. Virtually all, even those eventually accepted, receive at least one negative review. This reflects, at least in part, ambiguity or differences in opinion within the discipline regarding the criteria for evaluation of research. Given the diverse methodological approaches and theoretical orientations which typify the discipline this should come as no surprise. Indeed, that reviewers were consistent in their evaluations of 60 percent of the manuscripts is perhaps remarkable given the current state of the discipline.

The results of this analysis also suggest a complex picture of the process of editorial decision-making. The editor is clearly guided by the recommendations of reviewers. Manuscripts receiving positive reviews are far more likely to receive a positive decision than those receiving negative reviews. However, the editor is not bound by the reviewers. Over the three years examined, the editor exercised considerable discretion. This discretion was exercised negatively in a small number of cases to turn down manuscripts with a majority of positive recommendations from the reviewers. To a far larger extent, editorial discretion was exercised in a positive fashion, to select a few manuscripts for further consideration from among the many receiving a majority of negative reviews but identified by reviewers as having some potential for publication. The balance between these two uses of discretion may well vary over time and certainly will vary among journals. The editor of *American Political Science Review*, for example, no doubt seldom offers an opportunity to revise and resubmit to manuscripts with three or even two reviews indicating the need for substantial revision and, alternatively, declines publication to a larger number of manuscripts with a majority of positive reviews. But, while the nature of its exercise may vary, the data for *The Journal of Politics* clearly indicate that editorial discretion plays a substantial role in shaping the contents of journals.

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## About the Authors

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Micheal W. Giles is chairman of the department of political science at Emory University. He served as editor of the *Journal of Politics* from December 1984 to January 1988. David Patterson and Francie Mizell are students in the Ph.D. program at Emory.