Reflections on Building an Active State Association

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Reflections on Building an Active State Association

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This essay results from the gathering of state political science representatives that was initiated by the APSA at its meeting in Chicago in September 1992. At the invitation of the national office, we have put together some thoughts on running a state political science association. It is our hope that our experiences in New York can provide useful insights and guidelines for other state associations. A major constraint on professional activity today is the restricted financial support that many political scientists confront. State associations can provide an economical means for political scientists to meet professionally, and the more vigorous the association, the more that can be derived from these meetings.

The New York State Political Science Association (NYSPSA) has a long and proud history of lively, collegial annual meetings. In April of 1996, we shall be celebrating the fiftieth year of its existence. In recent years, our annual meetings, which are scheduled from noon on Friday through Saturday afternoon, have shown a steady increase in attendance and participation. Our April, 1992, meeting hosted by Buffalo State College had 59 panels and approximately 320 participants. The preliminary program for the 1993 meeting to be held at CUNY-Hunter College with David Johnston, Columbia University, as program chair lists 63 panels.

In achieving this longevity and attendance, the association has been helped by several advantages stemming from being located in New York State. New York State has a large number of political scientists. It has a wide variety of universities, colleges, and two-year institutions. Geographically, there are a number of major metropolitan centers scattered throughout the state. Properly utilized, all of these factors can contribute significantly to maintaining interest and activity in the state association. Although our location in New York State has provided us with advantages that other states will have only in varying degrees, we believe that there is no insurmountable reason why most state associations cannot make use of many of the techniques that we have employed and learn from the experiences that we have had. It is in this spirit that we offer a summary of how the New York State association has operated in the last decade.

Structure

The structure of the NYSPSA is fairly standard. Its primary goals are to facilitate continuity, or institutional memory, and to provide wide representation. The Executive Council is the governing body throughout the year. It is composed of ten section heads, a secretary-treasurer, vice-president and program chair, president, and past president. The Executive Council meets twice a year, in January, to prepare for the annual spring meeting, and again at the annual meeting to assess the conference. Section chairs serve two-year terms with two years the maximum. The terms overlap, so that at any one time there are several members of the Council who have experience in the association. Every effort is made to elect active, responsible people to the Council and to insure that upstate/downstate, small school/large school, and gender/other demographic groups are represented on the Council. During the year, the secretary-treasurer, program chair, president, and past president act as an executive committee to funnel nominations to the Council and to deal with details. At the annual meeting a short business meeting in conjunction with a reception is the point at which the membership, i.e., those who have registered and paid for the meeting, elect the new slate of officers.

Annual Meeting

As with other regional and state associations, the annual meeting is the primary focus of activity. The NYSPSA rotates its meeting sites among New York City, Albany, and western New York. Whenever possible, we try to involve faculty and students at the host institutions in the program preparation. The association has occasionally used hotels for meeting sites, but we are fortunate in having a number of colleges and universities that have been willing to host meetings. In the past several years, Buffalo State College, SUNY at Albany, The New School for Social Research, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, and the CUNY Graduate Center have provided facilities for the annual meeting. Par-
particularly important in providing a site is accessibility, proximity to reason-
able priced hotels, and rooms or
spaces for informal discussions and
get-togethers over the coffee and
pastries provided by NYSPPA. Often
panel participants want to continue
their discussions beyond their allotted
times and it is most helpful to have
places for participants to pursue their

**Advertising.** In preparation for the annual meeting, probably the single
most important rule is that it pays to
advertise. The association has
compiled a mailing list of approximately
2,500 names. This list is composed of
past participants, names provided by
the APSA, and names from other
sources. These names are contained
on computer files and labels are
easily printed from them. The mail-
ing of the call for papers goes out to
the entire list, usually in late August
or early September for the annual
meeting in April. Additionally,
announcements are sent to *PS,
Poltit*, and the *Chronicle of Higher
Education*, as well as other informa-
tion outlets. In particular, we have
found that the newsletters for the
various sections of APSA are very
good about printing announcements
of our meetings. The entire cost of
this phase of conference preparation
is minimal, approximately $200. In
our case, the program chair's institu-
tion normally bears this cost.

**The Preliminary Program.** The
next phase of conference preparation
can be a bit nerve wracking. The call
for papers establishes a deadline for
paper submissions and encourages
others to volunteer as discussants and
chairs. Usually, the deadline is set in
late November after the meeting of
the Northeastern Political Science
Association so that section chairs
have an opportunity to contact peo-
ple at that regional meeting.
Responses to the call for papers vary
from section to section. Section
chairs are encouraged to initiate con-
tact with individuals whom they
believe can help put together panels.
As the time for putting the panels
together for the program chair draws
near, section heads call each other,
the program chair, and the president
for names of possible participants. In
this respect, our list of past partici-
pants with addresses and phone num-
bers is particularly helpful. With
regard to obtaining chairs and dis-
cussants, it is often possible to per-
suade paper givers on other panels to
help out in this capacity as well. The
section chairs then send their pro-
posed panels to the program chair,
and at the January meeting final
adjustments are made.

The NYSPPA strives for a fairly
uniform format for its panels. Essen-
tially, most of the panels are com-
posed of three to four paper pre-
senters, a chair and one or two dis-
cussants, and it is expected that each
panel will have participants from sev-
eral institutions. The number of
paper presenters is determined pri-
marily by two considerations. First,
every effort is made to enable as
many as possible to participate. For
this reason, no one may present
more than one paper. Second, if
there are fewer than three scheduled
presenters, a no-show for whatever
reason seriously weakens the panel.
The NYSPPA also expects panel
chairs and discussants to be different
from the panel's paper presenters.
Again, at least two reasons support
this practice. The first is that we
have found that it is unreasonable to
expect a paper presenter acting also
as chair to be able to control fairly
the apportionment of time among
everyone on a panel. The second
consideration is that NYSPPA
depends on panel chairs in consulta-
tion with discussants to recommend
papers for best paper awards, and
impartiality in this regard dictates
that the chair not be a paper pre-
senter on the same panel. Also,
NYSPPA does not allow graduate
students to serve as chairs because
doing so may place them in an awk-
ward position vis-a-vis their faculty
mentors.

Roundtable panels and the under-
graduate panels are exceptions to the
standard panel format. Sections will
often have at least one roundtable,
which is chaired and composed of
perhaps four additional discussants.
More than one roundtable per sec-
tion is discouraged, but roundtables
do have their advantages in terms of
getting specialists on a topic together
easily and in terms of dealing with
late-breaking events. Additionally,
NYSPPA normally has at least one
undergraduate panel. This panel is

chaired by a faculty member and fac-
ulty serve as discussants. Under-
graduates with papers from any field
are placed on this panel. Usually,
four or five papers are presented.
(Graduate students are integrated
into the regular panels with faculty
and practitioner papers.)

After the January meeting, the
largest share of the work falls on the
shoulders of the program chair. It is
this individual's task to finalize the
preliminary program. This requires
command of a myriad of details, not
the least of which is ensuring that
individuals are not scheduled for two
panels at the same time. Also, every
effort is made to space panels so that
those, for example, with an interest
in comparative politics are not faced
with the choice of attending two
panels in their area in the same time
slot. The preliminary program is
printed at the school of the program
chair and mailed to everyone on the
mailing list. This is expensive, but
the NYSPPA pays for this item.
Thus, at this point everyone on the
mailing list has received a call for
papers and the preliminary program.
Nonetheless, despite this wide circu-
lation of information, the basic
axiom that size of attendance at a
conference is directly related to the
number of participants still holds
true.

**The Final Program.** Meanwhile
the section chairs have also been busy.
After the January meeting they have
informed their participants that their
papers have been accepted or that
they will be serving as chairs or dis-
cussants. Normally, the section chairs
will send all panel members copies of
the panels with addresses and phone
numbers for each participant and at
this time also confirm the day and
time assigned to the panel. It is
especially important in terms of hold-
ing down the number of no-shows
that the section chairs space their
communication with panel members
over a period of time. In this man-
ner, participants will be getting
reminders every three or four weeks
about the conference. This gives
those who will not be able to com-
plete their papers ample opportunity
to back out.

After the initial acceptance notifi-
cation, the section head will follow in
a few weeks with the procedures for

\[June 1993\]
panel participation. We have found these guidelines to be invaluable for well-run panels. They originated with Douglas I. Hodgkin of Bates College at the Northeastern Political Science Association and were modified by John Harman. These procedures have been proven workable over several conferences, and they help to insure that everyone is playing by the same rules. Essentially, they explain how time is to be apportioned among panel participants, describe the roles of the various participants, and warn paper presenters not to read their papers.

Finally, it is incumbent on the section chairs to remind paper presenters for the second time, approximately three weeks before the conference, that they must have their papers to all panel participants at least two weeks to ten days before the conference. The section chair will inform presenters that failure to meet this deadline will eliminate their papers from consideration for awards and that discussants have no obligation whatsoever to comment on these papers.

Section chairs may, of course, forward some of this information to the panel chairs and ask them to contact their panel members. The important points to get the information out and to keep participants aware of the forthcoming conference.

In the meantime, the final program is being printed in the same manner as the preliminary program. The primary difference between the programs, in addition to correcting details, is that the final program contains room assignments and information on special events. The final program is given to those who register for the conference, and, of course, all participants are expected to register. To encourage attendance, the association has deliberately maintained low registration fees with an “early bird” registration discount incentive. Students pay a lower special rate.

General Considerations

Much of the foregoing is pretty much standard fare for state and regional associations. Here we want to share some of our experiences have shaped ways in which we may do things somewhat differently from other associations. In these remarks, it is important to emphasize that we make every effort to be inclusive in our activities both in the organizational structure and at the annual meetings. Our goal is to provide an environment for the meeting that is both congenial and informative. We want political scientists to be able to talk together about issues in their field and to be encouraged to continue these conversations after the annual meetings.

Some associations have sought to build attendance by using a major scholar as a speaker. We found this approach to be counter-productive. Keeping in mind that a major reason political scientists attend the conference is the opportunity for them to talk together informally with their colleagues, the idea of taking a significant chunk of time to listen to an address has not proven attractive. We have found that an address by a major political figure, a governor or a presidential candidate, will draw attendance, but generally after the evening reception and a short business meeting, the evening is left free for the attendees.

In our experience all conference attendees gain when leading scholars from major institutions are at the conference as participants. This enables the maximum number of political scientists to engage in the give-and-take of panel discussions and informal conversation after the panels. Moreover, there are incentives for such people to attend. First, the conference offers their graduate students the opportunity to engage in a major activity of the discipline—conference participation—at minimal cost and in a setting that is usually less intimidating than those of the national and regional meetings. This activity can also facilitate contacts for those students who will soon be on the job market. Second, many of these scholars have texts on the market, and their interaction with political scientists from a variety of schools presumably will increase the visibility of their texts. Third, the NYSPSA conference gives all scholars an opportunity to test out new ideas in a collegial atmosphere with a minimum of rancor or unpleasantness. The NYSPSA has been fortunate in the support that it has received from major schools and major scholars in the field, and its former presidents include many scholars who have contributed significantly to the discipline.

More tangible incentives for participation have been the awards for best papers in the categories of faculty or practitioner, graduate student, and undergraduate student. These awards carry a cash prize, and the announcement of the winners is also published in PS. To have been recognized by one’s peers is always something worth noting on the curriculum vitae and during faculty evaluation time. In this respect, the quality of papers at the conference has generally been quite good. In fact, numerous publications have resulted from these papers. In terms of our memory alone, papers from NYSPSA conferences have been published in PS, Polity, Perspectives on Political Science, various law journals, Women & Politics, the Public Administration Review, and the International Political Science Review. There have undoubtedly been many other publications resulting from the NYSPSA meetings, but the major point here is that the opportunity to work together in areas of common interest inevitably will encourage political scientists toward publication, and those who have facility in doing this generally are helpful to those just getting underway.

Also of importance to the NYSPSA in terms of incentives for participation have been the disciplinary niches that the association has been able to utilize. For example, the NYSPSA, drawing on the state’s long border with Canada, has a section devoted to Canadian politics. The Canadians have found this an especially attractive opportunity to discuss ideas for which they have a limited number of forums in Canada. As can be imagined, these sessions have often been among the liveliest at the meetings. Other state associations cannot as easily draw on a Canadian connection, but every state has unique issues and niches that an enterprising state association can capitalize on. Again, in many instances, those interested in an area
are eager to have a place to discuss the issues of common concern to them. In the case of the NYSPSA, the Society of Greek Political Thought, local chapters of the American Society for Public Administration, and the Model European Community Association also have on occasion used the annual meeting as the opportunity to assemble several panels.

In summary, we wish to emphasize that the success of the NYSPSA has been due to generous and continuous efforts by a wide range of political scientists and institutions. The association has encouraged broad representation in its structure and expansive participation at the annual meeting. Every effort is made to make the annual meeting a pleasant and professional experience. In our work at the state level we have always found the APSA to be helpful in providing advice, mailing information, and publicity. We strongly support the national association’s work with the state associations. The exchange of ideas and information among state associations can only be helpful to everyone. In this spirit, we offer our services and support to other state associations, actual or potential, who may need more information than the general outline provided here.

An Update of Regional and State Associations

The following association has updated its information since the March issue of PS.

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<td>Past President: Don Schultz, Army War College</td>
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