SYMPOSIUM

Notes on the Romulan Reform of Conventions

Kenneth J. Meier, *Texas A&M University and Cardiff University*

Political science conventions are like health care in America: both are costly, inefficient systems that produce fewer benefits than desirable. Both are subject to path dependence, making it difficult to use the standard incremental decision-making process to create an optimal solution. Both have a multitude of outputs that are subject to different valuations by different stakeholders. Rom (2012) assesses conventions based on the contributions of panels to teaching and learning; this paper accepts that view even though it is likely that other aspects of the convention are more highly valued by many who attend.[1] Essentially, Rom (1) advocates the elimination of the tying agreements that group papers so attendees must sit through four presentations they do not care about to hear the one of interest, and (2) proposes to select papers based on two markets: one for finished papers (i.e., the teaching market) and another for works in progress (i.e., the learning market).[2]

An alternative view is to see the political science conference in the words of Kurt Vonnegut (1963) as a "granfalloon"—that is, a "group of people who affect a shared identity or purpose, but whose mutual association is actually meaningless."[3] Just as I am employed by a political science department in Texas but have little in common with other residents of that state, so we might similarly deconstruct my political science conference identity. Behaviorally, I do not read every article in the *American Political Science Review*, and I confess that perhaps 90% of the discipline holds little interest for me. I do not think I am unusual in this regard. Let me suggest an experiment: at the next convention, randomly assign political scientists to dyads and force them to discuss mutual scholarly interests or alternatively write a one-page essay on what their scholarship has in common. This experiment will generate either some interesting cross-subfield research or a series of successional movements that will group scholars with similar interests. But let us assume that the general political science conference is worth saving and examine Rom's proposal in more depth.

Rom demonstrates that path dependence is the dominant explanation for the current state of political science conventions, as it is for many other political phenomena (Pierson 2000). The ubiquitous panel format that draws his wrath exists because it has always existed, trapping us in a Vietnam-like quagmire where no feasible options have any chance of changing the outcome. Rather than emulating Senator Aiken and declaring victory and going home, Rom suggests that we adopt airline deregulation as our role model and substitute a voting-based market to select conference participants (Derthick and Quirk 1985).

In his analysis, Rom touches on the role of the discussant but does not probe this deeply. Unless one is extraordinarily lucky and draws George Krause as a discussant, paper authors are unlikely to receive useful feedback from a discussant, for two reasons.[4] First, authors abuse discussants by failing to send their paper to the discussant with sufficient time to generate cogent comments.[5] Second, the role of the discussant is low status: presenters are the elite; discussants are the rejected paper givers or the dregs. Many universities pay for a presenter but not a discussant. Texas A&M, in its own version of the three-fifths rule, pays less if you are a discussant than if you present a paper. This incentive system is completely wrong for providing meaningful feedback to authors. Extending the Romulan market reforms, discussants should receive free registration at the conference, and authors should provide a free-drink voucher to the discussant if the discussant had two weeks to prepare remarks or a free-dinner voucher if less time was given.[6]

Alternatively, we could admit failure and eliminate discussants. The Public Management Research Conference abolished discussants in 1999 and has been without them ever since.[7] It is unclear whether anyone misses them, and this puts pressure on the audience to participate as discussants. This seems fair because political science, like sex, is not a spectator sport. The audience should participate.

ROM 2.0

The Romulan Conference proposal is clearly a beta version, and it makes sense to take the logic of this reform and maximize its potential. If you set up a voting-based marketplace for teaching and learning panels, it makes no sense to travel to the convention to consummate the match. People do not sell stock on stock exchanges anymore; it is all done via computer. If I rarely travel anywhere—even short distances to shop for a variety of things, why should I travel to "shop" for (or give) political science advice? Rom 2.0 suggests that teachers and learners create a videocast for the conference website and let people download it for viewing.[8] Discussants could then upload their critiques and audience could pose questions. The Q&A could either be done in real time as in a chat room or over time as a blog.

ROM 2.5

What is the value of the professional association in this? Some scholars will engage in "cream skimming"—that is, setting up their own networks to circulate and share research, leaving the poor and slow to attend public conventions to fall

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farther behind. Professional associations and their conventions can play the role of venture capitalists in this market by investing in struggling startups (assistant professors, graduate students).[9] Alternatively, we know that there are markets for inferior goods (Akerlof 1970), and professional associations can become the K-Marts of scholarship.

ROM 3.0

In any market or voting system, it is clear that the rules determine the outcome. Rom recognizes this fact and suggests that voting might be weighted in various ways, such as giving graduate students or conference attendees more votes. This is clearly a situation where we should use our expertise and design not one but rather several voting systems, each with different rules to determine if the rules affect who is selected to present papers.

ROM 3.6

Professional associations might eliminate their conferences and seek to create a market for the conference functions—that is, selecting papers and providing critical commentary. Rom 2.0 provides a market mechanism for selecting papers that recognizes a basic fact: the function of a conference (or a journal) is to certify content, to provide the "Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval" on a paper. A similar market system might provide commentary for the learning panels. An association could set up an exchange with discussants offering to discuss a paper for a price. Discussants might state that they will provide comments in four weeks for $X or in two weeks for $5X. They could describe their expertise as broadly or as narrowly as desired. To address the adverse-selection problem inherent in markets, the professional association could set up a rating system similar to TripAdvisor or Yelp, whereby users could rate the discussant; those with higher ratings could charge higher prices. As a set of voluntary exchanges, such a market by definition enhances utility for both authors and discussants.

ROM 4.0

For those interested in both teaching and learning, why not skip the conference and just submit your paper to a journal? From a teaching perspective this has the advantages of creating a permanent record, reaching more people, not annoying people who do not want to hear your paper (and not penalizing people who write excellent papers but lack the skills to present a paper cogently). Plus your university might actually reward you for this. For learners, submitting to a journal gets you three reviews (on average), and samples of three are likely to be more reliable than samples of one. The quality of comments are likely to be better since a wise and judicious editor has selected reviewers based on expertise rather than selecting among those who had proposals rejected (although most of the reviewers likely have had papers rejected also).[10] Plus manuscript reviewers are more likely to tell you if you have a bad idea than will a discussant who would have to say that to your face.

THE NEW ROM II

Just when we thought it was safe to go back into the convention, Rom II (Rom this issue) appears and wants to turn political science conferences into slick media productions. Before we rush off in this new direction, let me offer the following two hypotheses:

> H1: The ability to present using visual media is correlated to the ability to present without using it. The correlation may not be perfect, but no amount of production wizardry can change a bad political science paper into anything better than *Ishtar*. Just as hockey players are no better at fighting than Mike Tyson is at skating, people who are very good at using visual media to present their ideas are not likely to be hidden in political science departments.
> H2 : Is there a need for political scientists to be constantly entertained or they will not pay attention to research? Are these the same people who go to a baseball game because they want to dance to bad music between pitches?

SOME MORE MODEST REFORMS

Moving to a market voting system with immediate feedback by one's peers on the quality of their work might be too intimidating for most to favor the adoption. Would we publish the votes just as they do in real elections so that everyone can see how much or how little political scientists care about an individual paper? Even if we do not publish the vote totals, if you were not at a conference, the general conclusion would be that your proposal was so poor that no one was willing to hear you present it. Similarly, individuals assigned to the learning session would carry the stigma of being inferior to the more exalted teachers even if the badges were not designated with the letter L. These potential problems suggest we might consider some halfway measures.

Doing Posters Right

Political science poster sessions are a pale imitation of those in other professions and generally are perceived as inferior to panel presentations. This is unfortunate because posters have several advantages over panels in terms of both teaching and learning. First, posters are efficient: neither the author nor individuals interested in the paper have to sit through the presentations of three other papers in a hot sweaty room. Audience members can approach only those posters that interest them, can engage in an in-depth conversation with the author and perhaps begin a series of later exchanges on research. Second, if no one comes to see your poster, you have other posters that you can browse while waiting for your own interactions. If even one person stops to ask a question in a poster session, you are as well off on the benefit side, according to the empirical data in Rom (2012), as you were on a panel and well ahead on the cost side. If no one stops to ask you a question, you might have gotten the same lack of attention on a paper panel, but at least did not have to listen to papers you were not interesting in hearing.

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As someone who has attended the thriving poster sessions of the American Public Health Association (APHA), it is clear that political science conferences do posters badly. First, the distinction between papers presented on panels and those presented on posters should be eliminated. In both cases, a paper is presented at the conference; only the format differs. This means poster presenters need to also upload a paper to the conference website.[11] Second, there needs to be a critical mass of posters; 10 posters in the corner of a room are not enough. Provide a map of poster locations to make individual posters easy to find. Third, organizers need to think about traffic flow and have the traffic flow run parallel to the posters not perpendicular.

Fourth, create some incentives. The Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management (APPAM) provided food vouchers for individuals visiting the posters one year. Free drink coupons are another option or just serve free drinks which should facilitate even more interaction. Occasionally discussants are assigned to individual posters. Fifth, eliminate the cap on the number of posters (for those conferences that do this); poster space does not appear to be scarce. At the 2014 APSA meeting, I saw more vacant than occupied poster boards Sixth, add incentives for section heads to increase the number of posters; for example, provide an extra panel for every two full professors who do posters (or some other ratio).

Force Experimentation

Program chairs should retain a set of panels that could be allocated to section heads (assuming that the conference is one that actually rejects papers) for experimental formats or methods. Alternatively, one section might randomly be selected to adopt the Romulan Convention Reform and select papers by a vote; another might be restricted only to posters; a third might eliminate panels and focus on the building networks of scholars; a fourth might move to formats like the European Consortium for Political Research workshops. The Southern Political Science Association in recent years has used a conference-within-conference format for some panels that generates a specialized mini-conference on a topic that meets in the same room for the duration of the conference. Or a conference might emulate the Michigan local school property tax experiment and simply abolish all panels and see what the sections generate in their place.

Give a Best-Section-Head Award

Professional associations give best-paper and best-poster awards and journals now give "super-reviewer" awards, so why not give a best-section-head award based on the creativity shown in compiling the section? Perhaps alternatives to grouping by substance or method could be considered; I once titled a Midwest Political Science Association (MPSA) panel "Four Excellent Papers with Really Awful Titles." The panel drew very well and everyone agreed that they were four excellent papers that needed better titles. As a prize, the award might emulate the Master's Golf Championship and award the section head a green jacket and free qualification for a teaching panel for life.

Schedule the Paper Times

The APHA lists precise times that papers will be presented in the program; attendees can arrive at a panel, say at 2:15 p.m., and hear the one paper in which they are interested. The MPSA experimented with this format one year. Public health scholars are much better behaved than political scientists and keep strictly to the schedule. Providing a cattle prod or some other device to ensure that papers are presented according to schedule might be a Pareto optimal solution.

Reward Good Behavior and Punish Bad Behavior

The current conference system assumes good behavior on the part of authors but does little to punish the infractions. There is no penalty for sending a late paper to a discussant, no penalty for not uploading the paper to the conference website, no penalty for a 35 minute boring presentation, and no penalty for simply not showing up. A market system could be very effective at punishing bad behavior and rewarding good behavior. Rom suggests rewarding good behavior (e.g. attending panels) by allowing such individuals more votes. This makes sense, but only if individuals are allowed to sell their votes since some scholars will accrue more votes than they care to cast. Monetizing the good behavior is the optimal solution. We should let virtuous scholars not only vote multiple times for their own paper but also allow them to spend their votes to buy a prime panel time. Time slots at 8:00AM or on Sunday might be reserved for those with negative votes as the result of previous bad behavior.

Ban PowerPoint

We have all sat through too many PowerPoint/Beamer presentations where the author recites the same words that appear on the screen, presents a table that is too small for anyone to see, or shows a variety of nifty graphics that are generally incomprehensible. If authors cannot make an interesting 12-minute presentation on their research without using props, perhaps their research is not very interesting.

Moving the Voting Closer to the People

The Romulan Convention Reform could go one step further and treat the initial voting as a primary election. Then, a set of four papers might be engaged in a run-off election that would occur during the actual panel. Each author would have 30 seconds to summarize his or her paper, sort of a campaign commercial; audience members could then vote on whether on not the paper should be presented. Such a process will ensure sincere voting, since only those who have already shown up can cast a vote.

Make Every Day Wednesday

Some of the most creative things at conventions happen on Wednesdays, when professional associations give up their monopoly control over space and allow individuals and groups to innovate. The Western Political Science Association has fostered at least two active research networks—one on Latino politics and another on theory and environmental policy. These networks and workshops do an excellent job of integrating graduate students into the profession and

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providing more detailed feedback on research ideas. The practice is well worth emulating. For those who think Wednesdays make the conference too long, I suggest eliminating Sundays, simply because no one wants a Sunday panel.

CONCLUSION

The Romulan Convention Reform clearly breaks out of the group-think that currently dominates our conventions. Rom's basic question is: Why not experiment with how the panel portion of the conference is organized? He suggests that we have nothing to lose but the chains that bind us to an inefficient and inequitable process. I agree. Conferences provide myriad other functions and will continue to draw individuals who seek to build networks, solicit editors, introduce graduate students to the profession, or simply want to get out of town. Let a thousand flowers bloom. ■

NOTES

1. For example, networking, the business of political science (i.e., editors and journals), and social activities. See Deardorff and Rutherford, both in this issue.
2. There continues to be a role for hierarchy or regulation because it may not be apparent to attendees whether they are "teachers" or "learners." Perhaps we should let the market decide, with the option of engaging the equivalent of a marketing consultant to tell prospective authors whether they are teachers or learners. Convention badges could be designated with the letter "T" or "L" to facilitate interactions.
3. Available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Granfalloon (accessed April 24, 2014).
4. George typically brings several pages of single-spaced comments to give to an author, in addition to his verbal comments that focus on bigger issues.
5. Executive directors of political science associations have reported to me that, depending on the conference, 14% to 48% of papers are uploaded to the conference website. I infer from this and my own experience that discussants rarely have the two to three weeks needed to prepare for their role.
6. Note that the discussant does not have to eat or drink with the author.
7. Personal communication with Kenneth J. Meier, April 25, 2014.
8. This section was drafted before Rom's paper was circulated.
9. Individuals also could play the role of venture capitalist by providing valuable comments for an equity stake in the project.
10. Personal communication with several wise and judicious editors.
11. This appears to be rare. In one section of about 25 posters where I served as a best-poster judge, only two people uploaded their paper—and both were PhD students of the same faculty member.

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