Symposium on Desk Rejections

Guest Editor's Introduction: Symposium on Desk Rejections

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The purpose of this symposium is to consider and evaluate the role of desk rejections in a discipline dominated by the peer-review paradigm. Peer review is widely considered to be valuable, but so is the smooth operation of scholarly journals that rely on a match between the supply of manuscripts submitted and the number of reviewers needed to review those manuscripts. What does it mean for peer review when the journals in a given discipline rely heavily on desk rejections? What are the consequences for the political science discipline—unintended or otherwise—of an expanded and widespread reliance on desk rejections? To be sure, even journals that have high desk-rejection rates still only publish papers that have been through peer review; therefore, peer review remains an important component of the publication process even with the expanded use of desk rejections. However, it also means that desk-rejected manuscripts are not subjected to peer review, and authors of desk-rejected papers lose access to constructive comments from peer reviewers about how they can revise and improve their papers for publication.

This symposium brings together a wide array of scholars—several of whom coedit scholarly journals—to discuss the merits of a system of scholarly publication that includes peer review but also includes, to varying degrees, the use of desk rejections. This symposium is anchored by a provocative article written by James Gibson, "Against Desk Rejects!" Professor Gibson makes a strong case against desk rejections and offers alternatives that address the mismatch of demand and supply for manuscript reviewers. My coauthor Moriah Harman and I follow Gibson's article with an article that brings some data to bear on desk-rejection practices in the discipline. This is followed by a set of articles—written mostly by editors of respected scholarly journals—that debate the role of desk rejection in the publication process in political science. Most of these journal editors are critical of Gibson's arguments, noting that desk-rejection practices are important for the smooth operation of scholarly journals in a period when there is an oversupply of submitted manuscripts and an undersupply of willing reviewers. The symposium also includes additional voices that are critical of desk-rejection practices, and Gibson concludes with a response to those who are critical of his position. Ultimately, there is a full airing of alternative viewpoints on this important trend in scholarly publishing in our discipline.

PEER REVIEW AND DESK REJECTIONS

Peer review is one of the core tenets of publishing research studies in scholarly communities. The idea behind peer review is that authors' scholarly research should be published only after it has been subjected to rigorous evaluation by other scholars who are experts on the topic that is the subject of a submitted manuscript. The assessment by experts in the field (as opposed to scholars in any field) is considered an important component of the peer-review process because they are likely to be aware of the methodological and substantive nuances associated with research conducted in that field. Before peer review, a given scholarly paper or set of research findings is likely to be viewed with skepticism, but peer review provides a "stamp of approval" such that the published research findings presented in a peer-reviewed paper enter the scholarly dialogue in the field and can be taken seriously. However, in addition to screening out scholarly papers that are not ready for publication, peer review has another important role. When experts in the field write a review, they indicate as part of their evaluation a set of concerns that authors must resolve before the paper is ready for publication. Hence, peer review has an important constructive component, and authors of rejected papers can consider this advice as they revise their papers for submission to another scholarly journal.

This is one reason why the expanded use of desk rejections by political science journals has resulted in controversy in the discipline. A desk rejection occurs when a manuscript submitted to a scholarly journal is rejected by the editors without peer review. The practice and extensive use of desk rejections is relatively new in political science. Most scholarly journals in political science have long used peer review as the primary or exclusive process through which manuscript submissions are evaluated. Journal editors have always had the discretion to reject a paper without peer review if it is deemed to be unrelated to their journal's scholarly mission. However, for most journals, desk rejections historically have represented a relatively small number of submissions. In recent years, there has been a substantial increase in the propensity of editors of scholarly journals to use desk rejection as an option, for two

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related reasons: (1) there are more journals, and many have experienced a substantial increase in the number of submissions, both of which have created greater *demand* for reviewers; and (2) for many scholarly journals in political science, there is a diminished *supply* of reviewers, and it has become increasingly difficult for editors to secure a sufficient number to provide evaluations of submitted manuscripts. This mismatch between the number of submissions and the number of available reviewers has prompted many journal editors to rely more heavily on desk rejects as a means of managing a scarce resource (reviewers) in light of increased demand (submissions).

What are the consequences for the political science discipline—unintended or otherwise—of an expanded and widespread reliance on desk rejections?

BENEFITS AND COSTS OF DESK REJECTIONS

It is clear that desk rejections provide benefits for editors of scholarly journals. All journals—especially high-impact scholarly journals—receive submissions that clearly are inappropriate for publication. In some cases, a submitted paper does not fit with the substantive focus of the journal; in other cases, authors submit papers that are not scholarly but rather are editorials or opinion pieces. In still other cases, it is clear from an initial reading that a paper is unlikely to escape the peer-review process and be allowed to continue to publication. High-impact journals also receive submissions that have little hope of publication. There are anecdotes about scholars who submit every paper that they write (regardless of quality) to one of the top journals, hoping that by the luck of the draw it will receive three favorable reviewers and sneak its way into publication. There also is folklore surrounding the contention that in some doctoral programs, graduate students are mandated to submit their seminar paper to a scholarly journal (regardless of quality) as a course requirement. There are good reasons for editors to find value in discarding these manuscripts early in the editorial process by not sending them out for review, thereby not taking up the scarce resource of reviewers' time. This also means that editors cannot take advantage of advice that they might receive from peer reviewers because the manuscript is not sent out for review. However, for manuscripts that fail to meet basic publication criteria, there is value for editors in rendering a desk-rejecting decision.

Desk-rejected manuscripts also can be beneficial to reviewers. There is substantial anecdotal evidence to suggest that many scholars are overburdened by the number of manuscripts that they are asked to review each year. Some of the editors who contributed to this symposium point out that it often is difficult to secure a full panel of reviewers for a given manuscript, sometimes asking eight to 12 (or more) potential reviewers before securing commitments to review from a panel of three reviewers. Most papers that receive favorable reviews in the first round are given a "revise and resubmit," meaning that those same reviewers (and perhaps one or two additional reviewers) are being asked to review a manuscript for a second round.

For authors, benefits and costs are more complicated. On the one hand, authors invest much effort and emotional energy in the papers that they write; many authors carefully consider where to submit their papers, submitting only to journals that they perceive to be appropriate for that manuscript. When a paper in which an author has invested so much energy is desk rejected and when the desk-rejection decision is not accompanied by a detailed review from expert peers, it is understandable that at least some authors might not respond favorably. This is especially the case when authors carefully considered the journal to which they should submit their manuscript and submitted it to a particular journal because they perceive it as having an appropriate fit. It is one thing to submit a paper to a scholarly journal and receive detailed and constructive comments from reviewers but in the end miss out on publication. It is still another thing to submit a paper to a scholarly journal and have it dismissed out of hand, without review and without receiving detailed feedback from expert reviewers.

Critics of desk-rejection practices also point to the disadvantage accruing to authors who do not receive a set of reviews from experts. In the past, journal editors often touted the value to rejected authors of receiving constructive (or even critical) reviews—what former *American Political Science Review* (*APSR*) editor Pat Patterson referred to (in the pre-email era) as "seminar by mail." These reviews could be used by authors to identify weaknesses in their arguments as well as receive suggestions for possible improvement. For desk-rejected manuscripts, authors do not receive this important feedback. Editors generally recognize the value to authors of peer review; however, in many cases, peer review of all or most manuscripts is perceived as a luxury because of the oversupply of submissions and undersupply of reviewers. Moreover, some journal editors suggest that their primary responsibility is to make decisions about publishing the best work they can and that feedback on

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unpublished work is only of secondary importance and should be generated through other means (e.g., conference participation and comments by colleagues).

On the other hand, desk-rejection decisions can have one major benefit to authors. If a paper submitted to a given journal is not a viable candidate for publication, and if the editor can make that determination quickly, it may save authors the two or three months that they typically must wait to receive the inevitable negative verdict. This means that authors can submit their paper to another more appropriate journal sooner rather than later, which can be particularly valuable to doctoral students and postdoctoral fellows who soon will be on the job market and to junior faculty members who are closing in on their tenure year. Receiving a quick decision—even if it is not favorable—means that authors can quickly begin the editorial process at another journal.

ABOUT THE SYMPOSIUM

The starting point for this symposium is a provocative article by James Gibson that strongly objects to current scholarly journal desk-rejection practices. For Gibson, desk-rejection practices give considerable discretion to journal editors, who make editorial decisions without advice from subject-matter peers. Gibson suggests that maintaining a system of strong peer review is sufficiently important that there are other ways to address the mismatch between the supply of manuscripts and the demand for reviews. Possible solutions include paying reviewers funded though submission fees, publication fees, or required association membership, with appropriate subsidies for graduate students and others who would be burdened by these fees. Gibson also urges scholars not to review for journals that desk reject their own papers.

There clearly is a diversity of viewpoints about the use of desk rejections by scholarly journals in political science.

In the next article, Moriah Harman and I bring some data to bear on journal desk-rejection practices. We report the results of a survey of journal editors about their desk-rejection practices and frequency, as well as an analysis of manuscript-level data on editorial outcomes for *APSR*, *Perspectives on Politics* (*POP*), and *PS: Political Science & Politics* (*PS*). In our analysis of survey data, we find considerable variation in desk-rejection rates, although there is apparent consensus among journal editors about appropriate justifications for desk rejections. In our analyses of editorial outcomes for these three major American Political Science Association journals, we find mixed evidence of manuscript and author effects, although there is little evidence that race and gender affect editorial decisions.

The other symposium contributors include coeditors of five scholarly journals, including *American Journal of Political Science* (*AJPS*) (Kathleen Dolan and Jennifer Lawless); *Comparative Political Studies* (*CPS*) (David Samuels and Ben Ansell); *Political Research Quarterly* (*PRQ*) (Toby Rider); *State Politics and Policy Quarterly* (*SPPQ*) (Chris Bonneau and Kristin Kanthak); and *Politics, Groups, and Identities* (Nadia Brown). These journals represent a wide range of desk-rejection practices and frequencies, and various perspectives are represented among the journal editors. Indeed, most point out the need to use desk rejections (to varying degrees) to balance the supply and demand for reviewers, but at least one journal editor (Brown) suggests that desk rejections should be used sparingly.

Both Dolan and Lawless (*AJPS*) and Samuels and Ansell (*CPS*)—editors for journals with very different desk-rejection rates—present detailed data about desk-rejection outcomes that inform the debate about desk-rejection practices. Dolan and Lawless use desk rejections relatively infrequently at *AJPS* (i.e., less than 30%) but, in analyzing their desk-rejection data note that (1) most desk-rejected papers are "journalistic or opinion pieces, review essays, or those that contain no data or theoretical argument"; and (2) the remaining desk-rejected manuscripts are vetted by field editors and deemed not to have sufficient prospects for publication in a highly-ranked journal. Dolan and Lawless explicitly address the tradeoff between providing feedback to authors and taxing the reviewer pool, as well as possible equity concerns.

Samuels and Ansell report a pattern of increased submissions over time (and, subsequently, a desk-rejection rate of 50%), and they have adopted an editorial philosophy that aggressively "resolved to find ways to use authors' and reviewers' time more efficiently." They address Gibson's arguments point by point, expressing strong disagreement. However, readers may find it most interesting that they conduct an "internal audit" in which they compare citation outcomes for manuscripts that are desk rejected, rejected with review, or accepted for publication at *CPS*. They find that desk-rejected manuscripts are less likely to be published by another journal and cited, and the citation rate for desk-rejected manuscripts is lower than that for manuscripts that are accepted at *CPS* or rejected after review but published by another journal. Samuels and Ansell conclude that the evidence provides a validity check on their editorial decisions, particularly for desk-rejected manuscripts.

Bonneau and Kanthak coedit *SPPQ*, also a journal with a low desk-rejection rate, but they take strong issue with Gibson's arguments. Although they desk reject only a small percentage (about 12%) of submitted manuscripts, they are strong advocates of editorial discretion, suggesting that journal editors have been through a vetting process involving close scrutiny of an editorial "vision statement" that includes an expected desk-rejection rate. Moreover, they also criticize Gibson's proposed solutions (e.g., paying reviewers) as impractical.

Rider is the international relations editor for *PRQ*, which has a desk-rejection rate of slightly more than 50%, but he offers arguments about desk rejections that are not explicitly tied to

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demand and supply of reviewers. He does not consider the undersupply of reviewers but rather the fit of the submission, whether it is well executed, and whether it meets *PRQ* expectations. Rider suggests that these are reasonable standards for journal editors to consider in the editorial process.

The symposium also includes contributions from two scholars who are sympathetic to concerns about desk-rejection practices. Indeed, both of these critics are especially concerned about the disparate impacts that desk-rejection practices may have on publications in major journals by underrepresented groups. Nadia Brown, the editor of *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, argues for a "publishing-as-mentoring ethos," with editors sending all or most papers out for review and cultivating manuscripts through the editorial process, including providing authors additional rounds of review to bring manuscripts up to speed for publication. She describes efforts to reduce pressure on reviewer pools by expanding their size by targeting "untapped groups of scholars," such as faculty at historically black colleges and universities and community colleges.

Hans Hassell offers a critical voice, suggesting that desk rejection exacerbates inequality in the discipline. He contends that the loss of peer-review content has a disparate effect for some scholars, particularly those teaching at smaller colleges that lack the resources and research infrastructure found at well-funded research-intensive universities. Hassell believes that scholars who most need the constructive feedback associated with peer review are those who are most disadvantaged by desk-rejection practices.

There clearly is a diversity of viewpoints about the use of desk rejections by scholarly journals in political science. This symposium captures some of that viewpoint diversity, and we hope that it informs debates about this practice in the discipline. ■

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