MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Chinemelu Okafor

PHD CANDIDATE | HARVARD UNIVERISTY

How did you learn about APSA? When did you become a member of APSA, and what prompted you to join?

I learned about APSA during my time as a Predoctoral Research Specialist with Princeton's Emerging Scholars in Political Science Program and became a member in 2021. With a bachelor's degree in economics and international studies from the University of Michigan, and a master's degree in applied economics from George Washington University, I sought to couple my economics toolkit with theories of development most appropriately found in political science for my doctorate degree. My interest in improving complex political and economic development outcomes in West Africa necessitated the study of important theories of the state and institutions put forth by political scientists. With this in mind, I sought to be part of an organization that prides itself in exploring difficult questions with deep contextual knowledge, nuance, and care. However, after gaining admission to my PhD program in government at Harvard University, and receiving an APSA Diversity Fellowship in 2021, I realized that one thing that I lacked in political science was a mentor to support me as I progressed through my PhD. It was through the APSA Mentoring Program that I became a member and participated as a mentee for three years.



How have APSA membership and services been valuable to you at different stages of your career?

APSA has been a fantastic place for resources to support my research and progression throughout my PhD. In 2021, I was awarded an APSA Spring Diversity Fellowship which helped with costs incidental to the transition to a PhD which can be extremely prohibitive for many. I also participated for three years in the APSA Mentoring Program. I met regularly with my mentor to discuss my progress in the program, including strategies for passing my qualifying exams, new research ideas, and other resources at my disposal. As an avid proponent of mentorship, this was the best program I could have participated in early in my PhD. My mentor was particularly aware of what is known as the "hidden curriculum" —or the unspoken rules in political science— and was there to help support me through any obstacles along the way.

APSA member since 2021

Can you tell us about your professional background and your research?

I am a rising fourth-year Harvard PhD candidate, Graduate Prize Fellow, Karl Deutsch Fellow, and 2025-26 Weatherhead Center Graduate Student Associate. In the past I have worked at institutions, including the White House Council of Economic Advisers, the World Bank, and the International Finance Corporation. I hold a bachelor's degree in economics and international studies from the University of Michigan, and a master's degree in applied economics from George Washington University. From 2019 to 2021, I worked as a Predoctoral Research Specialist with the Emerging Scholars in Political Science Program at Princeton University before starting my doctorate.

My research interests lie at the intersection of comparative political economy, development economics, and economic history. Specifically, I quantitatively explore how social and institutional legacies of pre-colonial (and colonial) episodes continue to shape contemporary political and economic development outcomes in West Africa. For instance, one project I am working on seeks to answer the broad question: ***Do village group myths that present positive views of women reflect a social history that has led to more economic empowerment for women in the region today?***

One such myth is that of the historical village group called Nnobi in Nigeria. This myth positively portrays the river goddess and mother Idemili as industrious and prosperous, and from whom the women in Nnobi (which translates to "mother's heart") are said to have inherited hard-work and industriousness. Economists have demonstrated that folklore of this kind is a particularly important type of story that can convey historical social attitudes. Thus, deepening our understanding of how communities develop and maintain distinct conceptions of the

© AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION 2025

https://doi.org/10.1017/psj.2025.10089 Published online by Cambridge University Press

appropriate role of women in the economy – especially in societies that rely on oral tradition to preserve history and knowledge. However, existing scholarship on shared stories and economic outcomes in sub-Saharan Africa imprecisely attribute folklore-mythological motifs to entire ethnic groups. This overlooks the considerable heterogeneity documented by ethnographers in origin myths, sacred cultural objects, and worldviews within some ethnic groups.

To more precisely link traditional normative views to independent intra-ethnic group communities, my work proposes an unexamined source of cultural variation: village group origin myths. Important actors in a group's origin myth are often reflected in the group's place name, which can contain gendered words related to kinship (e.g., mother, daughter, wife etc.), similarly to Nnobi's. Using contemporary data on the location and names of historical village groups in Nigeria, I aim to show that variation in women's economic empowerment today can be explained by group origin myths that prominently feature women as proxied by their place names. By using gendered place names to explore variation in historical worldviews within ethnic groups, this project seeks to provide valuable insights into the factors that shape women's economic empowerment in contexts where quantitative analysis is limited by the availability of historical data. Furthermore, this project will be the first to explain modern intra-ethnic patterns of women's economic empowerment in sub-Saharan Africa through the persistence of gender norms embedded in the historical social structure of traditional societies.

Which APSA programs or events would you recommend to people who are not members of the association, and why?

I would recommend the APSA Mentoring Program to all researchers, but especially early career researchers and PhD students. The mentorship program was an incredible source of support during the years leading up to my qualifying exams. It was also a great place to discuss research ideas and a space to try and fail. I also would encourage scholars historically excluded from political science to join the mentorship program, as there are challenges that arise as a result of academia's hidden curriculum that direct and personalized mentorship can help moderate.

Is there anything else you'd like people to know about you or the work that you do?

I am a firm believer that individual acts of public service can have massive impacts on the lives of others. As I've insinuated throughout this article, I truly believe in the power of mentorship, and while there are no economies of scale in mentorship, there can be meaningful ripple effects where individuals who have good mentors can be good mentors themselves.

As is the case for many underrepresented minorities, my path into economics and political science was non-linear. It required learning the "hidden curriculum," which serves as a barrier for people not already read into the culture of academia, especially within economics and political science. However, the most important feature of my trajectory was meeting my first mentor. It was this experience: learning the secrets nuances of economics, understanding the implicit culture of the field, and comprehending the unwritten and unspoken rules of the game that inspired me to advocate for myself and others professionally. As I began finding my way, I committed myself to helping others find theirs as well. As I reflected on the world of information and inspiration my first mentor brought to me, I could only imagine how difficult things could be for others who look like me in a field that does not look like them. From this reflection came the seeds of Research in Color – a 501c(3) non-profit organization established in 2019 that is dedicated to increasing the representation and retention of historically excluded scholars in economics and economics adjacent fields through mentorship and financial support.

At Research in Color (RIC) we champion mentorship - given the critical place it occupies in the success of all students and in particular scholars from historically excluded backgrounds, its simplicity in implementation and sustainability, and its resource-efficiency. Using a bottom-up approach that centers mentees, the central goal of RIC is to increase the number of historically excluded scholars in economics and related fields, such as public policy, political economy, and other similar quantitative social sciences. To do this, we match scholars with established mentors (economists and quantitative social scientists) in an eight-month personalized mentorship program to prepare them for graduate school or a career in economics or an economics adjacent field.

In 2023 I was 1 of 30 recipients of a Forbes 30 under 30 North America award in education for my work as the founder and president of the Research in Color Foundation. While programming at Research in Color is currently paused, through the program, 95 scholars have benefited from eight months of direct mentorship. In addition, the foundation has provided over $160,000 in scholarships to mentees. Through organizations like RIC and APSA, I hope others get to experience the magic that is having a good mentor there to champion you and support you throughout your journey in academia, as I have. ■

© AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION 2025

https://doi.org/10.1017/psj.2025.10089 Published online by Cambridge University Press