A Half-Century Perspective on APSA Annual Meetings

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I attended my first American Political Science Association meeting in 1949. It was an exciting experience for me as a first-year graduate student. I already venerated several established scholars in the profession. Herman Finer and Carl Friedrich were the towering figures on my intellectual landscape in comparative politics, my major field. In American politics, in which I was a teaching assistant, Edward S. Corwin and Carl B. Swisher were giants. And here they were, conspicuous in the halls of the hotel, standing for hours, as I recall, each in his own place, talking with groups of awe-struck students. The greats of the profession were suddenly real people rather than simply names on books. The APSA membership included a significant cadre of political leaders, public figures, and well-known journalists. I was astonished to see Senators Hubert Humphrey and Paul Douglas, Congressman Jacob Javits, Ralph Bunche, who had just served as acting UN Mediator on Palestine, and Max Lerner, a noted editorial writer and political theorist.

While putting faces to names was one source of excitement, hearing papers on subjects I was studying was a second. The program was peppered with the profession's most celebrated scholars. In its *48 pages*, half devoted to book advertisements, I easily found panels that seemed relevant to seminars I was taking. I took notes as I would in a classroom. The government department at Cornell, where I was a Ph.D. student, had just five faculty members in 1949, but at the meetings I could hear a large array of scholars whose work I had read but whom I could not have otherwise encountered. Before the era of paper distribution in advance of meetings, electronically or in print, one had to attend panels and hear the papers as they were given. The meeting expanded my horizons—my view of the discipline I was entering. I was not yet job-hunting nor was I looking for ancillary "services." I also was not conscious of having to make "contacts," to gain "visibility." To me this first meeting was a purely academic experience.

The meeting took place over three days during Christmas week. A predominantly male profession in 1949 was not yet ready to accommodate the schedule to family holiday plans. The meeting was not exactly small. Panels met in the Roosevelt, Commodore, and Astor hotels in New York City. Attendance was about 1,500 people—nearly 30% of the Association's 5,140 members (News and Notes 1950, 150, 155). Panels were held in two-hour blocks—mornings from 10 a.m. to noon, afternoons from 2:30 to 4:30 p.m.—with scheduled breakfasts, lunches, and dinners outside of these times. The foreword to the program mentioned that "the times of trains leaving New York allow sessions to be scheduled for the afternoon of the third day" (Final Program 1949, 3). The official report of the meeting noted with pride that "no less than 35 participants were from the West," part of an effort to "obtain diversified participation—by regions, by age and sex, and by occupation" (News and Notes 1950, 152). But reliance on rail transportation obviously limited participation outside the Northeast. Since conference registration cost $1 in 1949 (about $8.50 in current terms), attendance was obviously not constrained by the registration fee but by the cost in time and money of train transportation, and for non-New Yorkers, by the cost of hotel rooms.

The report on the program said that it "was by a substantial margin the most extensive in the history of the Association" to that point (News and Notes 1950, 150). There were 58 panels over the three-day period, having 350 different participants. Altogether there were over 80 separate "events," including 17 simultaneously scheduled "informal discussions," each led by two senior members of the profession, for groups of 15 "of the younger men." The program also included a "tea for women political scientists [which] was a pleasant occasion," three lunches, and a testimonial dinner for Frederic Austin Ogg, who was stepping down after 24 years as managing editor of the *Review*, a length of tenure never even nearly repeated.

The program committee had sifted 175 proposals to come up with its 58 panels, conscious that it needed to avoid spreading attendance too thin. However, it had nervously moved in that direction by scheduling as many as a dozen panels simultaneously. So although the committee had prepared what it regarded as a "diversified program full of potential conflicts" (Final Program 1949, 3), most of the panels reported that attendance overflowed the rooms in which they were held (News and Notes 1950, 150). The Association's Research Committee had identified areas and topics representing "the important frontiers of political science" (News and Notes 1950, 151). Absent was today's pressure to provide the widest possible participation. The membership was much less diverse than it is today and members were less conscious of the need to publish early and often. Of the 1,500 attendees at the 1949 convention, 350, or fewer than one-fourth, were on the program. By comparison, over 4,700 individuals were on one or more parts of the program in 2006, over 90% of the 5,193 members who registered in advance (Brintnall 2006, 1006; Official Program 2006, 379–95).

Even by today's standards, attendance at the 1949 convention was quite large. It was, however, relatively homogeneous in social composition and organized in a relatively casual, amateurish fashion. The membership was overwhelmingly White and male. It was stratified by seniority and by the prestige ranking of the colleges and universities to which members belonged. An establishment of tenured professors from the major institutions clearly dominated the program. The program organization was entirely in faculty hands. The Association was highly decentralized, its committees autonomous, its work carried out by its faculty officers headed by a president who served a one-year term (Somit and Tanenhaus 1967, 147–55). In 1949, the Association

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had an annual budget of less than $40,000 ($340,000 in today's terms) (News and Notes 1950, 163). A day before the meeting began, the Council had voted to establish a Washington office at a cost not over $20,000 per year, to be financed in part by raising annual membership dues from $6.60 to $10 ($85 in today's terms) (News and Notes 1950, 156). That was the beginning of the professional organization we have today.

The difference between the 1949 meeting and the most recent annual meeting in Philadelphia can be explained only partially by a growth in the Association's membership. In 2006, the membership of the APSA was 14,601, admittedly nearly three times greater than it was in 1949, and a higher proportion of the current membership attended the 2006 meeting. The total meeting participation, including exhibitors, members of the press, and guests was 7,030, over four times the attendance in 1949. But other indicators of change are far more dramatic.

The 2006 program had 432 pages, each page twice the size of the 1949 program, so that it was 18 times larger than the earlier one. While the Program Committee in 1949 had nine members, in 2006 it had 51 members and input from the Association's 35 organized sections. The 2006 program had 26 theme panels, 660 regular panels organized under 46 subjects, 121 panels organized by "related groups," plus business meetings of the specialized sections, meetings of Association committees, short courses, meetings of working groups, and countless receptions. The total number of scheduled events was nearly 14 times the number in 1949. Pre-registration cost $140, in real terms roughly 17 times the fee in 1949.

In short, the Association's membership may have tripled and convention attendance may have nearly quadrupled, but by other measures the annual meeting has expanded at least 15-fold. These numbers reveal significant organizational changes, which reflect changes in the composition of the membership, in the proliferation of specialties within the discipline, and in the structure of higher education in the United States.

Today there are 1,300 departments offering one or more degrees in political science or its specialized fields, 473 of them separate departments of political science and 121 offering Ph.D. degrees. Although exact figures are unavailable, it is likely that in 1949 there were about one-fourth as many departments in each category. Furthermore, the professionalization of careers has affected the importance of convention attendance. Graduate students are acutely aware that giving papers contributes to visibility, prospects for publication, and therefore advancement. Appearance on the program justifies travel grants. Collaborative research requires opportunities for meeting. Editors of journals, far more numerous than half a century ago, need occasions to consult their editorial boards. Authors and editors need to consult their commercial publishers. Interest groups and members of sub-specialties need the chance to meet. Publishers want to display their wares. For all these reasons, the demands placed on the annual meeting have grown exponentially, requiring a level of organization undreamed of half a century ago.

And that organization has developed, from its start in 1951 with a rudimentary office, to an office in its own building that today employs 25 full-time staff members. The budget of the Association for 2005–2006, at $4,395,400 (Brintnall 2006, 1007) was in real terms over 13 times the budget in 1949. The sources of this additional income are not, interestingly, from membership dues, which have stayed steady in real terms for the average member. But significant income now derives from the Association's journals, from other services, and, notably, from conference pre-registration and conference book exhibits. For 2005–2006, projected conference proceeds exceeded conference costs by nearly $400,000, so that the annual meeting is a "profit center" for the Association (Affigne 2006, 388). In economic terms, the demands placed on the annual meeting seem to be inelastic, explaining the 17-fold increase in the registration fee.

Has the transformation of the annual meeting, easily understandable as a reflection of the transformation of the profession, had undesirable consequences that could conceivably be corrected? Meeting attendance has expanded but participation at the average panel is sparse. The opportunity for serendipitous encounters has obviously declined. Despite efforts by the Program Committee, it is nearly impossible to give intellectual focus to the program. It is of course difficult to preserve the informality and academic atmosphere that I recall from my first meeting in a profession that has become more fragmented, and that has changed so much in size and in complexity. But it may be useful to recall the attributes of the meetings of half a century ago and to consider ways of offsetting some undesirable consequences of the changes that have occurred. Experienced convention goers can mostly cope with the complexities of the meeting today. But for graduate students and new faculty, it may be overwhelming rather than the exciting experience it was for me over half a century ago.

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Appendix: List of Panels in the Final Program of the 1949 Annual Meeting

SUMMARY OF PROGRAM

Wednesday, December 28

10:00 A.M.

(1) Open General Session — The Current Status of International Cooperation.

12:30 P.M.

(2) Luncheon—The Nature of National Strength.

2:30 P.M.

(3) The Nature of National Strength.

(4) Liberty vs. Authority in the Age of Revolutionary Change—(I).

(5) The Hoover Commission—an Appraisal.

(6) The Bases of Political Science—(I).

(7) The Way of Progress in Teaching Political Science.

(8) Party Organization and Operations in Congress.

(9) The City Manager Plan Reappraised.

(10) Democratizing an Occupied Country—(I) Germany.

(11) Judicial Organization and Administration—(I).

(12) Palestine: A Jewish State in an Arab World.

(13) The Pathology of Democracy in Latin America.

5:00 P.M.

(14) Research Committee of the Association—Open Meeting.

6:15 P. M.

Testimonial Dinner to Frederic Austin Ogg.

8:45 P.M.

Presidential Address and Presentation of Political Science Awards.

Thursday, December 29

10:00 A.M.

(15) The Post War Constitutions —(I).

(16) American Legislatures.

(17) The Future of the Parties.

(18) Local Self-Government and Citizen Participation.

(19) Current Trends in the Soviet Union—(I).

(20) Church and State.

(21) New Colonial Policies.

(22) The Atlantic Pact.

(23) Liberty vs. Authority—(II).

(24) Administration of Regulatory Functions.

(25) The Bases of Political Science—(II).

(26) Labor and The Public Interest.

12:30 P.M.

(27) Luncheon — Religion and Democracy.

2:30 P.M.

(28) Liberty vs. Authority—(III).

(29) Judicial Organization and Administration—(II).

(30) The Understanding of a Foreign Culture.

(31) Congressional Control of the Executive Branch.

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(32) Public Opinion Polls as a Tool of Political Research.

(33) India.

(34) The Effective Scope of State Activity and Autonomy —(I).

(35) Civic Education.

(36) Western European Federation.

(37) The Hoover Commission: National Security

(38) The Bases of Political Science—(III).

5:00 P.M.

Tea for Women Political Scientists.

6:00 P.M.

Dinner: Pi Sigma Alpha.
Dinner: Institute of Social Order.
Dinner: Editorial Board.

8:00 P.M.

(39) Economic Power Blocs and American Capitalism

(40) Informal Discussions.

Friday, December 30

10:00 A.M.

(41) Democratizing an Occupied Country—(II) Japan.

(42) Social Structure and the Public School System.

(43) Mass Media and the Study of American Politics.

(44) The British Commonwealth of Nations.

(45) Current Trends in the Soviet Union.

(46) The Integration of State Governments and Regional Developments.

(47) The Geographic Basis of the Strength of the Key Powers.

(48) Participation in Politics.

(49) The United Nations and the United States Foreign Policy.

(50) Liberty vs. Authority—(IV).

(51) The Office of the President.

(52) The Bases of Political Science—(IV).

12:30 P.M.

(53) Luncheon — Executive Reorganization.

2:30 P.M.

(54) Big Government.

(55) Political Parties — Committee Report.

(56) International Control of Atomic Energy.

(57) Democratic Motivations in the Cold War.

(58) The Post War Constitutions —(II).

(59) Urban Planning.

(60) The Effective Scope of State Activity and Autonomy—(II).

(61) A Re-thinking of International Law.

(62) Liberty vs. Authority—(V).

(63) The Bases of Political Science—(V).

4:30 P.M.

ANNUAL BUSINESS MEETING.

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