# Facing Failure: The Use (and Abuse) of Rejection in Political Science

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Not long ago, I received a packet of papers, the contents of which explained why my latest article submission was rejected by a well-known peer-reviewed journal. Like everyone else, I've been in this position before, but this time two things led me to more contemplation than usual. First, it was the first rejection since I received tenure, and I noted that job security did little to dampen my disappointment. Second, it came very shortly after I ran into a senior colleague, who noted fairly casually that two of his articles had just been turned down, one of them by a top political science journal.

This combination of events reiterated to me something that had been rather obvious, but which I had never fully internalized, namely that our profession (perhaps like all academia) revolves to a considerable degree around the handling and acceptance of failure and rejection, yet we rarely talk of it. The above example with the senior faculty member was exceptional, and therefore caught my attention. Many of us are caught, in the felicitous phrase of former *APSR* editor Samuel Patterson, by the "itch to publish" and so we are also often faced with those moments when rejection means the itch cannot immediately be scratched.

I looked through back issues of *PS: Political Science and Politics* in search of insights, but found very little. There was a small handful of articles highlighting the sometimes Byzantine (and occasionally even unprofessional) nature of the process of submitting an article manuscript to political science journals, or whether non-objective conditions (such as the school of the submitter) affected acceptance (Borer 1997; Lewis-Beck and Levy 1993). Another analysis began with, "The rejection of manuscripts by journals is clearly the norm in the social sciences," with the most common reason being "unimportant or insignificant contributions" (Bonjean and Hullum 1978, 480). But these articles address the core issue only tangentially, focusing on the mechanics of article rejection instead of the phenomenon of failure itself. Thus, in the absence of much data, I rely upon personal observation in conjunction with published insights from other disciplines, and argue that more empirical analysis on the subject would be a welcome addition to the discipline.

## Failure in Political Science

Of course, failure is common in many professions. In baseball, someone who gets a hit one-third of the time (thus failing to do so two-thirds of the time) is a huge success. In other cases, failure is also more critical, even life threatening. When doctors, fire fighters, or police fail, the consequences are dire. But in academia, we are expected to fail quite frequently and, unlike baseball, there is no team to lift us up. The consequences are important for tenure, promotion, merit pay, etc. Our failures are also mostly private, since rejection letters and emails come to us individually, and we choose whether to share them. Very often, we don't.

Further, this failure comes entirely from the opinions of our peers. Peer review of books and articles is the foundation of the discipline, and even small, regional, or less well-known journals turn down the majority of manuscripts they receive. Book proposals are rejected in even higher numbers, given the costs associated with production.

Rejection and failure become the proverbial elephant in the room, visible to all yet taboo. No one wants to be viewed as losing consistently, although we don't necessarily know if our colleagues are failing, unless they have no tangible publications at all. I must plead guilty on that count, since recently, for the first time, I got an article published that had been rejected twice before, and I didn't rush to admit it to anyone. The article

was "accepted" and therefore good, untainted by a frustrating past. In this sense, we may be quite different from the politicians we study, who labor mightily to emphasize their humble beginnings once they have reached high office. Instead, we tend to give the impression that all our publication conceptions were immaculate.

As a profession, we judge article publication success by the limited number of submissions that make the grade. We take some degree of satisfaction in the idea that the vast majority of people who submit must be disappointed because, of course, it only serves to enhance our own achievement when we find our article in print.

And this is good. True achievement should be won, and must be earned. The purpose of this article is not to suggest that failure should be banned so that we can all feel better about ourselves. But I would call for a more open discussion of failure, and closer attention to the dynamics of rejection. After all, it is a part of our lives, for better or worse, and should not be relegated to dejection and complaint. It is worthless to drown in our sorrows for too long.

I use the terms "failure" and "rejection" in tandem, with their most literal meanings. An article rejected by a journal—that is, the editor of the journal has decided the article will not be published—at least temporarily represents a failure, since the original goal of publication is not reached. Failure, however, need not be permanent, since the author may get the article accepted in a different journal and thereby achieve success. The process, then, is all about constructive use of failure. I argue that we should face failure squarely and use it, while always remembering that failure is easily abused, which in turn negates any of the positive outcomes that rejection is intended to produce. Failure should be a tool used for the greater goal of intellectual and analytic advancement, and all concerned should view it as such. If it is not utilized in that manner, then it serves only as a way for one person (or group of people) to intentionally tear down another.

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## Using Failure

### 1. For the author: Take what you can, and leave what you must

Criticism is an essential part of the expansion of knowledge. Done well, criticism can improve our arguments. However, some criticism is ham-handed and perhaps even worth relatively little, so the discerning author must use their own faculties—and the help of any willing and knowledgeable peers—to do some weeding.

But most rejection letters can be used for gain. They are written by people with detailed knowledge of the field, and can yield critical insights that the author has failed to take into consideration. Failure to address those concerns may lead the author to resubmit to a different journal, but with essentially the same results. There is no point wasting time, effort, and possibly postage for resubmission if you do not keep all the counter-arguments in mind.

Thus, the rejection should be considered a revise and resubmit elsewhere. I have encountered all too many people who gave up immediately, even when the rejection letters gave signs of how the manuscript could be improved. In one case, someone received a revise and resubmit from a very good journal, but the amount of revision necessary seemed overwhelming, and ultimately the manuscript remained untouched and therefore unpublished. John Dryden's oft-cited poem sums it up: "I'm a little wounded but not slain/I will lay me down to bleed a while/Then I will rise and fight again." Even bad reviews should not automatically be mortal wounds. Bleed a bit, then get back up, edit, and send it back off to battle.

Political scientists have not done much to study the chances of a rejected article being published later in a different journal. One exception is an interesting study by former editor of the *APSR*, Samuel Patterson, who sent out surveys to authors whose work had been rejected by the journal. In 1990, nearly 70% of authors resubmitted their *APSR*-rejected manuscripts elsewhere, and about 75% of those were published; overall, just over half of all rejected manuscripts are published in a different journal (Patterson and Smithey 1990). Unanswered is why about 30% of authors choose not to resubmit, and instead allow their manuscripts to die silently.

Much more data exist for medical-oriented journals, revealing that a majority, and in some cases even over two-thirds, of rejections ultimately find a home (Chew 1991, Ray et al. 2000; Nemery 2001). The overall resubmission success rate with political science articles in general is a topic ripe for analysis. Even assuming that the publication rate of rejected-then-resubmitted political science articles doesn't approach the high of their medical-oriented brethren, rejected political science authors should feel confident that, with work, they will be published.

With that in mind, my department is experimenting with hosting presentations of papers nearing the submission stage, followed by discussions of both the work and its appropriate journal audience. These papers will then be tracked as they receive journal referee feedback, with further discussions of the merit of the reviews and the ways in which the manuscript could be improved (even if rejected) with the goal of having every such presentation eventually become a published article.

Separating the wheat from the chaff in reviews is difficult. The decision to ignore reviewers should not be taken too lightly. In the heat of reading, it is easy to denounce the reviewers as "idiots," but even a poorly written review may contain good advice. Some reviewers may have obvious biases against certain types of analyses or have a professional stake in the advancement of certain arguments, though it is not always clear to the person being reviewed. Receiving advice from peers after receiving reviews adds a more objective voice to the process.

### 2. For the reviewer: Provide details even in rejection

All too common is the peer review that curtly notes the problems with the article without providing any supporting evidence beyond opinion, even though some journals explicitly instruct reviewers to be specific. According to a former editor of *Administrative Science Quarterly*, "What the reviewers do not realize is that their line of criticism often would not survive public scrutiny. Many reviewer comments that editors override say essentially, 'This is bad because I say so'" (Weick 1995, 292). If you, as a reviewer, note that a manuscript is without an original argument, specify exactly which authors have already argued the same and include citations noting pages (in an article) or chapters (in a book). This exercise will guide the author on how to improve their work in the future, even if this particular effort has no future.

As an expert on a topic, you should be able to provide citation with little effort and minimal time, especially with Internet library databases at your fingertips. If the topic is outside of your field or you are unwilling to substantiate your criticism with citations, then don't accept the assignment in the first place. A survey of authors in top management journals found that 25% made suggested changes they believed to be incorrect. Even more startling is that 55% of those same authors had at some time been asked to be the referee of a manuscript which they believed they were not competent to review, and 37% did so anyway (Bedeian 2003).

## Facing Failure

### 1. Talk to junior faculty about failure

I have now accomplished enough to receive tenure and promotion, but I have done my share of worrying about rejection. I was most heartened by a senior faculty who once shared his experience with failure. In the 13 years since I first started graduate school, such experiences have been very rare, and therefore all the more memorable. At a time when I really wanted to publish a book, it was heartening to know that a prolific author I greatly respected ended up with a file full of rejection letters. I now have a book, but I also have that file.

What I would suggest, then, is for all faculty, but especially those with tenure, to be more open about rejection. Since their job security is intact, the main obstacle to such a *glasnost* is probably ego. It may be preferable to lead others to believe we are working on other things, rather than admit we have spent considerable time writing articles that are being turned down. But letting other faculty—especially those without tenure—know that rejection is often overcome can facilitate the more important process of using rejection for gain.

A study of publication effort in social work revealed the striking, if not entirely surprising, conclusion that as one moves up in rank, publication rates increase. In a year-long span of time, assistant professors had an acceptance rate of 53.5%, associate professors 65.9%, and full professors 72.3% (Green 1998). The fruits of a relationship between junior and senior faculty is evident, since more senior professors have learned how to address deficiencies in manuscripts more effectively before sending them out for review.

## 2. Cut your losses when necessary

Thus far, this article has stressed the need for authors to do their utmost in getting an article published, resting on the assumption that most work deserves publication. But editors are indeed "gate-keepers" committed to maintaining the highest possible quality in the articles they publish. Although editors welcome increases in submissions, and often celebrate them in editor's notes, their attitude about the quality of the manu-scripts they receive quite naturally di-verges from that of the submitting authors. Editors may very likely also have different views about whether a significant majority of manuscripts should ever be published. As a long-time editor of *Journal of Applied Psychology* writes, "The overall quality of the sub-missions was a bit lower than antici-pated. In fact, it was a bit of a shock" (Campbell 1995, 271). Or, as the editor of *Demography* argues, "Most manuscripts are not especially good or bad. They are just OK" (Guest 1994, 95).

As already mentioned, even though a majority of manuscripts get published, there are many that disappear entirely. An author must make a decision based on the comments of editors, reviewers, and peers about whether to jettison a given manuscript. But when? F. Scott Fitzgerald famously papered his walls with rejection slips, and one editor of an academic journal in the field of health claims the world's largest collection of rejection letters, including six for one article (Morse 2004). Although she did not indicate whether her sextuple failure eventually led to publication (and thus whether she had wasted considerable time), the general point is that persis-tence can yield success, but sometimes cutting your losses is necessary. This is a judgment call with no clear guidelines. Ideally, as authors gain experience, they will clear up all problems before submit-ting a manuscript. An author (especially junior faculty) that continues to receive rejection after rejection should seek ad-vice from trusted colleagues about what is amiss.

## Abusing Failure

### 1. Don't attack authors under the protection of anonymity

Anonymity allows a reviewer to be frank without fear of reprisal (either pro-fessional or personal), but this protection can also lead to abuse. I have received an article review so scathing that I felt the reviewer was actually angry at me, perhaps for making an argument so ridic-ulous that he or she resented having wasted precious minutes of their lives reading it. In another, the reviewer ar-gued that since my article was well-written, it was clearly simplistic. Strangely enough, such over-the-top re-views may be accompanied by reviews which praised the article and felt it con-tributed to a given field. The only benefit comes if the author decides to use the experience to become a better reviewer: one member of several editorial boards writes that receiving an early review call-ing her hypotheses "vapid and inane" still rankles after years; right then she decided never to be so callous (Romanelli 1995, 198–9).

There is no point in going to such lengths to insult the author. I have written highly critical reviews before, and the point can be made without snide com-ments. Some journals request that review-ers be civil, though that instruction is not necessarily followed. I would argue that authors tend to ignore these types of re-views, since the tone suggests the re-viewer is not taking them seriously and wants rather to hurt their feelings. If the purpose of reviews is to help authors, then intentionally turning them off represents a failure for the reviewer. If a reviewer truly feels that the article has no merit and should either be heavily revised or simply abandoned, a calm, logical exposition will do the trick far more effectively.

No one needs a license or training to review manuscripts, which can lead to highly uneven quality. Other disciplines, such as management and sociology, have discussed the inclusion of reviewer workshops at major conferences (Mar-well 1992; Miner 2003). John Miner, a former editor of the prestigious *Academy of Management Journal*, became so concerned about egregious examples of derogatory remarks that he occasionally deleted them from the reviews. As he argues, "I knew of no evidence that being a good researcher and having a very thick skin are positively correlated; yet many of our journals seemed to as-sume such a correlation" (Miner 1997, 1423). This is not uncommon among editors. An editor of *Justice Quarterly* would cut and paste "to avoid unneces-sarily hurting authors' feelings or pride" (Fyfe 1994, 64). At the very least, this issue is one that political science should address more directly.

## Conclusion

It is never pleasant to have one's work criticized, and even less so to have one's peers write that the long hours of re-searching, writing, and thinking did not yield a product worthy of publication. It is nonetheless a central aspect of the pro-fession, even though we generally tiptoe around it.

Rejection and failure should be viewed as guides to constructing better work, and therefore authors should not easily give up on their quest to have a given work published, while reviewers should endeavor to make their negative reviews useful for the author, eschewing unnecessarily harsh language and sar-casm, which in some cases may even have the opposite effect intended by the reviewer. The profession is best served if failure is used well, and not abused. Political science remains behind other disciplines in terms of systematic inves-tigations into publication and failure. We should, therefore, start talking (and pub-lishing) about it more.

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