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ARTICLE



The APSA journal list: popularity, purpose and performance

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ABSTRACT

For over a decade, the Australian Political Studies Association (APSA) has maintained a list ranking journals into A*, A, B and C bands. However, we know little about how Politics scholars use and view the list. In this study, we firstly discuss the history of the APSA list, before then presenting the results of an original survey conducted in March 2017 with over 250 members of the discipline. While the APSA list seems to enjoy overall support, we find that there are concerns about its purpose, its assessment of journal quality and how it treats different subfields and methodologies. In the discussion section, we address some of the main criticisms that have been made of the list and offer a number of suggestions for revisions. These include widening the consultation process, making submissions to the ranking committee public and extending the range of journals included in the list.

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Introduction

Journal rankings have become an increasingly important part of publication strategies and evaluations for scholars. Whether through Impact Factor scores such as those produced by Thomson Reuters and SCImago or the more recent top-20 lists by Google Scholar based on h-index ratings, we now have a series of metrics by which we judge journal quality, but also by which our publications are judged. The rise of these metrics has been the subject of much discussion, with some questioning the validity of using decimal point differences in Impact Factors to rank journals (Hicks et al. 2015) and others opposing the idea that research should be subject to any evaluation other than peer review (Coles 2013). There is no international consensus on this, but one compromise solution that has been undertaken to different extents in Australia and some European countries (e.g. Italy and Norway) has been to create discipline specific ratings and lists of journals.¹ These involve groups of experts coming together to rank journals relevant to their field. While the evaluation process may comprise the use of metrics such as Impact Factor and article acceptance rates, journal lists are, as Pontille and Torny (2010, 348) put it, ‘an intermediary between peer review and diverse metrics.’

This has been the model followed by our discipline in Australia, where, for just over a decade, the Australian Political Studies Association (APSA) has maintained a ‘preferred

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journal list' that ranks journals into A*, A, B, and C categories. First released in June 2008 in advance of the 2010 Excellence of Research in Australia process, the list was revised in 2013 and again in 2016. The last two editions have been approved by majorities at the Associations' annual general meetings, but we know little about how the wider community of politics scholars in Australia views the list. While an APSA survey in 2017 showed that a majority of respondents supported the Association maintaining the list, it did not explore the issue further. Using data from an original survey, this article does so by investigating how over 250 members of our discipline use and view the list.

The article proceeds as follows: in the next section, we set out the background to our study, discussing the history of the list and journal rankings in Australia. We then present the results of our survey. We find that, while the APSA list seems to enjoy overall support, there are concerns about its purpose, its assessment of journal quality and how it treats different subfields and methodologies. In the discussion section, we address some of the main criticisms that have been made of the list and offer a number of suggestions for revisions. These include widening the consultation process, making submissions to the ranking committee public, and extending the range of journals included in the list.

Background

The APSA journal list is part of a much larger effort over the past two decades to devise a best practice framework for assessing research quality in Australia. In the early years, this was characterised by a series of U-turns, thanks to the divergent preferences of different federal governments. The main motivation for including qualitative benchmarks in Australian research policy was that basic funding had hitherto been allocated according to a 'Composite Index' whereby universities received funding on the basis of their external earnings, publication counts, as well as higher degree loads and completions (Butler 2001). Under this system, it was the number of publications, rather than the standing of the outlets in which they appeared, that decided the amount of funding. With all articles held to be equal in value, Australian-based scholars responded by significantly increasing the amount they published between 1993 and 2003, especially in journals with lower impact factors (Butler 2003, 41). This rush for the low-hanging fruit did not go unnoticed by the government, with concerns expressed in a 1999 ministerial discussion paper on higher education research about how 'the publications component of the Composite Index has stimulated an increased volume of publication at the expense of quality' (Kemp 1999). The rising numbers went hand-in-hand with an extraordinary growth of higher education expenditure on research and development, which the conservative government led by the Liberal Party's John Howard deemed to be imprudent and unsustainable.

Seeking to emulate the United Kingdom's Research Assessment Exercise, the federal government signalled its intention to develop a new Research Quality Framework (RQF) in May 2004 (for a wider discussion of research evaluation internationally, see Geuna and Martin 2003). The initial proposal saw significant input from an expert advisory group, national stakeholders, a senate committee and, in particular, from the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee. In December 2006, the Howard government announced \$41.9 million in funding for universities to implement the inaugural 2008 round of the RQF exercise. To create discipline-specific standards, expert bodies from

different fields were formed to rank journals and book presses. Under APSA's leadership, the panel tasked with assessing journals across political science, international relations and public administration was comprised of Linda Butler, Margaret Hamilton, Carol Johnson, Christian Reus-Smit, Rod Rhodes and Pat Weller. The group sourced journals from the Institute for Scientific Information, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory and a pilot study completed as part of the RQF. It adopted a four-step evaluation process and ranked 363 journals according to the procedure stipulated by the Department of Education, Science and Training, which had set bands, distribution and indicators for disciplines to follow (see the guidelines, quoted in [Table 1](#) below). APSA's 'preferred journal list' was submitted to the government for consideration in November 2007.

In December 2007, however, a Labor government under Kevin Rudd took office and quickly announced it would not be proceeding with the ranking exercise as previously devised. Instead, the RQF would be replaced by the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA). In addition to dropping the ranking of book presses, the task of evaluating quality was transferred from the Department of Education, Science and Training to the Australian Research Council (ARC). The ranking of journals nevertheless proceeded based on the Fields, Courses and Disciplines classifications published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. In June 2008, the initial list was released. It contained over 19,500 journals across 181 fields of research. After further revisions, the rankings became a key part of the ERA 2010 evaluation, which aimed to identify and promote research quality in Australia's higher education institutions.

In June 2011, another Labor government, this time led by Julia Gillard, removed the journal classifications from the evaluation framework. A noted concern was how universities and sub-disciplines were making use of them. According to the Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, Kim Carr, there was 'clear and consistent evidence that the rankings were being deployed inappropriately within some quarters of the sector, in ways that could produce harmful outcomes and based on a poor understanding of the actual role of the rankings' (in [Creagh 2011](#)). One such inappropriate use, Carr said, involved 'the setting of targets for publication in A and A* journals by institutional research managers.' Some subdisciplines were also considered to be misusing the ranks to game the system. One of the most egregious examples was Design Practice and Management (Field of Research code 1203), for which 14 of the 43 listed journals were A* ranked ([Vanclay 2011](#)).

Table 1. Tiers for the Australian ranking of journals.

Bands	Distribution	Indicators
A*	Top 5%	Typically an A* journal would be one of the best in its field or subfield in which to publish and would typically cover the entire field/subfield. Virtually all papers they publish will be of a very high quality. Acceptance rates would typically be low and the editorial board would be dominated by field leaders, including many from top institutions.
A	Next 15%	The majority of papers in a Tier A journal will be of very high quality. Typical signs of an A journal are lowish acceptance rates and an editorial board which includes a reasonable fraction of well known researchers from top institutions.
B	Next 30%	Tier B covers journals with a solid, though not outstanding, reputation. Typical examples would be regional journals with high acceptance rates and editorial boards that have few leading researchers from top international institutions.
C	Next 50%	Tier C includes quality, peer reviewed, journals that do not meet the criteria of the higher tiers.

Source: Australian Research Council (2008).

The Australian political science community – which had played by the band limit rules – elected in late 2011 to maintain a discipline-specific list. The same decision was made by other Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences disciplines. The Asian Studies Association of Australia ranked 292 journals, while the Economic Society of Australia ranked 890 journals. The Australian Historical Association followed suit later on, retaining the A*, A, B and C bands, but discarding the existing quota for each. Using the 2010 ERA list as a guide, Katharine Gelber was tasked with building a list of journals for the Field of Research (FOR) codes 1605 (Policy and Administration), 1606 (Political Science) and related fields of research. The working list, which eventually included 1094 journals, was taken as a starting point in July 2013 by a subcommittee consisting of executive members Katharine Gelber, Linda Hancock, Brian Head and Jason Sharman that was formed to create a preferred journal list. The group received fourteen submissions of recommendations (from five journal editors, five individuals and four departments) and ultimately produced a list of 590 journals. The band distribution in the list was consistent with the division previously set out by the ARC (see [Table 1](#)).

Another round of revision took place in June 2016. APSA’s stated aim in this instance was primarily to incorporate new journals that were not on the 2013 journal list, but also to reflect any changes in journals’ standings and correct errors (APSA 2016a). Submissions were invited, particularly from departments, but also from individuals within the discipline. On this occasion 605 journals were ranked by an APSA working party comprised of executive members Anika Gauja, Katharine Gelber, Adrian Kay and Jason Sharman. Using the existing bands, the group considered 19 recommendations (from 15 individuals and 4 departments). The journals were ranked according to criteria such as citation rates, impact factor, percentage of submissions accepted and other data points reflective of reputational quality. The new list, whose contents were 90% similar to the 2013 edition, was approved at the general meeting at the annual conference in September 2016 (although there were some dissenting voices, a large majority of those present voted in favour of adopting the new list).

But what does the broader community of Australian-based Politics scholars think about the journal list? A survey of over 200 APSA members and non-members conducted by the APSA executive in May-June 2017 found that a majority of respondents (56%) were in favour of keeping the list, with only 28% believing that APSA should not have a journal list. Around 15% either did not have a preference or did not know/preferred not to answer ([Table 2](#)).

However, beyond this overall approval for APSA having a journal list, we know little about how Australian-based Politics scholars view the list’s functions, composition and

Table 2. ‘In 2013, APSA issued a list of ‘preferred journal rankings’ and updated this list in 2016. Do you think APSA should have such a list?’.

Response	Number	Percentage
Yes	117	56.2
No	59	28.3
No Preference	19	9.1
Don’t Know/Prefer Not to Answer	13	6.2
Total	208	100

Note: Elaboration on data from the Australia Political Studies Association (2017) Survey Report. The results exclude 26 respondents that we noted as missing from this and several immediately preceding questions.

its changes over time. In particular, does the list influence people's publication strategies? Is it used to assess publications? Do academics think it should be used for this purpose? What do scholars think of the current classifications in the APSA journal list? Do they believe the list provides a true reflection of the standing of journals? Does it properly reflect the methodologies within the discipline? Can the processes of devising the list and ranking journal publications be improved and, if so, how?

Survey and analysis

To answer the above questions, we conducted a survey of Australian-based Politics scholars in March 2017. This seemed an ideal time to gauge their views given that it was not too long after the formal adoption of the new journal list at the APSA conference in September 2016. Using the politics and international relations departments listed on the APSA website as a broad reference point, we identified 767 potential respondents. Working with Griffith University's Online Research Survey Tool, an initial invitation and two reminders were sent over the course of the month. A total of 84 individuals opted not to participate in the survey (because they did not consider themselves part of the discipline) and 35 were excluded (because they said they were unaware of the APSA journal list). Another 12 individuals began the survey but failed to finish it. All responses were anonymous and each participant could only complete the survey once (thanks to a generated token key). The overall response rate was 261 out of 683 (38.2%). This compares well with similar surveys of political scientists conducted in Australia, Canada, the UK and the US.²

The survey collected the views of a wide range of politics scholars in Australia. Geographically, our respondents reported affiliations with 24 universities around the country (see [Table 3](#)).

Table 3. Affiliations of survey respondents.

University	Number of respondents from university	As percentage of all respondents
Australian National University	42	16.0
Griffith University	31	11.8
University of Queensland	24	9.2
Deakin University	22	8.4
University of Sydney	22	8.4
University of Canberra	19	7.2
University of Melbourne	17	6.5
University of New South Wales	12	4.6
Monash University	11	4.2
La Trobe University	10	3.8
Flinders University	9	3.4
Macquarie University	8	3.0
Murdoch University	7	2.6
University of Adelaide	6	2.3
University of Newcastle	4	1.5
University of Western Australia	4	1.3
University of Tasmania	3	1.1
University of Wollongong	3	1.1
Curtin University	2	0.7
Australian Catholic University	1	0.3
Southern Cross University	1	0.3
University of New England	1	0.3
University of Technology Sydney	1	0.3
Western Sydney University	1	0.3

As the table above shows, our respondents included lone individuals at Australian Catholic University and Southern Cross University (0.3% each), along with larger groups at Australian National University (16.0%) and the University of Sydney (8.4%). Respondents were working within 17 different subfields, ranging from political geography (the smallest at 5.6%) to international relations (the largest at 42.0%). They cover the full spectrum of employment levels: 12 Associate Lecturers (4.6%), 60 Lecturers (22.9%), 83 Senior Lecturers (31.8%), 45 Associate Professors (17.2%), 56 Full Professors (21.4%) and equivalent research fellow positions at those levels. A final demographic feature was workload profiles – i.e. the amount of time formally designated to research. 26.4% of our respondents said that research accounted for less than 39% of their work profiles, 45.5% said the figure was 40%–59% and 27.9% stated that research was more than 60% of their profile. Finally, 53.6% (140) of respondents said they were members of APSA.

Who uses the list and how do they use it?

Almost two-thirds (65.5%) of our respondents said they had discussed the list with colleagues in the six months prior to our survey. The nominal importance of the list was underscored by the fact that 69.7% (182) of Politics scholars said they had submitted a manuscript to an A* journal in the past three years. Moreover, when we asked respondents whether the list had influenced their decisions about where to submit articles in the previous three years, 59.3% answered ‘yes’ and 40.2% ‘no.’ When broken down by university, however, there are noticeable differences. A large majority of respondents from Griffith University (83.8%) and the University of Queensland (79.1%), for example, said they were influenced by the list when deciding where to submit articles (this is likely influenced by the fact that, as we note below, both universities provide funding for publications based on the list). By contrast, only 40.7% at Deakin University and 29.4% at the University of Melbourne were influenced by the rankings when submitting manuscripts (this may be because the latter has its own Humanities and Social Sciences list). Nonetheless, the influence of the APSA list in this sense appears to be growing. Amongst respondents, 68.9% reported that it would inform their decisions on where to submit articles in the coming years, 24.1% replied it would not and 6.9% said they did not know. We find little underlying variation on this question when analysed by university, subfield and workload.

We also asked respondents whether their universities use the APSA journal list to assess their research performance. Our survey reveals that a minority of universities do so. The clearest examples are Griffith University, University of Adelaide and University of Newcastle. It is worth noting, however, that respondents from the same universities sometimes offered opposing answers. The University of Canberra (42.1% yes; 36.8% no; 21.0% don’t know) and the University of Sydney (54.5% yes; 18.1% no; 27.2% don’t know) were notable examples in this regard. Amongst those universities that use the APSA journal list to judge research performance, Griffith University and the University of Queensland have gone a step further and also used it as a basis for awarding bonuses, such as conference funding.

What do academics think of the list being used by universities in this way? As [Figure 1](#) below shows, a large majority is opposed, with 64.3% either strongly disagreeing or disagreeing and only 24.4% agreeing or strongly agreeing.

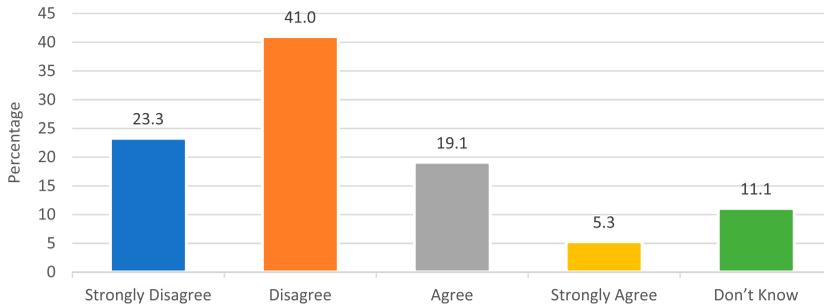


Figure 1. The APSA journal list should be used to assess my journal publications.

There was widespread disapproval across the various subfields for this use of the list. So much so that 82.3% of academics working in environment politics, 82.8% in political history and 84.6% in Indigenous politics either strongly disagreed or disagreed. The only subfield to agree was political geography, but this was also the subfield with the lowest number of respondents (12). Scholars at all academic levels disagreed (albeit to quite different degrees) that the list should be used to assess journal publications: associate lecturer (83.3%), lecturer (51.6%), senior lecturer (68.6%), associate professor (68.8%) and professor (62.5%). The implication of these responses is that, while academics may increasingly use the APSA list to decide which journals to submit articles to, they do not wish the rankings of those journals to be used to evaluate their research performance. On this point, it is worth recalling that when the Gillard government dropped journal classifications from the evaluation framework, it cited the ‘setting of targets for publication in A and A* journals by institutional research managers’ as a justification for its decision.

How is the quality of the list viewed?

Each new version of the APSA journal list has sought to improve on the previous one by either including new journals or correcting the rankings of those already on the list. When asked to judge the latest edition against its predecessor, 32.1% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the 2016 list provided a better assessment of journal quality than the 2013 one, while 27.5% disagreed or strongly disagreed. An extremely high 40.2%, however, said they ‘did not know.’ This suggests that people may have clear opinions about the list in general, but they are not necessarily aware of how it changes from one version to another.

Although nearly a third of respondents believed the 2016 list has improved on the 2013 one, there is still a significant level of discontent. When asked whether it provides an accurate assessment of journal quality in relation to their fields, 45.5% agreed, 47.1% disagreed and 7.2% said they did not know. This distribution remained fairly constant regardless of university affiliation, workload profile or APSA membership status. We find much more variation when we look at the subfield(s) of respondents (see [Table 4](#) below). On the one hand, those working within political economy, public administration and public policy mostly agree that the APSA journal list provides an accurate assessment of journal quality in their fields. By contrast, over 60% of those working within political history, political philosophy and political theory, disagree. In the latter cases, this is not so surprising

Table 4. The APSA journal list provides an accurate assessment of journal quality in relation to my field(s).

Subfield	Agree or strongly agree	Disagree or strongly disagree	Don't know
Political geography	75.0 (3)	25.0 (1)	
Public administration	56.2 (18)	34.3 (11)	9.3 (3)
Political economy	54.8 (34)	40.3 (25)	4.8 (3)
Public policy	50.0 (41)	34.1 (28)	10.9 (9)
Political communication	47.6 (10)	47.6 (10)	4.7 (1)
Political psychology	47.0 (8)	52.9 (9)	
Comparative politics	46.8 (45)	47.9 (46)	5.2 (5)
International relations	45.0 (54)	48.3 (58)	6.6 (8)
Government	44.2 (27)	49.1 (30)	6.5 (4)
Political sociology	43.9 (18)	53.6 (22)	2.4 (1)
Gender and politics	41.9 (13)	48.3 (15)	9.6 (3)
Area studies	41.7 (33)	54.4 (43)	3.7 (3)
Indigenous politics	38.4 (5)	46.1 (6)	15.3 (2)
Security studies	36.0 (18)	58.0 (29)	6.0 (3)
Political philosophy and political theory	34.3 (22)	60.9 (39)	4.6 (3)
Environmental politics	29.4 (10)	52.9 (18)	17.6 (6)
Political history	25.7 (9)	68.5 (24)	5.7 (2)

given that most of the long list of recommendations made by the Political Theory Association of Australasia to the APSA subcommittee in June 2016 were not accepted.

We also asked respondents whether the APSA journal list was representative of the different methodologies used within the discipline. There was a fairly even split on this question: 39.8% agreed or strongly agreed, 38.3% strongly disagreed or disagreed and 21.8% said they did not know. The strongest disagreement came from the subfields of area studies, comparative politics, environmental politics as well as gender and politics. This is perhaps not so surprising given the methodological pluralism that exists across these subfields (Rhodes 2009).

Finally, when asked which journals they thought were missing from the APSA list, 16.5% suggested that more area studies and interdisciplinary journals should be included. This was underscored by a general complaint that the list, which contains 605 journals, is not big enough when compared to Scopus (622 under 'political science and international relations') and Ulrichsweb (6917 under 'government, law, and public administration'). We will come back to this issue in the discussion section.

How should journal publications be evaluated (if at all)?

We saw above that 64.3% of respondents were against the APSA journal list being used to assess their research performance and only 24.5% were in favour. A corollary question is how – if at all – scholars think their publications *should* be assessed. When asked to select the best metric (if any) for assessing the quality of their journal publications, 27.2% of respondents chose 'Impact factors of the journals I have published in,' 24.5% favoured 'citations of my published articles,' 7.6% picked 'Google Scholar rankings of the journals I have published in,' 7.2% opted for 'my H-index', and 6.9% said they did 'not know.'

Over a quarter (26.4%) of respondents thought that none of the above metrics should be used to evaluate their research performance. When we look within this subset of respondents, we find that 66.1% of them also either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the earlier proposition that the APSA journal list should be used to assess their research performance (compared to 20.5% who agreed and 13.2% who did not know).

In other words, around 18% of our respondents are against the idea that either the APSA list or any of the other main metrics should be used to judge their journal publications. This steadfast position is evenly distributed across different universities, career levels, workload profiles, research subfields and APSA membership status.

Leaving aside those who outright oppose the main metrics as a basis for assessment, the most favoured options chosen by other respondents were impact factors of journals and citations (see [Figure 2](#) below). An interesting, but unsurprising, finding was that associated lecturers (9.0%) and lecturers (12.5%) were least enthusiastic about citations being used to assess their journal publications. It seems reasonable to presume that, on average, these respondents will have less citations than those at later career stages.

The most notable result displayed by [Figure 2](#) is the support for impact factor, which was considered the best indicator of journal article quality. Out of the 71 respondents who selected impact factor as their preferred metric (i.e. nearly a quarter of our sample), 36.6% had disagreed or strongly disagreed that the APSA journal list provided an accurate assessment of journal quality in relation to their field(s). In addition, 66.2% of those who selected impact factor were also opposed to the APSA journal list being used to assess their journal publications. This appears somewhat perplexing given that there is in fact a strong link between impact factor and rankings within the APSA journal list. We can see this from [Table 5](#) below, which crosschecks the top three tiers of the APSA journal list against different measures of journal impact published by InCites, SCImago and Scopus (the table reports 2015 data as it is the most relevant to the 2016 list).

[Table 5](#) shows that there is significant variation in impact factor between the top three tiers of the APSA journal list. The average and median impact for A* journals, to underscore an obvious example, are easily double that of A journals – regardless of how they are measured. Nonetheless, there are some exceptions to the overall pattern of correlation between impact factors and APSA list bands. Take, for example, *Health Policy and Planning* (a B journal with a combined average impact factor of 2.277), *Energy Policy* (an A

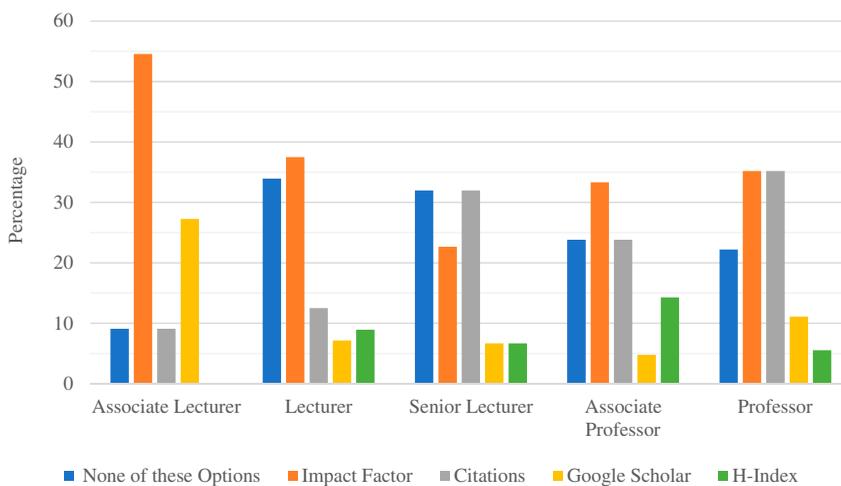


Figure 2. Which of the following metrics provides the best assessment of the quality of your journal publications?.

Table 5. Comparison of the journal list and impact factor measures.

<i>Thomson Reuters/InCites Journal Impact Factor (2015)</i>			
Description: Measures all citations to the journal in the given year to items published in the previous two years, divided by the total number of scholarly items published in the journal in the previous two years.			
	A* Journals (31)	A Journals (81)	B Journals (97)
Average	2.525	1.168	0.846
Median	2.438	1.050	0.744
Range	1.429–4.515	0.303–3.045	0.041–3.457
<i>SCImago Journal & Country Rank (2015)</i>			
Description: Measures the number of citations received by a journal and the importance or prestige of the journals where such citations come from. The numerical value indicates the average number of weighted citations received during a selected year per document published in that journal during the previous three years.			
	A* Journals (31)	A Journals (89)	B Journals (159)
Average	3.587	1.139	0.658
Median	2.954	1.010	0.495
Range	1.470–9.622	0.157–3.012	0.101–6.214
<i>Scopus Source-Normalised Impact per Paper (2015)</i>			
Description: Measures contextual citation impact by weighting citations based on the total number of citations in a subject field. The impact of a single citation is given higher value in subject areas where citations are less likely and vice versa.			
	A* Journals (14)	A Journals (30)	B Journals (57)
Average	2.992	1.347	0.999
Median	2.750	1.205	0.450
Range	1.510–4.860	0.430–2.260	0.220–2.830

journal with a combined average impact factor of 3.769) and *Global Environmental Politics* (an A* journal with a combined average impact factor of 1.656). Classifications like these offer an easy target for critics of the APSA list who prefer to simply rely on Impact Factors. Alternatively, if we look at the H-index based Google Scholar rankings, we find a number of top-10 journals in the ‘Political Science’ and ‘International Relations & Diplomacy’ categories that would merit A* ratings, such as *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *Political Studies* and *International Affairs* (all currently ranked ‘A’).

Discussion and recommendations

Our survey shows that, while the APSA journal list is increasingly relevant for those in the discipline when deciding where they submit papers, there are concerns about how the list is used, the degree to which it accurately reflects journal quality and how it treats different subfields and methodologies. Some of these views tally with those expressed in the open responses part of APSA’s 2017 survey and by Australian-based Politics scholars on Twitter in the period after the release of the 2016 list. In this section, we discuss a few of the main objections to the list and, where relevant, suggest potential solutions.

‘Why should APSA have a list anyway?’

As we saw from the APSA survey results, over a quarter of respondents (28.4%) thought that the association should not have a journal list. This complaint has also been made publicly on Twitter by a number of scholars, who – like some participants in our survey – have either advocated using metrics like Impact Factor to evaluate publication quality instead of

the list or have entirely rejected any system other than peer review. Some have also questioned the authority and/or need for APSA to devise a list.

There is an obvious first response to opponents of APSA having a list, which is that the majority of those in APSA's 2017 survey clearly indicated they wanted the Association to maintain one. With regards to the specific complaints above, the 'neither metrics nor the APSA journal list' position seems unrealistic to us, while the 'metrics rather than the APSA journal list' position is undesirable. University managers, job selection committees and promotion boards, along with external grant reviewers, will inevitably rely to some extent on ranking systems and international metrics when faced with CVs containing unfamiliar journals. If they were simply to use Impact Factor, this would not lead to any better judgements of publications than the APSA journal list and, in the case of Australian journals, it would certainly result in worse ones (given that the APSA journal list deliberately ranks the major Australian journals higher than their Impact Factors would suggest). In addition, having our publications evaluated using Impact Factor rather than the APSA journal list would risk validating cross-discipline comparisons according to that measure (something that would penalise Politics scholars).

'The journal list damages Australian politics research'

This argument has been made both in published work and in the open responses to APSA's survey. Kellow (2012) lamented how the dominance of the A* band by political science journals based in the United States creates 'an incentive for political science scholars to move their research focus away from Australia.' Similarly, a respondent in APSA's survey wrote: 'it would be really good if the list didn't reflect an international "cultural cringe" that downgrades Australian journals despite APSA representing political scientists in Australian universities.' This is one of the more misplaced criticisms of the list in our view. As noted already, the APSA journal list has actually protected the standing of journals like the *Australian Journal of Political Science* (AJPS) and *Australian Journal of International Affairs* by consistently ranking them as 'A' when their Impact Factors are more consistent with journals found in the B band. Indeed, if we look at the submission numbers to the AJPS in the decade between when the list was first released in 2007 and the most recent edition in 2016, we find that the best years for submission numbers to the journal have been 2014 (149 submissions), 2016 (136), 2008 (123), 2015 (120) and 2013/2009 (both on 113).³ Since AJPS mostly publishes work that either focuses on or at least includes Australia, we would expect to see a decline in submissions if the list's existence was inhibiting Australian politics research. Of course, one could respond to this: 'fine, but AJPS has been consistently ranked A by the list, what about the effects of the list on Australian journals that were ranked as B?' We therefore also looked at the submission data for *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, which was ranked as 'B' until 2016 (when it was increased to 'A'). However, the picture here again is of a clear rise in the number of research articles submitted between 2007 and 2016, with the best years being 2016 (98) and 2014 (89). In a nutshell, the list does not seem to be harming the major journals for Australian politics research and, if anything, it safeguards them from the adverse reputational effects of a purely metric-based evaluation system.

'The list is not sufficiently representative of subfields and methodological approaches'

This criticism comes up several times in the open responses to APSA's survey and is the main one that emerges from our survey. One person in APSA's survey stated: 'I support the existence of the "preferred journal list," but I also strongly support efforts to make the list more representative of the range of subfields in which APSA members work.' Another said the list was 'biased toward some subfields and approaches.' Our survey showed respondents were equally divided between those who thought the list provided an accurate assessment of journal quality and methodologies in their fields and those who did not.

Certainly, it is true that A* journals tend to favour quantitative research and this poses issue for the Australian political science community. While the younger generation of scholars in Australia appear slightly more balanced in terms of their preferred methodology (Kefford and Morgenbesser 2013), the traditional profile of Politics researchers in this country has been overwhelmingly qualitative. As Sawer and Curtin (2016, 447) noted, out of 95 Australian-based full professors in February 2016, 87 used mostly qualitative methods and only 8 used mostly quantitative ones. It is also true that Politics scholars from Australia have published little in the major A* journals, especially those run by editorial teams based in the United States. If we look at the 12 years prior to the 2016 APSA list revision (2003-2015), only 3 articles by Australian-based researchers appeared in *American Political Science Review* and 6 in *American Journal of Political Science*, both of which are generalist journals, but mostly publish quantitative research. At the same time, however, just 1 article by an Australian-based scholar appeared in *Perspectives on Politics*, the more methodologically pluralist journal set up by the American Political Science Association. Other A* journals in the United States with sub-disciplinary focuses present similar pictures. For example, *International Organization* published 6 articles by Australian-based researchers between 2003 and 2015, *Journal of Public Administration Research* published 3 and *World Politics* just 1 (see also Sharman 2008, who argues that Australian IR scholarship performs poorly if judged on leading international journal publications, but well if the focus is on books with university presses).

The record of Australian-based Politics scholars in European-based A* journals is generally better. Between 2003 and 2015, they published 59 articles in *Public Administration* and 25 in *European Journal of International Relations*. Even in the heavily quantitative *British Journal of Political Science*, Australian-based scholars still fared better than in similar US journals, publishing 12 articles. Nonetheless, if the APSA list is to be externally credible, it cannot exclude the major US journals from the A* category. However, including them leaves little room for other journals more open to Australian researchers, given the rule that A* journals should not exceed 5% of the total. This also has consequences for the degree to which the demands of some smaller subfields can be accommodated, since high-impact generalist journals and those of the major subfields like Public Policy/Public Administration and International Relations will inevitably crowd out journals from smaller ones like Political Theory in the A* band.

While Ariadne Vromen (2016) wonders whether a possible solution might be to amalgamate the A* and A categories, we fear this would lack credibility, both inside and outside Australia. For example, and with all due respect, it is implausible to claim that it is comparably difficult to place an article in the A-ranked journals *Government & Opposition* or

Journal of East Asian Studies as it is in the A* *European Journal of Political Research or Comparative Political Studies* (all of which the authors have published in). However, we do believe that a popular – and more legitimate – revision would be to include some additional high-quality journals open to Australian researchers within the A* category. One way of justifiably doing this, while remaining within the band limits followed to date, would be to take on board another criticism, which is that the list does not cover enough journals. In our survey, we asked respondents to suggest journals they felt should be included. They named 131 journals (see Appendix 2), including *Politics and Religion*, *Journal of Experimental Political Science* and *Review of International Organizations*. If the APSA list were to incorporate the journals our respondents have proposed, this would already open the way to including 7 more journals among the A* category and 13 more in the A category.

There is also the question of whether many interdisciplinary and area studies journals currently omitted should be considered for inclusion. This goes to the heart of the list's remit: Should it be a list of exclusively and clearly 'Politics' journals (in line with its original function)? Or should it be a (broader) list of journals that Politics scholars publish in? Leaving that vexed issue to one side, we sought to find out what was missing from the APSA journal list when compared to mainstream journal databases such as Clarivate Analytics InCites, Google Scholar, Scopus and SCImago. The search categories were straightforward – e.g. Area Studies, Political Science and International Relations, Public Policy and Administration and Women's Studies, amongst others. In total, we found 1076 journals that are not on the APSA list (see Appendix 3). To be clear we are not proposing a 'stack'em high' attempt to game the system by finding every journal vaguely related to our fields irrespective of quality, but to consider incorporating internationally respectable journals that Politics scholars publish in.

'The journal list lacks transparency'

One of the main criticisms both in the open responses to the APSA survey and on social media concerned how the 2016 list had been devised. One respondent said APSA needed to 'employ procedures for establishing and correcting the preferred journal rankings list that are more consultative,' while another complained that the 'journal-ranking process was not well instituted. There was too little opportunity for members to be involved.' A number of senior figures from the discipline also debated the issue openly on Twitter, with some arguing that the list relied too much on a small committee's allegedly opaque and subjective judgements, while others contended that the existence of the list in fact protected scholars against precisely such opaque and subjective judgements (both within universities and by external referees).

It seems unfair to claim that the discipline was not consulted, given that the committee explicitly called for submissions from departments, groups and individuals (APSA 2016b). Moreover, it is inevitable in an exercise of this type, which seeks to combine metrics and qualitative judgments, that there will be subjective decisions and borderline calls taken by committees that may be best left private (how ARC funding decisions are made also lacks transparency, yet we accept that as part of the process). That said, we have a couple of suggestions to make the APSA list's composition more transparent. First, it would be worth considering making public all submissions from departments and individuals. This would

allow everyone to see *what* the committee's deliberations have been about. Second – and we recognise this would involve a lot of extra work – it might be worth carrying out an expert survey of Australian-based politics scholars in the coming years to see how *they* think journals should be ranked. This could be conducted along the same lines as McLean et al. (2009) have done in Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States. While the authors noted a risk of 'fictitious familiarity' (i.e. respondents evaluating journals they are not familiar with), they nonetheless found a high degree of expert consensus, at least among the better-ranked journals (McLean et al. 2009, 35). Such an expert survey might also respond in part to the suggestion that 'sub-disciplines should have more say on their journal rankings' (Vromen 2016). While we believe there are pitfalls in having individual sub-disciplines decide rankings (in particular, we can see how this might lead to both intra-sub-discipline and inter-sub-discipline conflicts), a broad-based expert survey in which respondents had to indicate their sub-disciplines could be helpful.

Conclusion

It has been just over a decade since our discipline first began to establish its own journal rankings list in Australia. During that time, the list has acquired what Vromen (2016) calls 'discursive significance.' By this she meant that, from their first use in the 2010 ERA, 'the classifications A* and A articles started to appear in promotion, job and grant applications.' As we have seen from our own survey of 261 respondents from across the discipline, the list is something that Politics scholars discuss and increasingly use. Based on the 2017 APSA survey and our own one in the same year, we think it is safe to say that, as a community, most of us do not want to reject the journal list, but around half of us want to reform it. Some in our discipline have reservations about how it is employed to assess research performance and whether it accurately reflects journal quality, subfields and methodologies. This is particularly true for those working across fields or in smaller subfields such as political theory and philosophy. In addition, therefore, to reporting the views of Politics scholars about the list, we have put forward a number of proposals that may help address some of the above concerns. These include extending the list to incorporate the journals indicated by our respondents and to see if there are other journals that should be included; making future submissions to the list committee from departments and individuals public; and conducting an expert survey among scholars within the discipline in Australia in the coming years to see how they view the quality of journals. While there are always going to be some who oppose this list (or any list) for personal and/or sub-disciplinary reasons, we believe that introducing some of the suggested reforms may serve to increase the already significant level of support for the APSA list as it enters its second decade.

Notes

1. In Italy, journal lists for all disciplines have been created and maintained by the National Agency for Evaluation of the University System and Research. In Norway, a register for journals is jointly maintained by the National Board of Scholarly Publishing and the Norwegian Centre for Research Data, on behalf of the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research. In Australia, the list was introduced by the government, but has been maintained by the national political science association.

2. In their expert surveys of political scientists about journal quality, McLean et al (2009) reported response rates of 32.3% in Canada and 32.5% in the United States. A member's survey by the UK Political Studies Association a response rate of 11% (see O'Brien and Jennings 2015).
3. We thank the members of the former and current editorial teams of the *Australian Journal of Political Science*, including Ian McAllister, David Hundt and Annika Werner, for providing us with this submission data. Some of our figures may be slightly lower than the reality due to the transition from submissions by email to those using the online system during this period (David Hundt estimated that approximately 10% of submissions to the AJPS were made outside the system). However, this does not change our conclusion that there has been no major decline in submissions. We also thank Catherine Althaus, Heidi Allen and Rebecca Ciezarek from the *Australian Journal of Public Administration* editorial team and Wiley.

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