

**Article: “A Short Tour of Book Publishing for Political Scientists”**  
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# A Short Tour of Book Publishing for Political Scientists

**Charles T. Myers**, *Princeton University Press*

A new assistant professor of political science, who we shall call “Dr. Politics,” stands at the door of the exhibit hall at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association gazing at the crowds gathering at the booths of the leading publishers of scholarly work in political science. Dr. Politics’ dissertation has been finished, defended, and filed with the graduate school. The dissertation committee members have told Dr. Politics that the dissertation is but one revision away from being a completed book manuscript that will be attractive to many academic presses. Dr. Politics’ prestigious department requires at least one published book and one on the way for tenure. The chair expects the first book to be a revised version of the dissertation. How does Dr. Politics navigate the new world of publishing?

First, a word about dissertations as book manuscripts. In the experience of most editors very few dissertations are ready to be published without significant revision. Why is this the case? A dissertation is a report on a research project. Of course most dissertations offer an argument, but too often the question investigated is too narrow, or a demonstration of the candidate’s scholarly knowledge or methodological wizardry dominates. The objective of a dissertation is to prove to the candidate’s faculty that the student has learned how to conduct a research project, understands the methods employed in the field, has read the relevant literature, and can communicate the results of that research in a reasonably coherent way. A successful book, by contrast, seeks to communicate important and original ideas about an issue that a reasonably large audience can care about and understand.

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The puzzle the writer is addressing and the arguments made are front and center; the methods employed and ancillary arguments are discussed but given much less prominence. The language employed is appropriate for the audience. For example, if the audience is policy-makers and their advisors, the author does not use elaborate game theory and mathematics as a substitute for English. But if the audience is economists or game theorists, the author provides all of the math and modeling (Dougherty and Myers 2004).

Luckily, Dr. Politics has learned this from faculty advisors or friendly editors and has now revised the manuscript to focus on its new ideas, eliminating lengthy reviews of past scholarship while, of course, crediting those who have contributed to the debate she is joining. The author has done this briefly and throughout the development of the argument. The manuscript has been revised to eliminate repetitions and the exploration of peripheral issues, keeping the focus on the puzzle and on the author’s principle contributions. Dr. Politics has kept the intended audience in mind.

Which presses should Dr. Politics consider? Most scholarly work in the U.S. is published by university presses, although in many disciplines, including political science, excellent commercial presses publish scholarly books. University presses are sometimes supported by their home university but are increasingly required to pay their own way; commercial presses must make enough money to turn a profit for their owners. Dr. Politics researches presses to find those that publish similar books. Presses tend to specialize in particular kinds of publishing in terms of both subject matter and kinds of books—textbooks, reference, scholarly monographs—in order to conserve scarce marketing resources. Even within the discipline presses often tend to publish certain kinds of books. Within political science, some presses are more receptive to work that is more historical and qualitative in nature while others publish work that is more quantitative. In some

cases the presence of related lists onto which the books might be cross-listed for marketing purposes dictates these choices. Thus, a political science list that is more historical in its approach might be found at a press that also has a strong list in history. Presses try to develop a brand that attracts and helps market the kinds of manuscripts that the press wants to publish. Dr. Politics should research presses on the Internet, using the presses’ well-developed web sites to see which press is publishing similar work. Dr. Politics should look at the publishers of work used in the dissertation and should question faculty members about the most admired presses and respected editors within the field.

After identifying potential presses, Dr. Politics contacts and sends the appropriate editor at each press a proposal and CV. At this stage Dr. Politics need not be restricted by single submission considerations.

What is a proposal or prospectus? This is a selling document: the author tries to convince the editor to become interested in this project and spend resources on having it reviewed. The prospectus is a description of the manuscript, stating the question being investigated, the findings, the methods employed, why this is an important question, why the argument is new and thought-provoking, and who the audience might be. The proposal gives the length and number of tables and figures in the manuscript and tells the editor when the manuscript will be completed. The author should include a table of contents, a CV, and a short sample chapter with the proposal.

What are editors looking for? Editors are looking for manuscripts that offer new insights into questions that are important for the discipline or for a wider audience. Editors look for clear writing and a reasonable length. Too many words (for some editors much beyond 100,000 words) or too many tables (more than 10) raise the costs and the price charged for the book, a controversial issue in a price-sensitive discipline

like political science. In addition, longer books are often not read or assigned in class. One result of the decline of the library business is that presses must sell each book copy by copy. Presses must think about the number of individuals who will buy the book and the number of classes for which it might be assigned. As sales expectations dip below 1,000 copies, based on the press's experience with similar books, the case for publishing a book becomes more difficult to make, though presses do publish such books.

Editors are limited in the number of books they can publish at a press in any given discipline. Presses seek to balance their overall lists among different disciplines and kinds of books, i.e. textbooks, monographs, and trade books.

Thus a press might reject a worthy manuscript for a number of reasons. For example, the editor might reject a proposal because it does not fit the profile the press is trying to develop in a field, the editor does not think there is a market for the book, the editor already has too many books under review or in production to do a good job for the author, or the press does not want to take on any more projects of a particular kind at the time the submission comes in. The rejection letter may not carry a great deal of detail because the editor simply does not have time to write at great length and because the rejection may

be based on factors other than the individual characteristics of a particular project.

Dr. Politics' manuscript has now been invited in by three presses. This raises the issue of multiple submissions. The propriety of multiple submissions varies among fields and editors. Dr. Politics talks to the editors at each interested press about their multiple submission policy. Some will work with multiple submissions with a limited number of presses (usually not more than three) and with all editors kept advised as to the manuscript's progress at each press. In other words, transparency is the guiding principle here.

Why might multiple submissions be a problem? Most presses have limited

budgets to pay reviewers. Editors have many tasks in addition to supervising the reviewing process and finding reviewers these days is difficult. Therefore, presses may not be willing to review a manuscript that is being considered at another press; it certainly raises the bar for the manuscript. However, if the author agrees to give a press an exclusive submission the author should negotiate with the editor a time limit beyond which the author will pursue other publishing opportunities. If several presses agree to review a manuscript simultaneously, the author needs to give each press a reasonable amount of time to complete the review and let each editor know where the manuscript stands at each press.

From here the process varies a bit from press to press. Typically, the editor

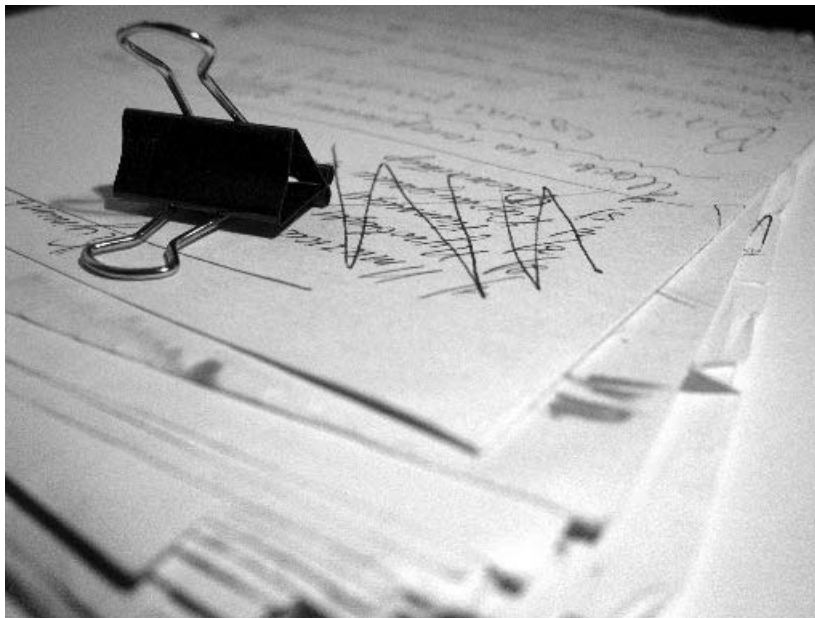
know the identity of the author but the author does not know the identity of the reviewer.

Once the reviews are in, the editor shares blind copies of the comments with Dr. Politics. If both reviews recommend publication, Dr. Politics will be asked to respond to the reviews by outlining the revisions planned and the points of disagreement with the reviewers. Then the editor submits the project to the management and ultimately to an editorial board which is customarily made up of tenured faculty drawn from many disciplines in the press's home university. This process can take months to complete.

If the editorial board approves the project for a contract, the editor will propose contract terms to Dr. Politics. Normally these deal with terms such as the delivery date, the length of the manuscript, royalties and advances against royalties (though advances are rarely offered for revised dissertations), and the question of a paperback edition. The contract for scholarly books rarely deals with marketing issues, cover design, or specific production issues, although these are all questions that should be addressed during the negotiations. In the process of negotiating the contract Dr. Politics will begin to learn about some of the challenges faced by publishers.

Dr. Politics wants the book published in paper immediately. Political science is a price-sensitive

discipline with many authors naturally concerned about the price charged for their book. Publishers on the other hand must pay their bills and seek to reach the point on the demand curve that will enable them to maximize revenue in order to cover costs, not even thinking of a profit in most cases. The problem with the paperback edition is that lowering the price does not necessarily greatly increase sales—or make up in volume for the lost revenue from the lower sticker price. Many scholarly books simply have a limited audience at any price. The result is pressure from the publishers to put out books first in cloth and only later in paper to maximize promotional opportunities and revenue. The promotion of paperback



**From Manuscript to Book.** Myer's rundown of the book publishing process can help the discerning reader get her manuscript from this stage to press.

will seek two reviewers for Dr. Politics' manuscript. These will be a mix of senior and junior scholars expert in the topics and approach taken by Dr. Politics. The author might be asked to provide a list of potential reviewers and a list of those the author would like the editor to avoid, usually because there has been some unhappy personal engagement. The reviewers cannot be from the author's graduate school or employing department or members of the author's dissertation committee.

It can take time to get these readers lined up; editors normally give the readers a deadline for return of the reviews, often six to eight weeks after delivery of the manuscript. These reviews are customarily single-blind: the reviewers

editions, particularly of first books, benefits from reviews of the cloth edition. The virtue of this from the author's standpoint is that a delayed paperback provides two rounds of sales promotions and advertising. Publicists maintain that serious review attention in mainstream journals is given to cloth editions; paperbacks are seen as textbooks.

While editors will pursue only those books that fit the business plans of the press, it is important that Dr. Politics and the editor develop a shared understanding of the audience for the book or the publishing experience will not be a happy one. The nature of the audience determines how the book is priced and promoted, including where ads are placed, where direct mail is targeted, and where reviews are sought. Most scholarly books are reviewed in scholarly journals; very few scholarly books—and even fewer revised dissertations—are reviewed in mainstream media such as the *New York Times*.

Once the book is placed with a good publisher, Dr. Politics will complete the manuscript, making the revisions agreed upon with the editor and the editorial board, and will supply the manuscript to the press in the technical form required. A production schedule will be set. Dr. Politics will carefully review the copy-edited manuscript, keeping in mind that this is the last stage that any re-writing can be done. Dr. Politics will next carefully review the proofs, correcting only typesetting errors, but paying close attention to any math or numbers. Dr. Politics will provide an index at this stage. Finally, after the book is printed, Dr. Politics will become a partner with the press in the promotion of the book. Dr.

Politics will speak about the book at every opportunity, cite it in articles, and make sure all friends and colleagues, including the college publicity department, know about the book.

Finally, a word about conditions in publishing in political science. Political scientists write three kinds of books: 1) disciplinary, scientific books written primarily for some part of the profession; 2) books that are primarily for class use; and 3) books for a broader audience that either cross disciplinary lines or are for a lay audience interested in some public policy question. All serve an important purpose. But there is far less overlap among these three types of books than authors—and sometimes editors—think. Why is this?

First, very few of the books written by political scientists reach a lay audience because social scientists frequently do not approach questions in quite the way people outside the academy understand them. Also, the public often cannot understand or are not interested in the technical jargon or math found in many books, or the dense theoretical debates engaged in by many political scientists. To publish a trade book on a topic of public interest requires that the author: state the question in a way the public can understand it; have a bold thesis that is stated in one simple declarative sentence; write a short book; and eliminate all professional jargon, all but the most simply stated statistics, and all coded references to the work of dense and barely known theoreticians. Few do this—most such writing is done by journalists—and thus publishing in political science is primarily for the discipline.

Second, the gap between the technical sophistication of much of the work in political science and the level of sophistication of the audience, be they the public, students, or other social scientists, has grown to the point that many books have an audience that is largely restricted to a part of the discipline with very limited course use potential. This may be a natural development for the field in that its best practitioners are using more complex methods but it makes political science publishing more like book publishing in technical disciplines where price sensitivity is not as great. Prices for these books will be higher because price has little impact on the market which is limited by the nature of the text.

Third, we are a divided discipline in methodological terms with many disagreements about what is good work. Presses thus must choose how to navigate these battlefields either by being agnostic or partisan about methods. These divides limit the audience and course adoption potential of some books.

Notwithstanding these complications, now is an exciting time to be involved in the social sciences given the rich research programs on many important social and political issues.

Dr. Politics has succeeded in having her book published by a good press that is now promoting the book to the appropriate audience. The press and the author are on a shared mission of promoting excellent scholarship. No longer is the exhibits hall at the Annual Meeting an intimidating challenge; Dr. Politics is published and has arrived.

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## Reference

Dougherty, Peter, and Charles Myers. Forthcoming 2004. "Putting Passion into Social Science." In *Revising Your Dissertation*:

*Advice from Leading Editors*, ed. Beth Luey. Berkeley: University of California Press.

