

## **The Junior Americanist Workshop Series (JAWS)**

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Like all modern innovations in political science, the Junior Americanist Workshop Series (JAWS) was born of a Twitter thread. When one of our cadre mused about whether zero-cost virtual seminars could fill the void left by the many in-person conferences and workshops cancelled or converted to costly remote formats due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we came together to answer the call.<sup>1</sup> The founding vision of JAWS was to provide cost-free opportunities for early career American politics scholars to present their research and receive feedback from leading scholars in their field.<sup>2</sup> JAWS has since evolved, now providing free networking and professional development opportunities, which many lost access to during the pandemic with conferences curtailed and university buildings closed. Here, we discuss how we developed JAWS, the challenges we faced, and how we envision the workshop continuing as a complement to traditional in-person conferences in a post-pandemic world.

We began soliciting submissions for JAWS in August 2020 via Twitter, political science listservs (e.g., POLMETH, RACE POL), and our informal networks, which generated significant interest among potential presenters. We also asked people, including senior scholars (i.e., tenured faculty), to volunteer as discussants, attend our sessions, and join our email list. As the number of submissions quickly surpassed 50, we promptly doubled the number of planned sessions by moving from once-a-month to twice-a-month to accommodate more presenters. Over the course of the 2020-2021 academic year, we held a total of 12 research workshops with 38 presenters that attracted a total of 632 attendees. per workshop. While our Fall 2020 workshops included four presentations over two hours, in the spring we moved to two presentations over 90 minutes to allow for more engagement with each presentation. Each discussant was only responsible for one paper, which helped to keep the commitment

manageable for those who agreed to volunteer in that role. We also encouraged presenters to send us their papers at least one week in advance of their session so we could post them on our website and allow for attendees to read them ahead of time. We made these decisions in service of our goal to provide presenters with quality feedback to which they might not otherwise have access. Overall, we successfully attracted a wide range of early-career academics to submit their work; roughly 40% of our presenters were graduate students, 24% held non-tenure-track positions, and 37% were tenure-track assistant professors. We also succeeded in securing experienced discussants for our presenters; all of our discussants held PhDs, and 47% of our discussants were senior faculty (i.e., tenured).

While we were successful in recruiting presentations from early career researchers, we had mixed success in ensuring diversity by gender, race, and institution type among our presenters. Fostering a diverse slate of presenters was a priority because scholars from underrepresented groups (e.g., women, persons of color) and from institutions without ample financial support for faculty research (i.e., non-R1 departments) are commonly thought to lack the very network connections which in-person conferences help build. Compared to the demographic characteristics of APSA members in the American politics subfield (as of February 2020), our slate of presenters included a larger share of women (47.3% vs. 35.5%) and only a slightly smaller proportion of persons of color (15.8% vs. 20.7%), suggesting that we performed reasonably well at cultivating diversity by gender and race.<sup>3</sup> However, we performed less well in attaining institutional diversity, as only 10.5% of our presenters were affiliated with non-R1 departments. While this is partially an artifact of our focus on graduate students, who predominantly come from R1 universities, moving forward we plan to more consciously account for levels of institutional support when soliciting submissions and choosing presenters. This will be particularly important in the near future, as those with substantial institutional support (e.g., conference and travel funding) will be better advantaged by the return of traditional conference formats.

In addition to our workshop series, we created a professional development series with the goal of helping junior scholars network and socialize into the profession. Starting in the Spring 2021 semester, we hosted three hour-long events that brought together panelists with expertise on specific aspects of the discipline and academia more broadly that may seem opaque to early career scholars. Our panel topics included public scholarship, academic book publishing, and academic journal publishing. When promoting these events, we broadened our outreach by emphasizing that they would be beneficial for all junior scholars rather than specifically those who study American politics. These sessions attracted 186 total attendees, and we plan to continue holding professional development panels in the 2021-2022 academic year.

A major challenge for those who hope to organize virtual conferences and workshops is mimicking the informal networking and discussion opportunities traditionally available at in-person conferences. One way we tried to facilitate networking was to host virtual trivia events on the same evenings as several of our JAWS panels.<sup>4</sup> While the attendance for trivia was smaller than that of the panels, we still attracted 80 total attendees convening on Zoom for these events and received positive feedback from attendees. We are actively considering other virtual networking opportunities for the coming year, including the use of Gather,<sup>5</sup> and we also hope to hold JAWS events at in-person conferences in the future. While it is difficult to replicate the space for networking that in-person conferences afford in a virtual format, we aspire to provide early career scholars with a complementary, cost-free networking environment.

Another challenge facing virtual conference and workshop organizers is avoiding burnout on the part of the organizers. We benefitted from having six people on our organizing committee, which allowed us to share and divide responsibilities, such as constructing panels, recruiting discussants, and preparing questions to facilitate audience discussion on each paper, based on schedules and expertise. We also kept in frequent contact using Slack, which allowed us to coordinate without bloating each other's email inboxes. Overall, having enough people on

board to help with organizing is critical; we will note that many in-person conference panels are organized by far fewer people, and this lack of bandwidth can result in less in-depth feedback for presenters. Moving forward, we are identifying deficiencies in our organizing team in terms of research interests and networks, and are recruiting additional organizers for the upcoming year.

Overall, we hope to solidify JAWS as a mainstay in American politics and that we encourage others to pursue virtual workshops as a way to provide cost-free opportunities for junior scholars from diverse institutions to interact with their peers and senior scholars. We believe that these workshops can complement traditional conferences by removing barriers to participation and promoting diversity and inclusion in a post-pandemic world. Many of the inequities in academia that have been highlighted by COVID-19—particularly financial and caretaking responsibilities—will still be present when the pandemic subsides, and we believe virtual workshops are one way to help address those inequities.

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<sup>1</sup>McCrain, Josh. [@joshmccrain]. “are there any American politics workshops/conferences out there taking submissions?...” Twitter, August 12, 2020, <https://twitter.com/joshmccrain/status/1293548018092974080?s=20>.

<sup>2</sup>We define early career scholars to include graduate students, tenure-track assistant professors, and those in non-tenure track positions (e.g., post-docs, visiting assistant professors, etc.). We chose to focus on providing opportunities for early career scholars because they were uniquely affected by the pandemic; still at the career stage where they are building research experience and network connections, these scholars are most in need of the feedback and exposure that the pandemic took away.

<sup>3</sup>“Membership Dashboard.” *American Political Science Association*, <https://www.apsanet.org/RESOURCES/Data-on-the-Profession/Dashboard/Membership>.

<sup>4</sup>We thank Patrick Rickert, a Ph.D. Candidate in Political Science at Washington University in St. Louis, for generously hosting these trivia events.

<sup>5</sup><https://www.gather.town/>