

ON THE PROFESSION

A Survey of Political Scientists' Views on LASA

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In recent years, I have heard a growing number of complaints about LASA from fellow political scientists. When I was asked to write a short article for the *LASA Forum* asking me among other things “to reflect proactively on what LASA might do to best meet the needs and serve the interests of those in [my] discipline,” I decided to survey the members of the Latin American Political Institutions Section (LAPIS) to evaluate how satisfied they were with LASA: what they liked and did not like¹. I chose to survey a broad group of political scientists rather than simply present my own views, in large part because it matters much more what the discipline as a whole thinks of LASA than what I think on a personal level.

As we shall see, this survey found that among political scientists there is considerable disenchantment with LASA, particularly regarding what is viewed as efforts by the leadership of LASA to politicize the association and marginalize social scientists. Nevertheless, most of the survey’s respondents expressed satisfaction with the association in spite of any criticisms they might have. I would like to make clear that I did not try to influence the results of this survey in any way, and I have selected certain quotes for inclusion below, because they are expressive of particular points of view held by political scientists in the Association, not because I necessarily agree with them. Indeed, while I agree with some of the praise and criticism of LASA expressed here, I disagree with a significant amount of it as well.

The survey, which I sent to LAPIS members via its listserv, contained the following questions:

- 1) In general, are you very satisfied, satisfied, unsatisfied, or very unsatisfied with the way that LASA is run?

- 2) Please list the three things about LASA that you like the most:

- 3) Please list your three main complaints about LASA:

- 4) What do you think LASA can do to better serve political scientists?

- 5) What, if anything, should LASA do to promote inter-disciplinary dialogue and scholarship?

I received 31 responses to the survey in all, although some of the respondents did not answer all of the questions. The survey’s respondents represent only a small percentage of the total number of political scientists who are members of LASA. Moreover, the survey was not designed to achieve a representative sample. It is not clear whether the members of LAPIS in general, or those who responded to the survey in particular, are broadly representative of all political scientists who belong to LASA². Thus, it is not possible to know to what extent the survey accurately reflects the distribution of views among the Association’s political scientists. Nevertheless, the survey should at least provide some insights into how a select group of political scientists feel about the association.

As Table 1 indicates, 52 percent of the respondents stated that they were satisfied with LASA, and another seven percent of the respondents pronounced that they were very satisfied with the association³. A sizable percentage of the respondents, however, stated that they were unsatisfied (28 percent) or very unsatisfied (seven percent) with LASA. And another seven percent indicated that they were somewhere between satisfied and unsatisfied.

Half of the respondents cited the politicization of LASA as one of their main complaints about the association. This complaint was particularly widespread among people who expressed dissatisfaction with the association. One unsatisfied political scientist referred to “the ridiculous lengths to which the organization goes to make a political point that emphasizes the organization’s irrelevance and extremism.” Another argued that “a certain group is politicizing LASA. In the name of political correctness, standard scholarly criteria are being cast aside.” A third complained about “obvious ideological tendencies that the organizers think all people should share if only they were right-thinking.” Even some scholars who stated that they were satisfied with LASA complained about the politicization of the association. One satisfied political scientist, for example, wrote that the organization placed “too much emphasis on political resolutions (and yet, LASA has yet to issue a strong resolution condemning Cuba’s lack of human rights).” Another complained about the “politicization of some decisions within LASA, especially by an agenda that seems somewhat outdated and heavily focused on Cuba.” Some of the respondents also mentioned the decision to move the next LASA meeting to Montreal as an example of the politicization of the Association.

Half the respondents also complained that literature and cultural studies scholars dominated the Association, and many of these respondents maintained that this group had deliberately marginalized political scientists (and economists) from the organization. One respondent referred to the “progressive exclusion of political scientists and economists (e.g. [fewer] panels for [the] conference).” Another mentioned “the patently obvious and politicized efforts to eliminate political science and especially empirical research from the LASA program

(we are following economists toward the exit door).” This complaint was also made by some people who were generally satisfied with LASA. One satisfied scholar, for example, stated that “I sense that social science is less and less central to the organization. Economists seem to be nearly extinct there, and political scientists seem to be a rare breed these days. I LIKE that we mix it up with the humanities, especially history, but the marginalization of the social sciences (probably self-imposed) is disheartening.” Another wrote:

My main complaint, by far, is that LASA is being increasingly dominated by a subjectivist group whose methodological/philosophical positions tend to run counter to the more positivist leanings of most political scientists. Pluralism in methods is always advantageous, but I have heard from several members of the executive committee that the LASA leadership increasingly views methodological differences as a zero-sum ‘us versus them’ struggle, and that there exists a conscious policy of trying to diminish the presence of positivist social science. I am finding this growing hegemony a little stifling and find it is siphoning the resources (‘Otros Saberes’ project and the panel schedule which is according political science a diminishing role).

The respondents also had complaints about the LASA Congresses, although these were fewer in number. Approximately 34 percent of the respondents mentioned some complaint about the Congresses, but most of these criticisms came from scholars who were satisfied with LASA and the criticisms were juxtaposed with praise for certain aspects of the meetings. Some respondents complained about the absenteeism of paper givers and the limited access to the papers that are presented. One scholar, for

example, wrote that “the official deadline for turning in papers is always too early; consequently, many papers are not turned in at all. Why can’t papers be uploaded online a few days before the conference?” A few scholars complained that political scientists were not awarded enough panels and/or that the conference organizers often added additional paper givers to their panels. In addition, a variety of respondents complained about hotel prices, and the sites and dates of the meetings. A few people complained that LASA did not have enough of a presence outside of the Congresses. One scholar wrote that “Other than the Congress and LARR [and the LASA] Forum, LASA really provides little benefit to members.” Others complained about “the lack of clarity about what sections may do” and the need “to strengthen and invigorate the sections.”

The vast majority of respondents also had positive things to say about LASA, however. Most of the respondents seemed to enjoy the Congresses. Indeed, 90 percent of the respondents identified the meetings as one of their three favorite things about LASA. A number of scholars stated that they liked the interdisciplinary program, the membership, and the opportunity to network with scholars from different universities and countries. One satisfied scholar wrote that s/he liked the “high level of participation by scholars based in Latin America. [The] large number of humanities scholars is [an] interesting contrast with other (political science conferences) I attend.” Another satisfied political scientist wrote “without question the LASA Convention is at the top of the list [of the things s/he likes most about LASA], because of the incredible mix of people, intellectual content, richness and variety of the panels, usefulness in facilitating regional networking and connections, and substantive and moral concerns engaged, all with the ability also to

have fun.” Even dissatisfied scholars, by and large, had good things to say about the meeting, characterizing it as fun and praising it for “the mixture of people from different fields at the conference” or because it gave them “the opportunity to interact...with scholars from Latin America and Europe working on similar topics.”

A number of political scientists also had praise for LASA publications, particularly the *Latin American Research Review* (LARR)⁴. Indeed, 34 percent of the respondents mentioned these publications as one of the three things about LASA they like the most. One political scientist, for example, stated that “LARR has served as an excellent site for publishing research (and reading top level interdisciplinary research and book reviews) and obviously I hope the current transition will not affect that.”

The Way Forward

The survey respondents offered a variety of recommendations, most of which aimed at addressing their main complaints. Those concerned about the politicization of the organization urged LASA in the words of one scholar to “stop the political posing.” Many of these scholars recommended that LASA focus more on academic and scholarly matters and avoid expending resources on politically charged endeavors. Those who argued that the social sciences were being marginalized recommended that LASA increase the number of panels and tracks allocated to the social sciences and take other steps to encourage social scientists to participate in the Congresses. Some scholars also recommended that LASA overhaul the procedures for selecting the nominees for key LASA posts. One scholar argued that LASA should “have competitive elections. Give us a choice between a politicized slate and a more professional slate and let us choose.”

MADRID continued...

Another advocated that “corporatist representation [be] built into the governing structure such that governing council representatives came from each discipline to make sure that the interests of all groups are represented and heard.” A third scholar argued that “political scientists need their own sub-organization within LASA that proportionally controls and allocates resources.”

Those who complained about certain aspects of the annual meetings had a host of recommendations to improve them, ranging from finding cheaper and more accessible locations for the Congresses to making conference papers accessible on line and limiting the number of presenters on each panel. The respondents were quite divided about what, if anything, LASA should do to promote interdisciplinary dialogue and scholarship, however. Some scholars argued that LASA is doing quite enough already. Others suggested that LASA might encourage interdisciplinary panels or research projects or solicit more interdisciplinary articles in *LARR* or the *LASA Forum*.

In considering these recommendations, LASA should also take into account the preferences of members from the many other disciplines that make up the Association. I would therefore recommend that LASA carry out a survey of its entire membership in order to gauge the overall level of satisfaction with the Association and its policies in recent years. However, even if such a survey finds that only a minority of its members are critical of the Association and its direction, I would nevertheless recommend that LASA seek to address the sources of the disenchantment of this minority, lest they begin to leave the organization *en masse*.

Several steps might be taken to address some of the complaints of some political scientists. First, I would recommend that LASA develop a new procedure for selecting the candidates for the Executive Council (EC) and the presidency/vice presidency. This is crucial in order to allow dissident groups to choose their own candidates and to challenge the incumbent power holders more easily. The current procedure vests too much control of the process in the incumbent president by allowing him or her to select the chair of the nomination committee who, in turn, chooses the members of the nomination committee. This committee then names the candidates who stand in the elections. I would favor a system in which the LASA membership had more input into the selection of candidates, perhaps by allowing members who gather sufficient signatures to run for the EC or the presidency/vice presidency, or by having the Sections play some role in the nomination

process. It might also make sense to change the electoral system itself, by, for example, allowing more candidates to run for the LASA presidency/vice presidency in the first round and then holding a runoff between the top two finishers. Such measures might go far to restore confidence in the openness and fairness of the system.

Second, I would reinstate the Politics and Public Policy track. According to the LASA leadership, this track was eliminated in order to encourage more interdisciplinary panels. Some political scientists, however, viewed it as a move to reduce the number of political science panels at the Congress. Moreover, a number of political scientists have told me that their research does not fit easily into any of the current tracks, although there are tracks (such as the Democratization and Democratic Performance track) that deal with issues of central interest to the discipline. Reinstating the Politics and

Table 1
A Survey of Political Scientists' Views on LASA

| | NUMBER OF PEOPLE GIVING THIS RESPONSE | PERCENT OF ALL PEOPLE RESPONDING TO QUESTION* |
|---|--|--|
| Degree of Satisfaction with LASA | | |
| Very satisfied | 2 | 7% |
| Satisfied | 15 | 52% |
| Between satisfied and unsatisfied | 2 | 7% |
| Unsatisfied | 8 | 28% |
| Very unsatisfied | 2 | 7% |
| Favorite things about LASA | | |
| Congresses | 26 | 90% |
| Publications | 10 | 34% |
| Main Complaints about LASA | | |
| Politicization | 15 | 50% |
| Marginalization of social scientists | 15 | 50% |
| Organization of Congresses | 10 | 34% |

* The total number of people responding varied slightly for each question.

El incierto rumbo de LASA

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Public Policy track would be a relatively costless way to address these concerns, and might serve as an effective goodwill gesture.

The most difficult issue to address may be the issue of politicization. Whereas some members clearly want LASA to take political stands, others believe that LASA should be strictly a professional organization. Nevertheless, even on this issue a compromise might be found by limiting the organization's stances to those issues that centrally involve academic freedom and/or participation in the association. In order to find such a compromise, however, we need to have dialogue and we need to have better information on the preferences of all of LASA's members.

Endnotes

¹ I chose LAPIS both because I have been a member of the Section off and on for the last half dozen years, and because, to my knowledge, it has largest number of political scientists within LASA. LAPIS had 281 members included on its listserv at the time I carried out the survey.

² It may be that people who were dissatisfied with LASA were more likely to respond to the survey in order to voice their discontent, but it is also possible that people with critical views felt uncomfortable expressing their criticisms even though I promised that I would keep the identity of the respondents confidential.

³ One of the respondents whom I have classified here as very satisfied actually said s/he was between satisfied and very satisfied.

⁴ The author of this article (and administrator of the survey) was Associate Editor of *LARR* from mid-2004 until January 2007. It is not clear how many of the respondents knew this, but it conceivably could have affected their responses to the survey. ■

It is important to place this contribution in its proper context. Along with other political scientists, I received an invitation from LASA President Charles Hale to write a brief piece for the *Forum* on the role of interdisciplinary dialogue and scholarship in Latin American studies and the best ways by which LASA can contribute to maximize this dialogue and the quality of scholarship.

I interpret Hale's invitation as a healthy response to a growing concern among members of LASA about the gradual drift of the Association away from its founding principles and historical roots as a *professional* association to one moving increasingly toward partisanship and methodological narrowness.

Frustration with LASA seems to come primarily from political scientists. However, disenchantment is evident to me in other social science disciplines as well and in sectors of the humanities. While voices of discontent have been louder among a sizable group of members with a background of active involvement in the Association, my sense is that many members perceive some problematic trends in LASA.

Recent developments in LASA are significant because they can, potentially, alter its fundamental character. It is important to stress that these changes have not originated under the current leadership, but began at least four years ago. If the gap between the Association's leadership and part of the membership deepens, I am afraid that we will witness growing disaffection, particularly among members who have devoted significant time to LASA without seeking any personal rewards. Unfortunately, a possible outcome of this process could be a decision by some of the very members who have supported the Association for decades, and nurtured it through thick and thin to withdraw from the Association.

Therefore, I commend Hale for opening this space. These are important issues that should

be amply debated. In this spirit, let me focus on two of the most important concerns raised by some LASA members.

Politicization of the Association

A number of members have expressed their disagreement with LASA's increasing *political* engagement. This concern was primarily triggered by LASA's 2003-06 Strategic Plan, which contained several sections calling for an increased political role of the Association. A point of particular concern was the Plan's proposal "to increase *political* relations with new or emerging social actors" [emphasis added].

Indeed, an important contingent of members, based on the conversations I have had, consider that LASA has been drifting in the direction of political partisanship, a trend that threatens LASA's status as an *academic, professional* association. No one questions the right of the Association to vote and publish resolutions on pressing matters. These formal declarations, which state specific views on public policy matters, are agreed to by a vote at the business meeting. This is the accepted procedure. What some members question is a recent tendency to steer the association closer to a pressure group that advances partisan causes beyond those that deal directly with scholarship, academic freedom, and the right of inquiry.

A group of members, most of them political scientists, articulated these concerns in a letter dated May 27, 2003 to the LASA president at the time. They wrote:

"Each member of LASA has countless opportunities to become engaged politically if he or she chooses. Members can join political parties, pressure groups, and voluntary associations of many kinds to push for the sorts of political changes that they may favor, and they can join other groups to oppose changes