THE SCHOLARLY CONFERENCE: DO WE WANT DEMOCRACY AND MARKETS OR AUTHORITY AND TRADITION?

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"I definitely have a love-hate relationship with academic meetings. Maybe more than a few scholars do" (Jackson 2009: np).

"The intellectual has never felt kindly toward the market place; to him it has always been a place of vulgar men and of base motives" (Stigler 1984: 163).

The conventional political science conference is a dinosaur: large, lumbering, and increasingly ill-suited for its environment, although extinction does not appear imminent.[1] Despite modest evolution, our conferences' main attributes have not changed in decades.[2] The focal point of these conferences is the "panel", at which research papers are summarized and critiqued in front of often passive audiences.

How hidebound has the American Political Science Association's (APSA) annual research conference become since it began in 1906? By 1916, the *American Political Science Review* listed the conference's "roundtables," which were essentially panels (*APSR* 1916: 144-46). The first explicit mention of panels came 65 years ago at the 41st annual conference in 1946, and the panels were listed in the program as today by topic, chair, presenters, and paper titles (*APSR* 1946: 323-31). The current panel structure (topic, chair, presenters, paper titles, and discussants) was firmly established by 1974

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(APSA 1974).[3] Had a political scientist attended that conference at the Palmer House 47 years ago, it would have been virtually indistinguishable from an APSA conference today. It is safe to say that no living political scientist has attended an APSA conference substantially different from the existing model.

King (2006) sensibly and wittily critiques APSA's panel presentations. But, like a revival preacher, King is perhaps better at making us wish to stop sinning rather than getting us actually to stop doing so. He calls for us to change our behaviors, without paying attention to the institutional structures and incentives that lead us to behave as we do.

These structures and incentives are governed more by authority and tradition than by careful consideration of how best to create stimulating and engaging environments for teaching and learning. As a result, conventional conferences are neither as effective at promoting teaching and learning, nor as enjoyable to the participants, as they might be. They do not serve the best interests of those giving presentations, nor those attending the presentations. They also do too little to build scholarly communities.

This paper proposes the *Customized Conference* as a way to use democratic and market mechanisms to replace authority and tradition in conference design and operation. The expected result is that conferences can better serve the individual preferences of those attending, build stronger networks of researchers, and therefore increase participant satisfaction.

I begin by outlining some potential goals individuals have for attending conferences, though the central arguments do not depend on agreement regarding these goals. Next, I summarize how conventional conferences are designed and implemented in principle and in practice. I then indicate the ways that conventional conferences frustrate optimization of individual goals. Subsequently, I suggest ways to redesign conferences along democratic and market principles to improve individual satisfaction through the *Customized Conference*. Finally, I anticipate some criticisms of the *Customized Conference,* offer some responses, and provide conclusions.

GOALS FOR ATTENDING CONFERENCES

What do conference participants want to achieve by attending? The conventional conference does not itself present meaningful goals, leaving each registrant to determine what is to be gained by attending the conference. A long list of individual goals might be identified. Many of these goals have little do with the panels themselves; for example, individuals go to see old friends and make new ones, to talk with book publishers or examine their wares, to find jobs or to recruit faculty, to tour the city, and so forth.

It seems reasonable to suggest that conference participants also have scholarly goals: to improve the quality of their research through discussing it with others, by developing relationships with scholars having similar interests, and by disseminating their work. These goals might be achieved when scholars present their own studies or when they learn about the investigations that other participants are conducting. The conventional conference is ill-suited to achieving these goals, however, as scholars learn less than they

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might in giving presentations or in hearing them, and because opportunities to network, at least regarding the papers that are presented, are more accidental than intentional.

The central arguments of this paper do not depend on these specific scholarly goals, however. Indeed, one of the blessings of the democratic and market reform principles suggested here is that goals need not be specified: each individual is free within the rules to determine which goals are worth pursuing.

CONVENTIONAL CONFERENCE FORMAT: PRINCIPLE AND PRACTICE

The typical scholarly conference is designed and run according to long-standing norms and behaviors that emphasize authority and tradition. Here I first present the basic outline of the process before adding in practical details and complications, using the APSA annual conference as my reference point.

Conventional Conferences in Principle

Many months before the conference is held, the relevant organization announces a call for papers. Scholars seeking to participate in the conference submit a brief abstract outlining the topic, goals, and methods of the paper they propose to write. These proposals are forwarded to the relevant authorities (the "Section Heads" (SH), generally chosen by the conference organizers for their expertise on a substantive topic or research method), who review the proposals and package them into coherent panels (unless the panel is submitted as a package) comprising three to five individual papers. Depending on the conference, more proposals are submitted than can be scheduled for presentation, so the SH determines which proposals are accepted and which are rejected; depending on

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the conference, proposals not accepted for a panel are often included in poster sessions. The SH also selects individuals to serve as panel chairs and discussants. The conference planners determine the panel schedule, with panels scheduled at a specific time for a set period running more-or-less consecutively for the length of the conference.

Over the subsequent months, those whose proposals are selected research and write their papers. Finished papers are then uploaded to the conference website and/or are distributed to other panelists (especially the chair and the discussants). Once at the conference, the scholars give 10-20 minute presentations of their research at their panel, with the discussant also giving 10-20 minutes of comments on the individual papers. A question and answer session with the audience concludes the panel. Individuals decide which panels to attend, based on their personal preferences, by reviewing the conference program.

Conventional Conferences in Practice

The stylized version of the conference presented above is of course more complicated -- and troublesome -- in practice. My impressions are based primarily on my attendance at some 50 such conferences since the mid-1980s. To check the validity of these impressions, I hired eight Ph.D. students (the "research team") to collect data at the 2008 APSA annual conference. Each student was paid $10 to fill out a one page questionnaire from every panel attended.[4] They were allowed to attend as many panels as they wished, and they could select any panels to attend. This produced a non-random sample of data on 127 papers from 33 panels.[5]

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The sample was deliberately non-random for two main reasons. First, I wanted to obtain information concerning *why* they wanted to attend each panel. Second, by allowing them to choose to attend as many panels I wanted to attend, I was interested in learning whether modest financial incentives influenced how many panels each student attended. The data are purely descriptive and no hypothesis tests were conducted. I have no particular reason to suspect that the data collected are unrepresentative of the panels in general.

Scholars have reasonably strong incentives to give presentations at these conferences. On the one hand, presentations bolster *curriculum vitae* and scholarly prestige, and potentially contribute to the quality of their research. On the other, funding to attend the conferences may be contingent on the scholar making a presentation. But because proposals must be submitted many months (in the case of the APSA, about ten) before the paper is actually presented, the proposals often represent aspirations for research that hopefully will be completed by the time of the conference.[6] Given the normal path of research, however, some substantial proportion of the final papers are considerably different than the ones proposed. Still other scholars find that they cannot complete the papers, or attend the conference, and drop out.

Now consider the actual tasks the SH faces when assembling the panels.[7] The SH receives numerous individual proposals to review, as well as a few panels submitted as an entire package. The SH is given a specific number of panels to create. Doing so is a chore: the SH is not compensated and receives modest recognition. As time is a scarce resource, the SH is understandably tempted to create the panels as expeditiously as

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possible, and can use several short-cuts to do this. Accepting pre-packaged panels is a clear enticement, as this requires little work.[8] Given the diverse character of the individual proposals, it is perhaps easiest to bundle them according to easily identified attributes, typically the substantive topic (say, "congressional committees") rather than more abstract theoretical concerns (e.g., "process tracing"). Strong individual proposals that do not easily fit together with others are a challenge; they can either be rejected, thrown together in panels according to vaguely connected themes (e.g., "cross-cutting topics in public policy"), or consigned to a poster session.

Registrants choose which panels to attend by either flipping through the printed program or searching the online one. As many panels are held at the same time, registrants frequently cannot attend all the panels that they wish to visit. Though it is possible to attend a panel to hear a single paper of interest, and then move to another panel to hear another paper, there is no guarantee that the presentations will follow the order they are listed in the program as the panel chair has the discretion to rearrange the presentations in any way the chair sees fit and, at any rate, the papers are not themselves given at any specified time.[9]

Just before the panel's scheduled starting time, the presenters enter, greet each other -- often for the first time -- and then sit at the head table. The audience filters in and takes seats. The chair convenes the panel, often by giving some context, some instructions, and introductions.[10] The presenters often have been given little or no guidance about what to emphasize in their presentations; as a result, most presenters simply spend about 15 minutes summarizing their papers.[11] After the papers have been presented, the

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discussants offer comments. These comments at times are integrative or synthetic; often, the discussant provides paper-by-paper critiques.[12] After the discussant finishes, the rest of the session is spent on Q&A and discussion. When the panel adjourns, some members of the audience will speak in small groups with the authors, while the others leave.

Panels vary widely in their attendance. Though some panels are well-attended, it is not unheard of for the panelists to outnumber the audience. Typical registrants, meanwhile, attend panels rather infrequently. The APSA reports that the "mean adjusted attendance" for each panel at its 2005 conference was 26 persons.[13] This might sound quite satisfactory – an audience "small enough for interaction but big enough to disseminate the research (Anonymous Reviewer 2010)" -- but considers what it means. In 2006 the APSA conference hosted approximately 730 panels and 7000 participants (APSA 2006). If the mean attendance remained the same as for 2005, this implies that each participant attended about 2.7 panels – or less than 20 percent of the 14 panel sessions that were offered. [14] In 2008, the graduate students whom I *paid* to go to panels attended an average of only four panels. This hardly suggests that attending panels is a high priority for conference participants.

PROBLEMS WITH THE CONVENTIONAL CONFERENCE

The principles of the conventional conference diverge substantially from the actual practices, and not to the benefit of the conference.

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Problems with Panel Design

In principle, panels are designed to be coherent; in practice, they too often are not. Part of the problem stems from the way the panels are assembled, conditional on the incentives and resource-constraints facing SH. Moreover, given the normal path of research, a substantial proportion of the final papers are considerably different than the ones proposed, further weakening the already tenuous coherence of the panel. True panel coherence seems a rare commodity.

Even in principle it is not clear how coherent panels will be, or how sensible it is to accept or reject proposals based on their ability to form coherent panels. Consider that proposals vary along three dimensions: substance, theoretical approach, and methods, and that each proposal is equally competent.[15] Now assume that each dimension has three possible attributes (denoted by 1, 2, and 3). Assume further that five proposals have been submitted, and that only three can be accepted, and that the panels are composed based on the similarity of attributes. The SH thus has the following information (Table 1).

[Table 1 about here.]

Which possible panels are most coherent, and which papers should be accepted? If decisions are based on substance (Panel 1), then proposals 1, 4, and 5 would be accepted (accepted papers in **bold**); if the theoretical approach dominates the choice (Panel 2), then proposals 2, 3 and 4 would be accepted; if methods are deemed the cohering factor (Panel 3), then proposal 1, 2 and 3 would be accepted. It is not obvious that one selection criteria should be favored over the others, although I believe that substance typically

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controls; that Panel 1 is any more – or any less – coherent than Panels 2 or 3; or that any paper in particular is more deserving or being accepted or rejected than the other papers. Though each panel might be justified, the decision is largely arbitrary.

There is an additional problem with panel design. The SH share a dirty little secret: they have virtually unfettered discretion in choosing papers and assembling panels. When administrative officials such as the SH have such discretion, one should surmise that it will not always be used neutrally. I am not suggesting that SH use their discretion capriciously (though I do seem to recall that some of my proposals may have received kinder treatment from friends who were SH), but it can nonetheless be abused as the SH attempt to construct panels expeditiously: scholars from prestigious universities may be privileged over those with lower reputations; friends may be preferred over strangers; favored topics may gain priority over those less well-liked. At any rate, those whose papers are rejected may reasonably ask "Why mine?" Note, also, that the possibilities that SH will misuse, even if inadvertently, their discretion – or be perceived to be doing so – increase as the competitiveness of the application process increases. The scarcer the resource held by administrative officials, and the greater the time pressures on the officials, the greater the risks and inducements for abuse.

Problems with Panel Operation

Even when panels are well-designed in principle, they are commonly unsatisfactory in practice. Two problems are especially worth noting. First, the quality of papers varies dramatically. Some are more-or-less finished products, suitable for submission to scholarly journals. Other papers are clearly works in progress. Yet others are, literally,

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pointless: no research questions are asked, no hypotheses are tested, no clear themes are developed. Of the 127 papers my research team heard at the 2008 APSA conference, 65 (51 percent) were judged to be essentially finished papers, 45 (35 percent) were fairly well-developed works in progress, 10 (8 percent) were in very preliminary stages, and 7 (6 percent) were judged to be "unclear in questions, themes, and methods".

The diversity in paper quality is a problem for a couple of reasons. From the perspective of the presenters, their needs are also diverse. For those with finished papers, a fairly standard presentation might best serve their interests in publicizing their findings. But for the less well-developed papers, what the author might need is not so much the chance to present the work as to *discuss* it. Conventional panels are ill-equipped to do this, as the discussion part of the panel might best be labeled as a "residual", taking up whatever time remains after the formal presentations.[16] Most presenters receive few questions. Of the 33 APSA panels assessed, the typical paper received less than *one* question from the audience; almost 40 percent of the presenters *received no questions at all*, and another 30 percent received only a single question. The diverse quality also can frustrate the audience, which may well want more time to learn about the polished papers and less time to listen to the more remedial ones. Yet the conventional format does little to meet the predilections of either presenters or audience.

Second, the quality of the presentations also varies dramatically. There are undoubtedly reasons for this. Some are exogenous. Presenters differ in their talents, skills and style: some are better, and others are worse. But other reasons are endogenous. As King (2006) has pointed out, precious few incentives exist to encourage high quality

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presentations. Conference funding might be contingent upon giving a presentation, but not a stimulating one. Awards are routinely given to "best papers", but no such recognition is given to "best presentations". It often appears that presenters spend countless hours writing their papers, and minimal time preparing their presentations, and this mismatch is evident. The lack of incentives to produce high quality presentations does a disservice to the presenters and also the audience. What compelling reason can be given for obligating the audience to sit through, say, two or three desultory presentations to hear one compelling one?

A couple other features of the typical panel are worth nothing. First, the audience has limited, if any, contact with the presenters before the panel. Some attendees will download the papers but most probably do not. Second, interaction among the members of the audience is quite limited. The audience members have no interaction with each other before the panel as it is impossible to know who will attend, or is interested in attending, except through serendipity. Audience members also have very limited exchanges with each other during the panel, as whatever dialogue that occurs takes place between presenters and the audience. There are also no established mechanisms for building relationships between participants after the session except for the informal sharing of business cards at the panel itself. Panels at the conventional conference are thus ill-suited for building communities of scholars. The presenters walk in, present, and walk out; the audience sits down, listens, and leaves.

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Mismatch between Participant Preferences and Outcomes

Conferees must make choices about which panels to attend, and these choices are difficult. They must choose between various panels, with greater or lesser attractiveness, at any particular time. It frequently is the case that individuals would prefer to hear one paper on a specific panel, and another paper at a different panel scheduled at the same time. The problem is that the panels are "bundles" of goods, while the participants want single components of the bundle. In answering the question "How many papers [on the panel] were you especially interested in hearing?" the modal answer from my research team was "one" (from 16 of the 30 valid responses). For example, assume that Panel 1 has papers A, B, and C, while Panel 2 has papers D, E, and F. Although the registrant only wants to hear the presentations for papers B and F, she is induced by the structure of the program to attend either Panel 1 or Panel 2 for the reasons specified above.

This panel structure has two unfortunate consequences. It frustrates the wishes of the participant, as she is unnecessarily forced to listen to presentations of little interest while forgoing those of greater attraction. The attendee consequently is commonly compelled by the structure of the program to hear two or three presentations she does not wish to hear in order to hear the one that she does, and she is forced to miss other presentations she values.[17] It also harms the presenters as, presumably, the registrant would have more useful comments on the presentation that is wished for but missed than the presentations that are unwanted but heard.

***THE CUSTOMIZED CONFERENCE*: A DEMOCRATIC AND MARKET-BASED APPROACH TO CONFERENCE DESIGN**

The conventional conference is governed by tradition and designed by authority. Yet democracies and markets are typically better equipped to meet individuals' preferences and needs and, at the same time, to build communities of common interests. Here I suggest ways to improve conferences – to customize them -- by replacing tradition and authority with democracy and markets. The details are less important than the principles, as each conference should also customize itself to meet the particular needs of its participants, though I suggest some details to illustrate the general principles.

The *Customized Conference* promotes two main principles:

1. The conference should seek to meet the individual preferences of the participants;

2. The conference should seek to build scholarly communities.

These two principles are complementary. Scholars – like individuals elsewhere – want what they want, and these preferences can and should be respected when possible. But not all individual preferences are easily met through individual action; to the extent that scholars want to solve collective action problems in building scholarly communities, the conference can and should help them do this. As solving the collective action problem of building communities can be difficult for individuals to do, the conference can assist them.

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Meeting Individual Preferences

The *Customized Conference* begins by seeking to meet the preferences of those who want to give presentations as well as those who want to learn from them. An important step is to eliminate the panels, privileged by tradition and established by authority, and to replace them with individualized "Teaching" and "Learning" presentations. Whatever merits conventional panels might have in principle, and however accustomed scholars are to them, in practice they do too little to meet the inclinations and interests of presenters and participants.

Individualized Teaching and Learning Presentations

Research is a process, with an often ill-defined beginning (the research question or puzzle or inspiration) and a concrete end (the publication). The closer one is to the beginning, the more valuable it is for the scholar to discuss the proposed research and to learn from others (call this the "Learning" dimension); the closer the project is to completion, the more beneficial it is for the scholar to impart the lessons learned (call this the "Teaching" dimension). While scholars at every stage of the research process can benefit from both teaching and learning, in the initial stages of the research the Learning dimension is more important; in the final stages, the Teaching dimension dominates.[18]

The conventional conference does not recognize this distinction, as it lumps together both works in progress and completed papers on the same panel. The *Customized Conference,* in contrast, recognizes that scholars generally have distinct interests in teaching and learning, and accordingly features two distinct presentation types. The "Teaching"

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presentation features a single, more formal talk on a specific project near or at completion. The "Learning" presentation offers the opportunity for scholars to discuss informally their works in progress with interested parties. The scholars could determine which type of presentation best serves their needs and interests.

The vision of the Teaching presentation is that scholars with finished research projects can explicate their work (theories, methods, data, findings) at somewhat greater length than at conventional conferences.[19] For example, Teaching presentations could last 20 minutes, with a 10 minute period either for Q&A or for a discussant's comments. The Teaching presentations would be scheduled at specific times, with the presentations running continuously throughout the day, with a 15 minute break between sessions to allow movement between sessions. If the presentations begin at 8 a.m. and continue to 5.45 p.m. (the current APSA schedule for panel presentations) this would allow for thirteen presentations each day, or about 45 over the time normally scheduled for entire APSA conference.[20]

Each Teaching presentation would feature a single research project. This has advantages for both presenters and those attending the presentation. From the presenter's perspective, the research can be presented in greater detail to those who are specifically interested in the project rather than to an audience that might be attending the panel to hear the other papers. Those in the audience, meanwhile, would not have to sit through other less relevant presentations in order to hear the one they came to hear. As a result, we might expect both presenters and audience to be more focused on, and more engaged in, the individual project being presented. Given that participants at a typical APSA

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conference hear about 10 or so paper presentations (2.7 panels times 3 or 4 papers per panel), this format would easily allow scholars to hear at least as many papers as they currently do, and to attend the presentations that are of the greatest interest to them.

The concept behind the Learning presentations is that scholars with works in progress would not give formal presentations, but instead would be available for more informal one-on-one conversations with those interested in the research. The format might be similar to the poster sessions of the conventional conference, but without the stigma. Learning presentations could be given in several ways, with the specifics modified to suit conference constraints. The presentations could be scheduled for specific time slots or they might be on continuous display, with the presenters indicating the hours they will be available for conversation.[21]

Learning presentations can be beneficial both to presenters and interested parties. The presentation format enhances the ability of scholars to engage in the types of conversation that are especially helpful at the beginning of the research process. It also allows those interested in the research to connect directly with the author(s) to share ideas, strategies, concerns and so forth.

Individualizing the Application and Acceptance Process

The initial step in the *Customized Conference* would remain essentially the same as for the conventional conference. Conference organizers would advertise a call for proposals, and scholars would be encouraged to submit abstracts to the relevant subfields. After this point, the *Customized Conference* diverges substantially.

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First, the *Customized Conference* calls for scholars to submit proposals for either Teaching or Learning presentations, based on the scholars' needs and preferences. The proposals could resemble conventional ones, with the key difference being that proposals would contain certain elements that would be entered in the conference's database. Possible data elements might be the authors' names, the relevant subfield, the presentation title, the primary research question, and other keywords that that identify the main features of the paper; these key words might be substantive (e.g. "legislative committees"), methodological (e.g., "Monte Carlo simulations") or theoretical (e.g., "informational asymmetries").

The next step in particular distinguishes the *Customized Conference* from the conventional one. The Teaching proposals would not be allocated to authorities who determine whether to accept or reject the proposal and who then assemble the papers into panels. Instead, the Teaching proposals would all posted on the conference website where they can be searchable by author, subfield, question and other keywords. Individuals interested in attending the conference would search the abstracts by whatever criteria they deem most relevant to their scholarly interests. Potential registrants would indicate a willingness to hear a Teaching presentation by "voting" for it by clicking on the appropriate box. When a scholar votes to hear a Teaching presentation, the vote registers the scholar's name, email address, and possibly other information, such as the scholar's institution, website, and so forth. Voting could be conducted over some predetermined period of time – say, the normal period between when proposals are submitted and the SH make their decisions.

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The votes cast on the Teaching presentations would be used, first, to determine which presentations are accepted for the program and, second, to determine presentation scheduling. Presentations would be selected, possibly by categories such as subfield or theme, according to the number of votes received, in descending order, until all scheduled slots are filled. The presentation schedule would be determined by vote totals: the presentation with the most votes by category would receive the "best" time slot, presumably, in the very middle of the conference, when the most people are attending; the runner-up the second best slot, and so forth, until all slots are scheduled. Those with the fewest votes would receive the least favorable slots, either at the beginning or end of the conference or at the same time as the most popular presentations.

Allowing scholars to vote for Teaching presentations carries substantial advantages over having authorities select them. First, it allows the community of scholars – rather than individuals in authority – to determine which presentations make the program. Second, it schedules the program to best match the demand for each presentation. Third, it encourages presenters to write proposals that will be most attractive to the scholarly community, while at the same time it generates interest among this community because it now has the power to make programmatic decisions.

Allowing scholars to vote raises two important questions: Who can vote? How many votes should each person have? Both questions deserve further scrutiny, but here I offer some preliminary observations. Suffrage should be as broad as possible, but eligibility should be limited to those who are likely actually to attend the conference. Perhaps all duly enrolled members of the relevant association should be allowed to vote, though this

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might disproportionately exclude graduate students (or, maybe, encourage them to join the association!). Alternately, a small fee (say, $10) could be charged for the privilege of voting, with this amount deducted from the conference fees should the voter actually register.[22]

The number of votes each person has might initially be set arbitrarily with, for example, each person having the number of votes equal to the average number of papers heard at the conference the previous year (for APSA, about ten or so).[23] Over time, however, the number of votes that a person has could also be customized in ways that enhance conference design. For example, those who actually attended the conference one year might have more votes the following year than those who did not; in this way, the preferences of "active" scholars would carry more weight than those of inactive scholars. In addition, those who attended the previous conference might "earn" votes based on the number of presentations they attended; scholars attending fewer presentations would have fewer votes than those who attended more. Again, this would allow the most interested and active scholars to have greater weight in program construction.[24] Voting rules could also establish whether each vote must be cast on a different proposal, or whether voters could allocate their votes in any way they choose. For example, if a voter *really* wanted a proposal to appear in a favorable slot in the program, all votes could be cast on that specific proposal; such a voting scheme would thus register the intensity of preferences.

Learning presentations could also be selected through a similar process, though this is not necessary. A preferable alternative would allow *all* Learning presentations to appear on the program, limited only by logistical concerns. In this way, all scholars wanting to

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discuss their research with others would have the opportunity to do so and, not incidentally, appear on the program to help them qualify for institutional reimbursement. Conference participants could still indicate which Learning presentations they want to be involved in by clicking on the relevant abstracts.

The *Customized Conference* is individualized in yet other ways. For example, rather than receiving the entire conference program when checking into the conference, each individual could be given a personalized program giving the time and location of the Teaching presentations they voted for and the Learning presentations they expressed interest in.[25] When the papers on which the Teaching presentations are finished and posted on the conference website, they could be automatically distributed to all who expressed interest in attending the presentation. And so forth.

Building Scholarly Communities

The *Customized Conference* is superior to the conventional conference in enhancing individual welfare. It also can be better at building scholarly communities which, not incidentally, can also improve individual well-being.

In the conventional conference, research "communities" -- that is, those with a common interest in a certain line of study -- are built in an *ad hoc* and inefficient way. Individuals attend panels and introduce themselves to others in the audience and the presenters. Individuals download papers and perhaps contact the authors. Whether or not a community is built depends entirely on the initiative of otherwise isolated individuals.

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The *Customized Conference*, in contrast, actively seeks to build scholarly communities by bringing together individuals with common interests. It does so in three ways.

First, recall that when individuals vote for Teaching proposals, or identify Learning proposals of interest, certain information (name, email address, and so forth) is captured through the voting software.[26] These data can be used to generate proposal-specific lists of interested parties, which can be distributed to the author and those who supported the proposal, so that each person on the list can easily contact those interested in that particular project.

Second, the voting can potentially create "networks" of similar papers or papers with similar audiences. This is similar to what happens when a person buys a book on, say, Amazon. When you search for a book title there, other related books – those bought by persons who also bought the title you were searching – are listed. In the same way, in the *Customized Conference* you could click on any Teaching proposal and see what other people who voted for that proposal also selected. Alternately, you could click on any person's name who voted for a Teaching presentation to see what else they voted for. These empirical relationships can be used to build personal ones, as scholars can see who else is interested in the topics they are interested in, or what other topics similar scholars are intrigued by. Again, such techniques allow individuals to come together in communities.

A third way the *Customized Conference* can help build scholarly communities is through the physical arrangement of the Learning presentations. The presentations can be located so that the "most similar" presentations, as identified by key words or participant

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interests, are in close proximity to each other. In this way, the Learning presenters would have greater ability to talk not just with those who visit their presentations, but with other presenters who are close by.

These ideas for personalizing the conference and at the same time building scholarly communities hardly exhaust the possibilities, but the message is clear: the *Customized Conference* is superior to the conventional conference at both tasks.[27]

A RESPONSE TO THE CRITIQUES OF THE *CUSTOMIZED CONFERENCE*

The ideas presented above would revolutionize the scholarly conference. The *Customized Conference*, based on democratic and market principles, is not a panacea. As with any revolution, opposition is certain to exist. Here I anticipate possible criticisms and offer responses.

Popularity, Not Merit

The proposal to select Teaching presentations through democratic processes, rather than by authoritarian ones, can be criticized as turning conferences into popularity contests. This critique merits a couple responses.

The first response is the classic liberal one: on what grounds are the authorities more competent to decide what should be heard than the people themselves?[28] Do the SH have special skills that distinguish them from other political scientists, placing them in a better position than you or I to decide what presentations we should hear? Unless compelling theoretical and practical cases are offered as to why authorities are superior to individuals in determining what is on the program – and, frankly, I cannot think of any – then it

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seems odd, to say the least, that political scientists would abdicate this opportunity for expanded democracy.[29]

A second response is this: in practice, the panels are already popularity contests. Some panels have large audiences; others, none at all. Participants attend the panels that serve their interests, and avoid those that do not. This proposal simply recognizes this fact, and indeed gives individuals greater capacity to pursue their own interests.

Style, not Substance

Another criticism, related to the first, is that selecting Teaching presentations through voting will promote style over substance. Hot topics or sexy titles will be favored over the more obscure or prosaic.

There is some truth to this critique, but it is not fatal. Conventional programs already favor hot topics, as the number of panels allotted to the subfields is determined by the average (weighted) attendance at the subfields' panels in the previous year: higher attendance yields more panels. Presumably, attendance is higher at panels that are considered "hot". Section Heads – if they wish to increase the number of panels allocated to their section, which all deem a favorable outcome – thus have incentives to make the panels they create as hot as possible. Democratic selection shifts programmatic power from the SH who must anticipate what their constituents want to the voters who actually know their own preferences.

Moreover, topics need not be sizzling to be on the *Customized Conference's* program. Remember, a proposed Teaching presentation does not have to "win" the election to be

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selected; it only has to receive some, perhaps minimal, number of votes. Any presentation that fails to obtain sufficient support is not merely "not hot" – it is downright cold. What persuasive reasons exist for accepting a presentation that virtually no one wants to hear?

Uniformity, Not Diversity

A third possible critique of the personalized conference is that the format will induce participants to gravitate to "acceptable" topics (i.e., those likely to garner votes), and that this will increase the uniformity of the proposals.

Though this might be possible, I suspect the exact opposite will occur: the personalized conference favors diversity. The logic is this. In the conventional conference, quirky proposals – those that the SH cannot easily package with other, similar proposals -- have a higher risk of being rejected than the more conventional ones. For the SH reviewing the proposal, the questions are not just "Is this proposal good?" but also "What do I do with it?" If the voters decide which proposals are accepted, the quirky one does not have to fit in with the research of others; it merely needs to attract an audience of intrigued scholars.

The Rich Get Richer

Selecting Teaching presentations through voting will have predictable distributional consequences. In short: prestigious scholars, or popular topics will be more likely to be selected to give Teaching presentations than less prominent scholars or those working on less popular topics.

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Two rejoinders might be offered. One is: so what? In market economies it is assumed that voluntary transactions will lead to unequal, though not necessarily inequitable, outcomes.[30] In democracies, it is a given that those with more votes win elections, and those with fewer lose them; if the rules are clear and fair, these unequal outcomes are perfectly acceptable. That the process produces unequal allocations is not itself damning – especially when the alternative (the conventional conference, based on authority and tradition) has its own inequitable features which already may favor prestigious institutions and individuals.

An alternative view recognizes concern about distributional consequences, but considers how institutional rules (rather than arbitrary authority) can be established to mitigate the allocational problems of markets and democracies. This can be done here as well. It is not essential here to delineate precisely the allocational rules to reduce inequalities, but a few possibilities can be illustrated. One is that voting rules could provide an extra boost to graduate students, participants from universities that are not highly ranked, and so forth.[31] Alternately, voting could be done in "tiers", with proposals separated into different categories for tenured professors (or professors at major research universities), graduate students, etc.[32] The trick is not to subvert democracy, but to improve it.

Democratic and market systems are also superior to traditional and authoritarian ones because they enhance the prospects of the poor *becoming* rich. One key reason for this is that individuals (entrepreneurs, politicians, and others) have incentives to *improve* their performance. Remember that, in the conventional conference, there are no rewards for effective presentations or penalties for substandard ones. A strong (or weak) presentation

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at one conventional conference has *zero* impact on the prospect of having the next proposal accepted by the conference planners. But under the *Customized Conference* format, the presentation quality *can* make a difference. If a presenter gives a dynamic talk, then that person's proposal is more likely to receive votes sufficient to appear on the program at the next conference. Mobility works both ways, however: if a talk is dispiriting, the presenter's prospects for appearing in subsequent conferences diminish.

At any rate, the *Customized Conference* has yet another advantage over the conventional conference. If the rules for presentation selection and scheduling are posted in advance, as they must be for the conference to work, the processes by which the rich get richer will be highly transparent: all scholars will be able to see who, how, and why benefits from the market and democratic processes.

Scholars Prefer Presentations, Not Posters

For conventional conferences, this is probably true.[33] To the extent this is true, it is probably due to the weight of tradition and the fact that authorities largely determine who gives papers and who gives posters ("I'm sorry to inform you that your paper proposal was not accepted, but you may present at a poster session.") This perception is probably reinforced through cultural norms that give the signal that "real scholars" give panel presentations, while the posters are merely a sympathy prize for the less fortunate.

At the *Customized Conference*, scholars may still prefer to give Teaching presentations and, if there is sufficient demand to hear the paper, they will be chosen to do so. But whether the applicant gives a presentation or a poster is no longer determined by

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authorities: applicants can *themselves* choose which they would rather do. The choice, moreover, can depend on the needs of the applicant: Do I want to present a finished product, or do I need to discuss this work at greater length with my peers?

It is still possible that Teaching presentations will be viewed as more having higher standing than Learning presentations – after all, democracies and markets do not eliminate status distinctions. Scholars may thus face choices (Do I go for a "status" Teaching presentation, even if it is less helpful for my research? Do I do what is best for my research by hosting a Learning presentation, even though this brings less cachet?), but a core element of the *Customized Conference* is that the scholars themselves are best-qualified to make those decisions.

The brilliance of markets, furthermore, is that they can be self-equilibrating. Assume for example that, initially, almost everyone (say, 90 percent) wishes to give a Teaching presentation and almost no one (10 percent) prefers to give a Learning presentation. The limited number of time slots ensures that many Teaching presentations will be rejected; on the other hand, the few giving Learning presentations might find them exceptionally helpful given the limited competition they face for attention. We might assume, then, that over time the marginal (in the economic sense) scholar will switch away from submitting a Teaching proposal, so that an equilibrium amount of both proposal types are submitted.

Presentations are Necessary for Professional Development

Conventional conference presentations help develop skills for precisely one task: presenting at conventional conferences. "Job talks" are substantially longer and more detailed. Classroom teaching is different in content, style, and goals. The only time that scholars give conference-style presentations is at scholarly conferences.

Unfortunately, conventional conferences do not usually even help presenters develop their skills, except in the most *ad hoc* ways. The chair often provides little or no guidance about what should be presented, or how the presenter should frame the presentation. The discussant most often focuses on the paper that is presented, not the presentation itself. Whatever presentation skills are learned at conferences are more accidental than intentional.

What *would* benefit scholars – especially the most junior ones, who presumably have the most to learn – is the chance to *discuss* their research. Conventional panels are poorly designed for doing this. The *Customized Conference*, in contrast, does provide real opportunities for scholars to improve their research. Teaching presentations create incentives for superior presentations, as such presentations are more likely to appear on the program. Learning presentations allow the presenter actually to engage with interested parties.

Voting Encourages Self Promotion

Yes, voting does this: it is called campaigning (or advertising). This is normally considered a virtue of democracies and markets, where those seeking office or profits are

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allowed – indeed, encouraged – to promote their visions or their products. It seems perverse for scholars to proclaim the benefits of these activities for politicians and the public, or firms and consumers, and then to disclaim them for their own work. To be sure, limits are placed on the ways that candidates can campaign, or that firms can market their goods, but the limits are designed to improve campaigns, not to eliminate them. The same principles can be put to work here: rules could be created to prevent "false advertising" or to reduce "market power". These rules could serve to improve the forms that self promotion take, without eliminating the benefits that come from it.

Voting Turnout Will Be Too Low

Will scholars actually scan the potentially thousands of Teaching proposals that are submitted in order to determine which ones are selected for presentation? Possibly not, but this does not seem that this a principled argument against democracy. If anything, potentially low voter turnout should encourage us to think of ways to increase voting, not to restrict it.

Still: voting turnout is unlikely to be low, for a couple of reasons. First, in one sense conference participants already "vote" – they must scan the often lengthy conference programs to determine which panels they will attend. The proposed voting scheme simply encourages them to do this before the program is printed, rather than afterward. Second, and more importantly, conference participants will now have more reason to review the proposals: their votes will matter. As the participants determine what is on the program, they have even more incentive to scan the proposals – and vote – than they do to scan the conventional program. Finally, because Teaching proposals contain the data

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elements necessary for voters to make reasonably quick and informed choices based on their interests. After all, one need not survey all the shelves in the library to locate the desired books, although one is certainly free to do so.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Any student of bureaucratic politics would anticipate that this proposal faces institutional opposition from at least three sources.

First, organizations are difficult to change, as the members are accustomed to and comfortable with existing routines. Moving from conventional conferences to democratic and market-based ones would disrupt these routines, and the consequences of the disruption are uncertain.

Such resistance is understandable and indeed appropriate. Although I hope I have provided solid rationales for change, modesty regarding the benefits and recognition of the potential pitfalls to sweeping changes is warranted. Consequently, it may be most beneficial to experiment with the proposed format at a smaller, perhaps state, conference. It would be worth seeking support from the National Science Foundation, or another sponsor, to fund an experimental *Customized Conference*.

Second, we might expect that those with power and discretion (especially conference chairs and SH) will be reluctant to cede both to the vicissitudes of democracy and the market. We *might* expect this because few benefits, and many costs, accrue to conference planners. Perhaps, if given the possibility of producing superior conferences

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at lower personal costs, they will instead jump at the chance. To better understand their concerns, it might be worth surveying former conference planners.

Third, we can anticipate that those who believe the new format will disadvantage them – especially those who prefer giving Teaching presentations, but who fear that their presentation will not receive enough votes to be accepted – will oppose the new format. This opposition is both legitimate and unsurprising, as scholars recognize the merit and importance of self interest in political decision-making. Imposing these changes by fiat seems ill-advised, to say the least. But to the extent that political scientists favor democratic and market processes over the blunt force of authority or the weight of tradition, surely they (and I) would welcome the call to make the decision about conference formats in the appropriate way: by using democratic principles and letting the relevant parties vote, or by using market principles to offer the *Customized Conference* in competition with the conventional conference.

ENDNOTES

[1] By "conventional" conference I mean the general political science conferences such as the American Political Science Association annual research conference and other regional conferences.

[2] My experience is primarily with political science conferences, but other conferences in the social sciences and humanities appear to share the same forms. For other conference programs, see American Economics Association (AEA 2006), American Historical Association (AHA 2006), American Sociological Association (ASA 2006), Modern Language Association (MLA 2006) and others.

[3] The APSA office does not have the *APSR* between 1966 and 1973, and the bound editions of the *APSR* do not contain the annual research program in the preceding years, nor were they otherwise available at the APSA office.

[4] The questionnaire as well as a list of the students collecting the data are available from the author on request. The graduate students were from the international relations, comparative, and American subfields, but political theory was not represented.

[5] Observational data were also collected on the behaviors of the chairs, discussants, and audience. As not all questionnaires were entirely completed, information on some panels was incomplete.

[6] One clear advantage of proposing papers well in advance is that it is a "deadline forcing" experience imposing an implicit contract on the proposer: If my proposal is accepted, I must actually write the paper

by a certain date. The contract lacks a strong enforcement mechanism, however: those who fail to meet it pay no penalty other than the notice of their peers.

[7] I have been the SH for two conference, but I expect that my experience is fairly typical. For some similar reflections, see Eisinger (1999).

[8] Eisinger (1999: 9) indicates that pre-packaged panels had a higher acceptance rate than individual papers. The chair of the Comparative Democratization section has urged members to submit complete panel proposals to raise their prospects for acceptance (Comparative Democratization 2005).

[9] For example, at one panel the first paper might not begin until 10 minutes after the scheduled starting time, and the presenter might speak for 20 minutes, so that the second paper is presented at 30 minutes after the starting time. At another panel, the first paper may begin on time and end expeditiously, so that the second paper begins 15 minutes after the starting time.

[10] For the 29 panels for which the chair's performance was assessed, ten chairs provided context, instructions and introductions; sixteen only gave some combination of instructions and introductions, and three offered only context or instructions or introductions.

[11] Good chairs *do* provide good guidance. My experience has been that "little or no guidance" is far more common than "good guidance," although I do not have data to support this claim.

[12] Of the 26 APSA panels for which discussant data were reported, twelve discussants offered context and detailed comments, nine gave only comments on the papers, and five provided only synthetic comments.

[13] Personal correspondence from the APSA office (2006).

[14] Many participants are not there for the entire conference, so will attend a higher proportion of the panels for the time at which they are at the conference. Others, of course, attend multiple panels during a single panel session, so in principle could attend more than 14 panels. Still, it is not unreasonable to think that, if attending panels was a high priority, participants would extend their stay at the conference.

[15] These are only three of the many possible dimensions that might be used to evaluate paper proposals. For a discussion of the various dimensions considered by political scientists, see for example Almond (1988).

[16] Of the 33 APSA panels assessed in 2008, the mean time for questions was 17 minutes.

[17] To be sure, the participant typically can download a paper from a panel that cannot be attended, but this can be done even by those who do not attend the conference.

[18] Of course even the best research can be improved, and the least well-developed research might benefit from broad distribution. For illustrative purposes, it might be worth comparing the newly published book with the newly drafted book prospectus. The former – already printed – cannot be further improved, at least not before another edition is issued. The prospectus, on the other hand, is in the best position to be revised.

[19] The details here are less important than the concept, and can be modified according to pragmatic concerns.

[20] Alternately, the Teaching presentations might last 30 minutes each, with 15 minutes for Q&A or comments, and then a 15 minute transition between presentations. In this case, nine Teaching presentation times could be scheduled each day. Because these individual sessions are relatively brief, there would be no need to schedule a break for lunch, as attendees would never be further than about 30 minutes from a break.

[21] In principle, the presenters could determine – based on their preferences – how much time they would be available to meet others. Some presenters might choose a brief period – say, one hour on a given day – while others might prefer to be available on several hours on each of several days.

[22] The revenue raised from those who vote but do not attend the conference could be used for other purposes that benefit the organization's members.

[23] The specific number could be determined by the length of the conference, the number of conference rooms available for presentations, and other logistical concerns.

[24] Basing votes on the number of presentations might also have another benefit. I suspect that more junior scholars on average attend more presentations than more senior scholars; by giving these junior scholars proportionately more votes, conference programs might more closely match the preferences of those closer to the cutting edge of the field.

[25] The full program would still be available on line as well as in published programs (available for purchase or review at certain locations). Additional benefits of this would be lower printing costs, less

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environmental waste, and less time spent in manually searching the printed program. After the conference

schedule is set, registrants could sign up to attend presentations they did not vote for, and these

presentations could be added to their personalized programs.

[26] Individuals could potentially "opt out" of having this information captured if they have privacy concerns,

though to the extent that research is a public activity I would hope that these concerns could be minimized.

[27] One anonymous reviewer suggested that conferences could also feature more "debates" between

scholars. This idea is surely worth pursuing, as much research actually involves virtual debates, with the

author of the current paper "challenging" the research of a previous scholar. Debates could be proposed,

and accepted, by the same protocols as the Teaching presentations.

[28] In raising this question, I follow the classical liberal assumption that scholars comprise a community of

equals; no, not in talents, experience, or reputation, but in the individuals' fundamental abilities to

determine what is in their best interest.

[29] It might be argued that Section Heads can use their discretion to guide their subfields in some promising

direction, but I think this unlikely given the practical constraints (e.g., time pressures and the "choosing

from what you've got" conditions) facing the SH.

[30] The conditions necessary for *pareto optimal* outcomes may not be completely met in the proposed

conference format, but it is not clear that the conditions deviate unacceptably.

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[31] For example, a "vote" for a proposal from a tenured professor might count as one point, a vote for a junior professor 1.2 points, a vote for a graduate student as 1.4 points, and so forth.

[32] The relevant model here could be college athletics, where schools compete against schools with similar characteristics, and are ranked accordingly (e.g., NCAA Division I, Division II, etc.)

[33] As Eisinger (1999: 9) noted, "most people in the profession, rightly or wrongly, [regard giving posters] as second or perhaps fourth prize."

TABLES

Table 1: Proposal Attributes and Section Head Choices					
	Proposal 1	Proposal 2	Proposal 3	Proposal 4	Proposal 5
Substance (Panel 1)	**1**	2	3	**1**	**1**
Theoretical Approach (Panel 2)	3	**2**	**2**	**2**	1
Methods (Panel 3)	**3**	**3**	**3**	2	2

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