

# The Pandemic and *Political Behavior*: Staying the Course

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**P**olitical Behavior is the official journal of the Elections, Public Opinion, and Voting Behavior organized section of the American Political Science Association. It publishes research on the political behavior of citizens, political activists, and political officeholders in the United States and around the world. From the perspective of its Journal Impact Factor, the journal's reputation and impact have grown steadily in recent years. The first and last listed authors of this article served as co-editors-in-chief of *Political Behavior* from 2019 through 2022. The middle three listed authors served as editorial assistants during this same period.

Much like the experiences reported in this symposium by the editors of the *American Political Science Review* (Dion et al. 2023), *Politics & Gender* (Franceschet, Schroeder, and Wolbrecht 2023), *Politics and Religion* (Lewis and Tepe 2023), and the *International Political Science Review* (Reidy and Stockemer 2023), our experience with *Political Behavior* during the COVID-19 pandemic was largely one of staying the course. As shown in this article, there was little noticeable change in the processing of manuscripts—article submission, reviewing, and turnaround time—and decision rates at the journal remained relatively steady. The only conspicuous difference in the work of *Political Behavior* was in the gender composition of manuscripts submitted to the journal. Similar to submission patterns at other journals (Franceschet, Schroeder, and Wolbrecht 2023; Lewis and Tepe 2023), there was a decrease in the representation of women authors in submitted manuscripts a few months after the pandemic began and then again a few months later, when COVID-19 cases spiked in the winter of 2020–2021. However, even that change—fortunately—was short-lived.

This article documents patterns of change and stability in the editorial process at *Political Behavior* during the past few years. We are unsure if these patterns are typical of those at other academic journals. However, to the extent that they are, they suggest that the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on academic publishing may not have been as negative as many scholars feared.

## MANUSCRIPT PROCESSING: SUBMISSIONS, REVIEWING, AND TURNAROUND TIME

The work of an academic journal is accomplished by three groups of people: the authors who submit manuscripts to the journal; the editors who decide whether to send a manuscript out for review and then make a final decision on it; and the reviewers who provide crucial feedback to the authors and editors about the quality of the manuscripts. Therefore, to determine how the editorial process at *Political Behavior* was or was not affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, we examined the behavior of all three of these groups. Figures 1 and 2 display statistics related to the processing of manuscripts at *Political Behavior* from 2019 to 2022. To capture the ebb and flow of the journal's work—particularly during the pandemic period that began in March 2020—the two figures display these quantities in three-month increments, beginning with March through May 2019 and ending with September through November 2022.

Figure 1 indicates authors' behavior—that is, the number of new manuscripts submitted to the journal—in which there is a clear pattern of staying the course.<sup>1</sup> The number of new submissions to *Political Behavior* every three months remained steady throughout our editorial term. In fact, new submissions spiked during the three-month period at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, from March to May 2020.

Figure 2 presents two indicators of the performance of the journal's reviewer pool—that is, the percentage of review requests that resulted in completed reviews and the average number of days in which reviewers completed them. The figure also focuses on a key metric of a journal's efficiency: turnaround time, or the average number of days between authors submitting a manuscript to the journal and the editors reaching a decision on it.

As in the patterns observed in figure 1, all of the series in figure 2 are relatively stable. It is important to note that our ability to find scholars willing to accept review invitations and complete their reviews in a timely fashion did not decline during the early days of the pandemic. The percentage of our review requests resulting in completed reviews remained stable through 2020 and into early 2021. It only showed a

noticeable decline during the six-month period from March to August 2021, and it is not clear whether that decline was related to the pandemic. In the United States, the number of positive COVID-19 cases was at a relatively low level from March 2021 to July 2021, before increasing again in August

who submitted reviews to complete them hovered between 29 and 34 days (i.e., right on time) throughout our editorial term and did not exhibit any increase after the pandemic began.

Providing further evidence of the public spiritedness of the journal's reviewer pool, a number of scholars contacted us after

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2021. However, *Political Behavior* receives approximately half of its submissions from authors who reside outside of the United States; positive COVID-19 cases worldwide reached their highest level to date in mid-April 2021, declining in May and June before increasing again in July and August of that year.<sup>2</sup> Our success rate in securing completed reviews was not impressive—it only reached 50% in one three-month period during our term. However, it did not seem to decline as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our difficulties—both pre- and post-pandemic—in recruiting reviewers and coaxing them to submit their reviews are common to academic editing. However, we were fortunate to have a strong pool of political behavior scholars who routinely accepted review invitations and completed their reviews relatively quickly. Those who accepted review invitations from *Political Behavior* and completed their reviews did so conscientiously and quickly. The average number of days for reviewers

the onset of the pandemic to volunteer to take on extra reviewing to compensate for their colleagues who were unable to review due to their own health or family situations. This extraordinary generosity speaks to the commitment of many political behavior scholars to this journal and to their profession.

It also undoubtedly is one of the reasons why the work of *Political Behavior* was largely unaffected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The ultimate measure of the efficiency of a journal is how long authors must wait to receive decisions about the work they submit. The turnaround time at *Political Behavior* remained steady throughout our editorial term and during the course of the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

**EDITORIAL DECISIONS**

The most important action that journal editors take is making decisions on whether work submitted is published. For us,

Figure 1

**Number of New Submissions to *Political Behavior* by Three-Month Period, March 2019–November 2022**

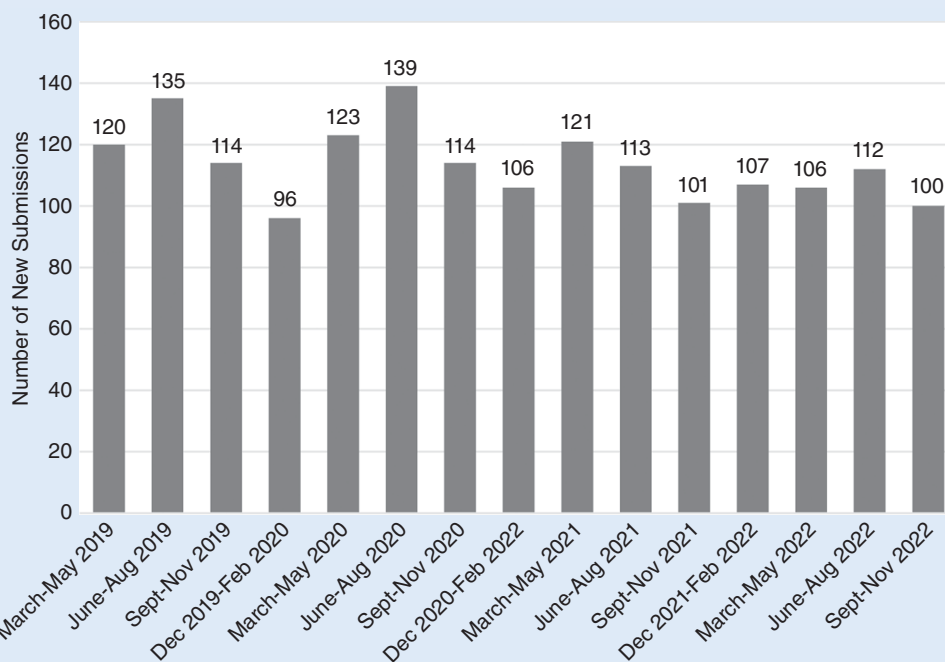
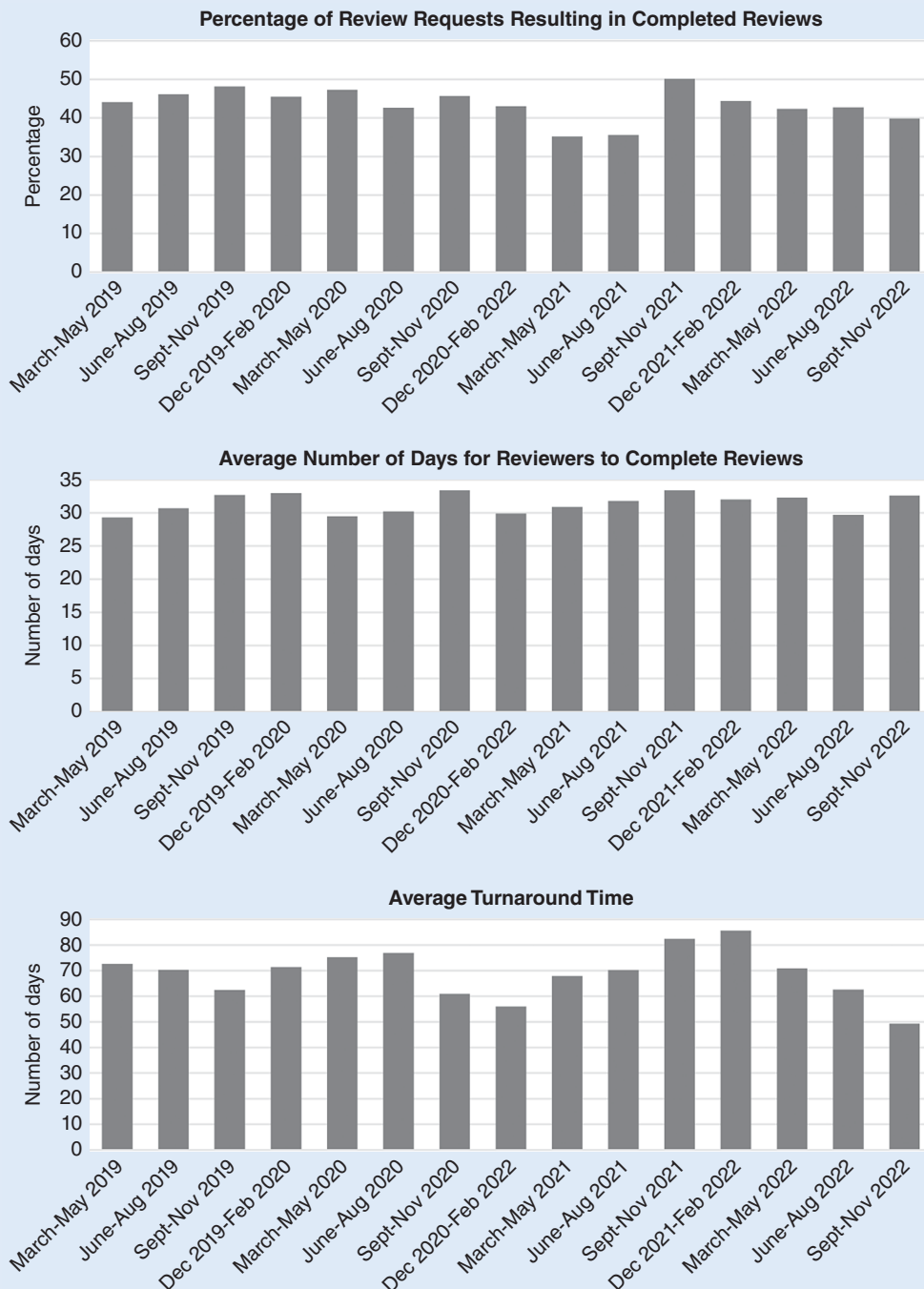


Figure 2

Manuscript Processing Statistics for *Political Behavior* by Three-Month Period, March 2019–November 2022

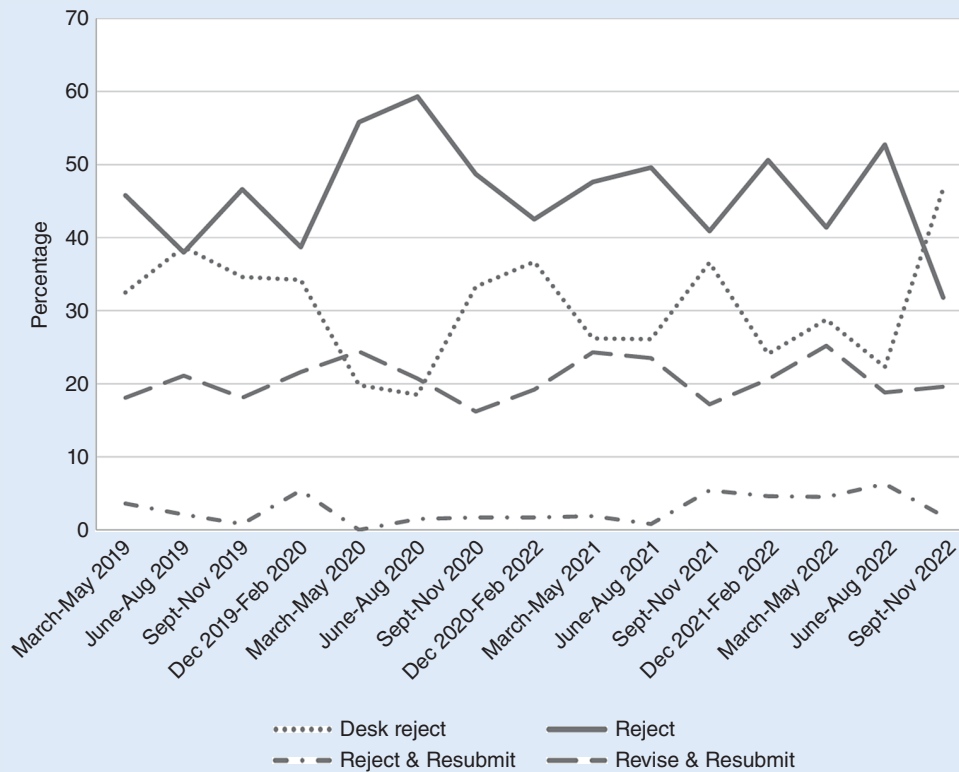


those decisions were mostly unaffected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 3 shows the percentage of initial submissions to *Political Behavior*—manuscripts submitted to the journal for the first time—receiving one of four possible editorial decisions between March 2019 and November 2022.

The four decisions are “desk reject,” meaning the editors rejected the manuscript without sending it out for review; “reject,” meaning the manuscript was rejected after being peer reviewed; “reject and resubmit,” a rarely used decision; and “revise and resubmit.” For us, an invitation to revise and

Figure 3

### Decision Rates for Initial Submissions to *Political Behavior* by Three-Month Period, March 2019–November 2022



resubmit a manuscript to *Political Behavior* meant that it had received mostly favorable reviews and had an excellent chance of being published in the journal if the authors effectively addressed reviewers' concerns. In contrast, we reserved the "reject and resubmit" decision for manuscripts that received mixed reviews but that we believed had potential to be published after extensive revisions.<sup>4</sup>

There was a noticeable shift in decision rates during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic, from March through August 2020. Throughout most of our editorial term, we desk rejected approximately 30% of all submitted manuscripts—that is, desk-reject rates ranged from 26% to 37% for all but a few of the three-month periods. However, in the periods from March to May 2020 and from June to August 2020, we desk rejected less than 20% of all submissions. Neither editor recalls making a conscious decision to desk reject fewer manuscripts. However, it is possible that during these intense early months of the COVID-19 crisis, we were subconsciously more sympathetic to authors and willing to give borderline manuscripts the benefit of the doubt.

It is not surprising that when we sent out more manuscripts of questionable merit to reviewers, we ultimately rejected more of them after review. This means that our overall rejection rate (i.e., either before or after peer review) during this six-month period was similar to the overall rejection rate throughout our

editorial term. Accordingly, the rate at which authors received revise-and-resubmit invitations was no different during the early months of the pandemic than it was either earlier or later.

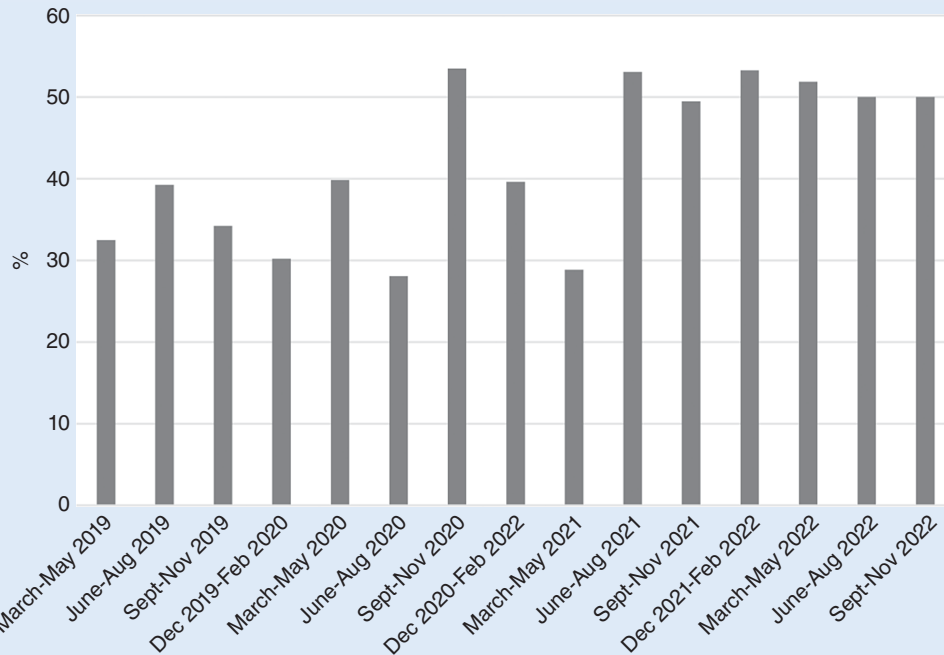
#### GENDERED EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON SUBMISSION TO *POLITICAL BEHAVIOR*

Although the overall effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on submissions to *Political Behavior* was negligible, the pandemic may have affected some types of authors more than others. In particular, the COVID-19 effect may have been greater for women than for men. Existing research finds that for various reasons—for example, women bear a disproportionate share of childcare and eldercare responsibilities, women in academia are more likely than men to be in dual-career households, and academic women often bear heavier teaching and service responsibilities—the negative effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on scholarly productivity was greater for women than for men (Cui, Ding, and Zhu 2022; King and Frederickson 2021; Myers et al. 2020). In political science—a discipline in which women clearly are underrepresented in the pages of leading journals (Dolan and Lawless 2020; Teele and Thelen 2017)—an increase in the gender gap in journal submission is of particular concern.

To assess whether there was a gendered effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on submissions to *Political Behavior*,

Figure 4

**Gender and Submission to *Political Behavior*: Percentage of Submissions with at Least One Woman Author by Three-Month Period, March 2019–November 2022**



we computed the percentage of all submitted manuscripts that had at least one woman author for the three-month periods from March 2019 to November 2022. These percentages, presented in figure 4, indicate decreases in rates of submission by women authors shortly after the onset of the pandemic; fortunately, those decreases were short-lived.

In the initial months of the pandemic—March to May 2020—there was no evidence of a gendered COVID-19 effect on submissions to *Political Behavior*. The percentage of submitted manuscripts with at least one woman author reached its highest level (40%) at that point in our editorial term. However, submission rates for women authors fell sharply in the next three-month period—June to August 2020—to the lowest level (28%) of our four years at the journal’s helm. The number of submissions with at least one woman author then increased rather dramatically—to more than half of all submissions—in the next three-month period before decreasing again in the six months from December 2020 to May 2021.

It is impossible, of course, to know if these two ebbs in the representation of women in the journal’s author pool resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic, but it may have been at least partially to blame. If the shock and shutdown of the first days of the pandemic affected the productivity of women studying political behavior, the effect on submission rates likely would not have been felt immediately but instead several months later—which perhaps accounts for the decrease in the next three-month period, from June to August

2020. Meanwhile, the decrease in women’s representation in submitted manuscripts from December 2020 to May 2021 coincided with a spike in COVID-19 cases around the world, particularly in the United States in late 2020 and early 2021. That spike may have had a stronger negative effect on research output for women than for men.

Fortunately, the decline in women’s rates of submission to *Political Behavior* in late 2020 and early 2021, similar to the previous decline in the summer of 2020, was short-lived. From June to August 2021, the percentage of submissions to the journal with at least one woman author increased to 53%, and it never decreased to less than 50% for the remainder of our editorial term.<sup>5</sup>

**CONCLUSION**

Judging from the aggregate patterns documented in this article, the COVID-19 pandemic had relatively little effect on the work of *Political Behavior*. New submissions to the journal remained steady, political behavior scholars continued to accept review invitations and complete reviews at typical rates, and the journal’s turnaround time remained about the same. Meanwhile, with the exception of a short-lived decline in desk rejections, decision rates at *Political Behavior* remained stable. There were two periods during the first 15 months of the pandemic in which the presence of women authors in submitted manuscripts decreased. However, those ebbs fortunately were short-lived and, by late 2022, women were better

represented in the journal's submissions than they were before the emergence of the coronavirus.<sup>6</sup>

We do not know if our pandemic-era experience in editing and managing *Political Behavior* was typical or exceptional among political science journals. Happily, the reports by other editors in this symposium suggest that they may have been typical. However, to the extent that *Political Behavior* stayed the course more than other journals, one reason—in addition to the public spiritedness displayed by the journal's reviewers and authors—may lie in the nature of political behavior research. Most scholarship on the political behavior of citizens and other political actors does not involve field work—something that was substantially interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather, most of the work submitted to *Political Behavior* involves surveys and experiments that scholars can conduct from their home or office and that subjects often can participate in online. Many surveys used by political behavior researchers are now conducted online, and even surveys such as the American National Election Study and the General Social Survey that traditionally involved face-to-face interviews moved to online interviewing during the most critical months of the COVID-19 pandemic (American National Election Studies 2021; Davern et al. 2021). This may have allowed political behavior scholars to maintain their normal pace of scholarship. It also may have allowed women scholars of political behavior to maintain a relatively equal pace with their male counterparts despite women in academia generally feeling the effects of the pandemic more than men.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Christopher Karpowitz and Jessica Preece, the current editors of *Political Behavior*, and Kelly Daugherty, managing editor of *Political Behavior* for Springer, for giving us access to the journal's editorial software system to collect data for this article. We especially thank Kelly for his valuable help throughout our four years as caretakers of this journal.

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the *PS: Political Science & Politics* Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/MCWNJA>.

#### SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096523000884>.

#### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

#### NOTES

1. See Layman et al. (2023) for replication data and code.
2. See the World Health Organization's Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard at <https://covid19.who.int>.
3. The number of observations on which the means in the last panel of figure 2 and the percentages in figures 3 and 4 were computed is the total number of manuscripts submitted to *Political Behavior* during each of the three-month periods. That number is displayed at the top of each bar in figure 1.
4. There were three submissions during our editorial term that we accepted "as is," without requiring further revisions. Because of that small number, we did not include them in the manuscripts considered in figure 3.
5. The online appendix includes estimates of lagged dependent-variable models testing the effect of time-period treatments on the change in proportion of submissions that include at least one woman author. We estimated four models, with the "treatments" being the March–May 2020 period, the June–August 2020 period, the September–November 2020 period, and the June–August 2021 period. We find that the first two periods had positive but statistically insignificant effects on the proportion of manuscripts with a woman author. The latter two periods had effects that were both positive and statistically significant, indicating that the proportion of submissions with at least one woman author increased slightly beginning with either the September–November 2020 or the June–August 2021 period. It is not clear whether these effects were due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
6. In our annual editors' reports for *Political Behavior*, we examined whether our decision rates for submissions with at least one woman author differed from those for submissions authored only by men. There was no noticeable difference in decision rates between the two groups of manuscripts in any year of our editorial term.

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