

# Desk Rejecting “Against Desk Rejects!”

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In “Against Desk Rejects!,” Jim Gibson lays out a passionate case for why he believes desk rejections are a perversion of the double-blind peer-review process and serve to hamper scholars.<sup>1</sup> He also describes a set of reforms that he argues would solve the issue of the increase in manuscript submissions without editors resorting to desk rejections.

As coeditors of *State Politics and Policy Quarterly* (SPPQ) from 2014 to 2020, we confess to having used desk rejections on occasion. In fact, we did so even though we were not burdened by a large number of submissions; we received only about 110 each year. So, why did we do it? Why not simply send out everything for review? Simply stated, desk rejections are an important part of the review process, and depriving editors of this important tool significantly hampers their ability to shape the direction of the journal. This article explains the reason why desk rejects, although disappointing for authors, do not constitute a significant problem in political science.

For the purposes of our argument, we concede Gibson’s point that desk rejections have been increasing. However, to be fair, it is not clear to us that this is the case. Certainly, we have anecdotal evidence, but Gibson’s article has not provided any systematic evidence in support of his claim. We do agree that there certainly is a perception among academics that desk rejections are increasing and that this is unfair to authors. To some extent, perception is reality.<sup>2</sup> So, assuming that this behavior has increased, why is it not a problem?

To begin, it is helpful to understand how someone becomes an editor. At almost all (if not all) journals in the discipline, the owner (i.e., either a professional association or a publisher) solicits applications from interested parties. It also is common for search committees to solicit applications. That is how we decided to apply to become editors of SPPQ; there was a call for proposals but we also were asked personally to apply. This is done to ensure a variety of applications, and it also makes people think about becoming an editor—it would not occur to some that they would be good at it or that they would have a chance to be named editor. This is particularly true for scholars from underrepresented groups or those at less prestigious universities. It also is worth noting that being an editor, even at a small journal, is a time-consuming job that requires both organizational skills and sound judgment.

As part of the application process, prospective editors must lay out their vision statement. That is, what do they want to focus on during their tenure as editors? We had four primary

goals: (1) increase the visibility of the journal via social media; (2) institutionalize the data-verification process; (3) continue to increase submissions by seeking papers at conferences and encouraging people to submit; and (4) increase the number of papers submitted (and published) that focused on subnational politics in other countries. By accomplishing these goals, we thought we could raise the impact factor of the journal and make it a more desirable place for authors to publish. Other people who applied to be editor laid out their vision for the journal. Although we did not say anything about desk rejects in our statement, we certainly could have stated that to preserve reviewers and expedite time to decision (an important factor that scholars consider when deciding where to submit), we were going to increase desk rejections for manuscripts that we did not think would survive the peer-review process for any reason (e.g., poor quality or poor fit).

The point of describing the editor-selection process is that editors are not simply selected randomly; rather, they must lay out their vision and then their peers decide if that is the direction they want for the journal. Moreover, it is not always the people with the best scholarly records or from the most prestigious institutions who are selected. Indeed, the “vision statement” is crucial to the process.<sup>3</sup> Given that we require editors to give careful thought about how they would run the journal, we should allow them to enact their vision once selected. If we said that we wanted to increase desk rejections by, say, 25%, the State Politics Section, which appointed us, should expect that that is what we would do. As anyone who has led an editor search knows, it is difficult to attract people to edit journals; it takes considerable time, and that time inevitably slows down our own research agenda. If we do not allow editors to shape the journal, we likely will have even fewer people willing to assume this important job.

More important, this level of influence is not held solely in the decision of whether or not to desk reject. Editors select reviewers and make decisions when reviews come back. They give authors guidance on which parts of the reviews are most important to consider. Those choices are based on whose views the editors think are most relevant to the paper in question. If we receive a review that states our paper is “too narrow” for the journal in question, there is a good chance that the editor also thinks it is too narrow, which explains why the editor thinks that reviewer is a good choice. If we think a paper on procedural justice is too narrow for our journal, we are

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unlikely to send it to Jim Gibson because we know he thinks that work is important. We are likely to take one of two actions: desk reject it or send it to reviewers who are likely (but not definitively) to share our assessment.<sup>4</sup> The question of expertise is rather more serious in general journals, but the same analysis applies. We would not advocate for a policy of desk rejecting a manuscript if the editor does not know that

a paper. That feedback is helpful because the author then can make the paper align with that one good way. However, the reality is that there are many ways to write good papers, and people can disagree about those ways. We can send a paper out for review so the author can receive feedback on our way of writing that paper, but this is hardly helpful if we are not going to publish it. Invariably, authors whose papers are rejected at

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particular subfield well enough to render such a judgment. However, any editor who would desk reject a paper that they do not understand also, under a policy that bans desk rejections, would not understand to which reviewers the manuscript should be sent for a fair review.

Similarly, we have heard many scholars complain that editors have become “bean counters.” That is, they simply add up the reviews and then make a decision without seriously considering the content of the manuscript. Under this formulation, anyone can become an editor; no substantive expertise or knowledge is necessary. Yet, we as a discipline want editors to read the manuscripts and make independent decisions that are informed by reviewers but not dictated by them. One way to do this is through desk rejects. Here is a little secret: editors have the discretion to reject a paper for any reason they want, regardless of the reviews. Bad editors can take advantage of that and make careless decisions, to the detriment of good researchers. However, banning desk rejections will not turn bad editors into good ones; it simply will increase the time it takes for good researchers to get the manuscript back. If an editor is not interested in publishing a manuscript, we think the author would rather know in five days than in five months.

Perhaps an example will make this clear. As scholars, both of us have serious ethical qualms about audit studies. Our opinions on these range from morally questionable to highly

*SPPQ* will submit those papers elsewhere. However, we would advise authors differently for a paper they are planning to submit to *Social Science Quarterly* than one they are planning to submit to *Journal of Public Policy*, for example. Tying up *SPPQ* reviewers, however, is not a helpful way to provide that type of feedback.

Authors are better off receiving feedback on a way of writing the paper that might help it get published. This is particularly true for junior faculty and graduate students, who need to have papers published as soon as possible. Of course, the main problem with this way of thinking about the publication process is the obvious implication that journals publish work based on the tastes of the journal editors, not some objective “measure of quality.” Moreover, if publications in “top” journals are a prerequisite for hiring or tenure, we are elevating the tastes of those few editors at the expense of the tastes of others. However, like most realities, denying that they are true—or papering over them with superficial fixes like a ban on desk rejects—does not actually make that reality any less true.

Here is where Gibson’s analogy of a student’s grade complaint simply is not applicable to the journal-submission process. There are literally hundreds of journals to which a scholar can submit but for a grade complaint, there is only one professor. For sure, some journals are more prestigious than others. However, over time, it is the

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unethical. We were not going to publish a manuscript that we believed was unethical; that was our prerogative as editors. So, if we received an audit study as a submission, why should we go through the peer-review process? How is that fair to the authors?

More important, pretending that eliminating desk rejections somehow will mitigate the effects of the outsize power of editors misses the point. Sending papers out for review even when the editor has no intention of publishing them is valuable only if we believe there is only one good way to write

quality of the work that attracts attention and citations, not only the place where it is published. A good example of this is Gibson himself: his most-cited article is in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, a journal with an impact factor similar to *SPPQ*! He also has highly cited pieces in *Law and Society Review*, *Political Research Quarterly*, and *Journal of Conflict Resolution*. All of these are fine journals that publish much excellent work, even though they are not as prestigious as the “top-tier” journals in the discipline.

Gibson also argues that desk-rejected papers have little opportunity to become better because they are deprived of comments from reviewers, and he believes this is a disservice to political science. We fundamentally disagree. First, although a paper might be desk rejected at one journal, there remain scores of others where it can be submitted.

Second, peer review is no substitute for soliciting feedback from our own peer (scholarly) network prior to submission. Indeed, we argue that this is an abuse of the process: authors should submit papers when and where they think they have a decent chance of getting published; a desk rejection means the editor does not share that assessment. This in itself is feedback, likely indicating that the editor is not a good choice to shepherd the manuscript to better feedback through the review process. Ideally, for manuscripts submitted in good faith that fall within the aim and scope of the journal, the editor(s) will provide some feedback to an author when desk rejecting a manuscript.<sup>5</sup> Certainly, we could argue that some scholars lack professional networks that allow them to receive valuable feedback before they submit their work for publication. We agree that this is a problem, one that is exacerbated when prospects for in-person academic conferences remain at the mercy of a global pandemic.

Again, prohibiting desk rejections is not a solution to that problem. If we think there are insufficient outlets for scholars to obtain feedback, we should provide those outlets, not high-jack the publication process for that purpose. Scholars should submit manuscripts only when they are ready to be published, and they should send them only to journals that might conceivably publish them.<sup>6</sup> Of course, it often is the case that seasoned researchers see their papers get desk rejected. However, this is because the review process is not a simple matter of

view it as aiding editors in deciding what to publish.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, reviewers who feel like their time has been wasted are far less likely to agree to continue to review in the future.

Although we disagree with Gibson's diagnosis of the severity of the problem, we also think that his proposed solutions impose more costs than benefits—and ultimately leave everyone worse off. One option he proposes is to pay reviewers for their time. This would help solve the problem of finding reviewers by compensating them for their time. This is the model that is used in economics and some journals in judicial politics, such as *Journal of Legal Studies* and *Journal of Empirical Legal Studies*. Where would this money come from? Gibson proposes submission fees, whereby authors must pay to have their manuscript considered for publication.

We all would love to be paid to do work that we are now doing for free. However, our concern with this model is that it would further advantage the “haves” over the “have nots.” That is, faculty with (substantial) research budgets could easily absorb these costs, whereas faculty without such resources would be forced to pay out of pocket. Even if there was a way to subsidize those scholars who could not afford a fee, the very fact of a fee would serve to discourage submissions, especially from under-resourced scholars. Vogel (2011, 273) found that “almost 40% said the lack of funding for publication fees was a deterrent” to submitting to open access journals. If scholars with the most resources had a monopoly on the production of the best work, then this would not be a concern. However, we all know that this is not the case, and we would not want to set up a system that further increased the likelihood of publication based on institutional resources.

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weighing a manuscript on a scale. We may believe strongly that our paper belongs in *SPPQ*, and we may have published frequently in *SPPQ* before. Honest people can disagree on what “good enough for *SPPQ*” means, but if one of those honest people is the editor, it makes sense to discuss that disagreement openly sooner rather than later.

At *SPPQ*, we desk rejected very few manuscripts, but there were some we probably should have and did not. How do we know? The reviewers in their comments to us as editors told us that we should have desk rejected this piece and inquired as to why we consumed their time and energy on a paper that clearly was not ready. This happened more than once. Whereas some reviewers may view their role in the peer-review process as helping scholars develop their argument and analysis—and our sense is that the state politics community has more than its fair share of patient reviewers who are willing to give helpful feedback on papers that do not meet the mark—many more

Others might counter by saying that submission fees would discourage the submission of papers that were not plausible candidates for publication—and this might be true. However, it is true only for those authors who lack resources. Both of us have research budgets, so we can “take a flyer” on a manuscript to a top journal and, who knows, maybe we will get lucky. It costs us nothing. However, those scholars without a budget are more likely to be risk averse because they would have to pay for the submission out of pocket. So, there likely would be a reduction in the submission of weak papers, *but only for those who do not have resources*. This leaves us again with the “have nots” bearing costs that the “haves” do not.

Another solution offered by Gibson is that, for graduate students, their adviser could be required to sign off on a paper before it is submitted. First, this assumes that the majority of desk-rejected submissions are from graduate students. We are not convinced that there is evidence of this. Second, we view

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consulting with an adviser before submitting work to be the bare minimum for a reasonable adviser/advisee relationship, but we do not think “legislating” such a relationship is particularly helpful. If a relationship between an adviser and an advisee is so poor as to fail to reach that undemanding threshold, what adviser is going to refuse to sign off on a submission? It costs advisers nothing to sign off; they have to bear none of the costs of the submission. Moreover, refusing to sign off could jeopardize the likelihood of advisers having students to work with in the future, if they develop a reputation of not allowing their students to submit papers. In summary, refusing to sign off on a student’s paper is simply not a rational (or likely) course of action.

Finally, Gibson says that he refuses to review for journals who desk reject his submissions, and he encourages others to adopt this position as well. Certainly, that is his right to do so. However, we can easily see how this “tit-for-tat” game ends: author gets desk rejected (maybe justifiably, maybe not), author refuses to review for the journal, journal then refuses to send out author’s subsequent manuscripts because of the author’s refusal to review. Editors have been known to refuse to consider manuscripts submitted by scholars who routinely decline to review for them.<sup>8</sup> This strategy of refusing the review is extremely shortsighted and it is one that can be adopted only by those scholars like Gibson (and ourselves) who are tenured and not dependent on a publication in a specific venue for career reasons. Also, we hasten to add that journals receive far more submissions than they can publish. So, who is harmed by Gibson’s proposal? Not the journals: we have more publishable submissions than space. It is the scholar who is harmed, particularly graduate students and pre-tenure scholars. Editors may be loath to wield a particularly itchy desk-reject trigger finger when the author is a good reviewer for fear of raising that reviewer’s ire in the future, but this strikes us as a strong incentive to be a good reviewer rather than as a reason to reject desk rejection outright.

As authors who have been desk rejected on occasion, we understand the frustration with decisions without any rationale or useful comments; as authors, we also appreciate knowing this decision sooner rather than later. Our goal as editors was to publish the best manuscripts as quickly as possible. To accomplish this, occasionally we needed to triage manuscripts and desk reject some. Were we always correct? Of course not. That is why there are numerous other journals to which authors can turn. The existing system is not perfect, but eliminating desk rejections, implementing submission fees, or refusing to review for journals almost certainly will make it worse for most authors. ■

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#### NOTES

1. It is important to note that Gibson does agree that the desk rejections for “lack of fit” are a good thing. Therefore, he would have no problem with a desk rejection of a submission on elections in Burundi that was submitted to *American Politics Research*.
2. To a larger extent, reality is reality.
3. Indeed, Coauthor Bonneau recently served on a search committee to recommend a new editor for *Journal of Law and Courts*. All of the proposals were from qualified individuals; what set the applicants apart (and consumed almost all of our discussion) was their vision statement for the journal.
4. This is an example of how editors *might* behave if desk rejections are eliminated. Personally, we would desk reject in this situation.
5. We confess that we did not give additional feedback to manuscripts submitted to *SPPQ* on, for example, Russian foreign policy. For similar manuscripts, detailed feedback is unlikely to be productive.
6. To be sure, this is not always a clear decision and errors occur in terms of both manuscript readiness and appropriate venue.
7. As editors, we preferred reviewers to provide us with the strengths and weaknesses of the manuscript.
8. See, for example, the policy at *American Political Science Review* ([www.apsanet.org/APSR-Submission-Guidelines](http://www.apsanet.org/APSR-Submission-Guidelines)) and *American Journal of Political Science* (<https://ajps.org/guidelines-for-manuscripts>).

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#### REFERENCE

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