

# Identity challenges

## *Facing the Association for Politics and the Life Sciences*

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**F**ounded in 1980, the Association for Politics and the Life Sciences (APLS) sought to establish biopolitics as a recognized field and to integrate biologically based research methods into mainstream political science. The association's founders established these goals to encourage a generation of scholars and promote the spread of biopolitical knowledge. There was early success when the American Political Science Association (APSA) recognized biopolitics as an organized section. However, this development did not leave an appreciable imprint on the political science profession and the experiment conjoining the two did not last long. The other goal of the founders, to integrate biologically based research methods into mainstream political science, faced more formidable obstacles and still faces challenges, though not without some progress.

### Strands of biopolitical knowledge

Of course, the biology and politics interface yields a diversity of knowledge types. Scholars working at this intersection share an evolutionary framework and use it to develop broad scale understandings of political behaviors. Many political scientists who adopted an evolutionary framework found an organizational home with the Association for Politics and the Life Sciences, and perhaps even encouragement from like-minded scholars. John Orbell, a political science professor, is a case in point. Orbell and his colleagues examined the evolution of cooperation through a computer-based simulation. Both the *American Political Science*

*Review*<sup>1</sup> and *Politics and the Life Sciences*,<sup>2,3</sup> the flagship journal of the Association for Politics and the Life Sciences, published their results. Books by political scientists that adopt an evolutionary perspective receive important attention in both circles: Roger Masters<sup>4</sup> on evolution and collective action; Tatu Vanhanen<sup>5</sup> as well as Al Somit and Steven Peterson<sup>6</sup> on evolution and democracy; and Brad Thayer<sup>7</sup> on evolution and international relations.

Representing a second strand of biopolitical knowledge is research on the physiological antecedents of political behaviors. Initially, this research focused on measurements of externally observable states like sleeplessness, fatigue, and stress but matured into assessments of psychophysiological signals, internal levels of hormones, and, with the increasing availability of magnetic resonance imaging equipment, neurological activity. Several review articles by Somit, Peterson, and colleagues documented a shift in the quantity of such research, with a mushrooming in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>8,9,10,11</sup> However, they also pointed out that while this research frequently graced the pages of *Politics and the Life Sciences* throughout this period, it appeared nowhere in the pages of the *American Political Science Review*—a situation that has since changed. Somit and Peterson attribute the dearth of biobehavioral research articles in *APSR* to a regrettable and nearly exclusive commitment among political scientists to “nurture” explanations of political behaviors—the ongoing belief that socialization and learning are the only sources of behavioral variation. They also note that the high cost of conducting physiological research,

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