

THE POMEPS VIRTUAL RESEARCH WORKSHOP

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In June 2020, the Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) launched a virtual research workshop for junior scholars to fill the void left by the cancellation of so many conferences and workshops due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For the 2021–2022 academic year, we expanded the virtual workshop dramatically to include 18 workshops dedicated to book manuscripts or journal-article manuscripts. Because of the format's flexibility, efficiency, and advantages for diversity and inclusion, we plan to continue it even when travel becomes possible again. There are costs and risks, however, that require attention.

Overall, the move to virtual research workshops has been a resounding success. Since its launch, POMEPS has conducted 24 workshops, including 82 junior-scholar authors and 58 senior-scholar discussants. Each two-hour article workshop typically features three papers, each with one assigned discussant. The authors are asked to read the other two papers, whereas discussants may but are not required to do so. As the convener and moderator, I read all of the papers and provide a second set of comments to supplement the assigned discussant. Book workshops, which are more intense, typically last 90 minutes for one paper or three hours for two papers on related themes. Each book manuscript has two dedicated readers, in addition to myself and typically one other member of the selection committee. We conducted 11 virtual book workshops for the 2021–2022 academic year.

The buy-in from the Middle East political science (and broader Middle East studies) community has been phenomenal. Although we cannot offer honoraria, almost all invited discussants usually agree to participate. If they are unavailable, they often offer suggestions for alternatives—which is useful when the topics of the papers or books are outside of the organizers' areas of expertise. A Zoom meeting will never be as much fun as an in-person seminar, but the relatively small size of the group keeps everyone engaged and allows for personal interactions. Authors do not present their manuscript, assuming that it has been read in advance, which maintains a high level of engagement because there are few long spans of only listening.

The virtual format allows us to more fully include scholars based in the Middle East and Europe, for whom it otherwise might be prohibitively expensive and pose complicated visa issues. We can offer invitations without regard to physical distance or national location. As a result, scholars from the Middle East and Europe who otherwise might have been excluded for logistical or cost reasons can participate at a high level: 40 of the 82 article authors and eight of the 11 book authors participated from outside of the United States. This also allows us to forego extensive advance planning, travel arrangements and logistics, and multiday disruptions. The selection process actively seeks applicants from outside of the usual elite institutional networks, on the assumption that junior scholars from top schools already have support from their institution and are networked into the scholarly community.

POMEPS has definite plans to continue these workshops even after the world heals; however, there are disadvantages to the format. In general, we have not heard the common complaint that online sessions are alienating, non-interactive, or unproductive.

The small size and engagement-oriented organization has resulted in dynamic and productive sessions. Zoom burnout is real, however. We have found that a session lasting more than a few hours is difficult to sustain, even for the most dedicated of us. Time zones also have been an issue—we sometimes struggle to find workable times for participants who might be calling in from the West Coast of the United States and from Doha, Qatar. Moreover, there is no substitute for the informal time after in-person workshops sharing cocktails or dinner or an evening walk through a new city. We are concerned that the ease of virtual workshops will lead to a two-tier system in which non-U.S. based scholars benefit from feedback and professional development but remain excluded from the more informal social benefits of in-person events.

A more significant concern about the potential for a self-destructive dynamic is the tendency to overschedule because it is so easy and inexpensive to do so. The sheer volume of workshops enabled by the virtual format can be overwhelming, not only for the organizer who reads and comments on all of the papers almost weekly but also for the larger community. If we exhaust the pool of plausible readers and return multiple times to the same senior scholars, at some point, their enthusiasm for being a discussant inevitably will wane. Furthermore, it is possible that funders will observe the success of online models and become unwilling to fund the more expensive and unwieldy in-person events. That would be very disappointing because many new ideas and enduring partnerships are developed in those informal spaces of in-person conferences and workshops. ■

WORKSHOPS WITHOUT BORDERS: BUILDING AN ONLINE COMMUNITY OF JAPAN SCHOLARS

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Many social science departments include scholars whose work involves different world regions. Department breadth presents an opportunity to learn from colleagues working across very different settings. It also presents a challenge. Researchers who work on specific contexts must ask: Is my understanding of this feature of the political system or policy area correct? What other conclusions have scholars drawn that might be relevant to my line of inquiry? Have I identified and addressed all potential competing explanations? To answer these questions, scholars must share their work with others in the same field.

Few of us in the Japanese politics community are fortunate to have other Japan scholars in the same department. This is largely true for other country and regional experts, except for Americanists. Conferences have always been important venues to engage researchers with similar interests. Concerned that the COVID-19 pandemic would diminish opportunities to receive feedback and interact with fellow academics, we established the

Japanese Politics Online Seminar Series (jposs.org), or JPOSS. This article describes JPOSS and its advantages for our community, and it summarizes logistical and technical challenges.

JPOSS at a Glance

Since its inaugural session on July 10, 2020, JPOSS has met approximately twice a month. The one-hour sessions take place via Zoom in the evening in the US Eastern Time (i.e., early morning in Japan). Papers for presentation are submitted via our website or invited by the organizers. Presented papers cover a wide range of topics related to Japanese domestic and international politics and use various qualitative and quantitative approaches. We usually solicit two discussants for each paper, one of whom is not an expert on Japan. The event then is disseminated via the JPOSS website, Twitter, and email. Sessions are open to everyone. A postdoctoral researcher, Nicholas Fraser, posts an online blog after each session, which preserves the presentation and discussion content. Presenters can submit either a draft paper or a pre-analysis plan, and they are required to circulate their paper one week before the event. We also feature several practice job talks to prepare students with a wide range of feedback.

Each session consists of the chair's introduction, researcher presentations (10 minutes each), and comments from two discussants (10 minutes each). This is followed by a chair-moderated Q&A session. Participants use the "raise-hand" function to ask questions directly; many others also use the chat box to make comments. Each JPOSS session draws an average of 60 attendees, highlighting substantial buy-in from the Japanese politics community, which is relatively small compared to other fields.

In addition to standard presentations, we also have held two special sessions and a virtual "happy hour." The special sessions provided professional-development advice on topics such as publishing, fieldwork, and working in Japanese academia. These two sessions were very popular, drawing 129 and 98 participants, respectively.

The Value of an Online Seminar Series

Online seminar series like JPOSS provide considerable value to area-focused researchers in comparative politics and international relations. First, they offer opportunities for students at institutions that do not have faculty who specialize in their region to connect with experts elsewhere. Professionalization sessions also "level the playing field" for students by providing equal access to information.

Second, by recruiting non-Japan experts to serve as discussants, JPOSS creates dialogue between Japan-focused researchers and other scholars studying similar topics in different parts of the world. This helps to situate our research within the broader discipline, maximizing its impact, while also increasing knowledge of Japan across subfields. In particular, we encourage graduate students and early-career researchers to present their work and nominate a "dream team" of discussants. We are fortunate to have excellent discussants, and we hope that the communication between presenters and these non-Japan experts continue.

Third, JPOSS serves a larger purpose in cultivating area expertise on Japan and fostering a sense of community. This is useful to researchers in all stages of their career: senior members of the community can learn what early-career scholars are working on and provide valuable advice and mentoring; early-career scholars can increase their network and broaden the impact of their

research through greater exposure. The happy-hour session using gather.town promoted an inclusive culture in a casual environment. We are pleased that several retired scholars of Japanese politics also attended our sessions. Our platform provides opportunities for scholars of all generations to "meet" and get to know one another.

Fourth, building and strengthening international connections is a signature accomplishment of the forum. About a third of JPOSS attendees and some of the presenters and discussants are affiliated with Japanese universities. Before launching this online platform, the only effective opportunity for those in Japan and in other countries to interact with one another was to physically attend conferences and seminars. The cost of academic interactions among scholars around the world, therefore, has been reduced dramatically. We expect that this benefit of an online seminar series applies to other area-focused researchers as well.

Managing an Online Community

Several features of JPOSS have worked well. First, we receive generous administrative support from the Program on US-Japan Relations at Harvard University and the Centre for the Study of Global Japan at the University of Toronto. Excellent staff support on matters such as logistics and communications allow faculty organizers to focus on general direction and intellectual engagement during sessions.

Second, JPOSS adopted a shared-leadership model, with six faculty organizers. This gives us flexibility: one organizer is always available to chair, and a subset consistently attends every session. Our shared-leadership model also guarantees presenters a range of comments—substantive, theoretical, and methodological—that reflect the diverse expertise of the organizers. Challenges of shared leadership include the need to achieve consensus on organizational matters and to communicate effectively across time zones. Our initial attempts to communicate by email were cumbersome and delayed our decision making; however, we solved this by using Slack's threaded conversation features, which allow for isolated discussions about each planned session.

Third, we take advantage of the virtual format. We encourage attendees to use Zoom's chat feature. Comments and questions typically flow almost as soon as the presentation begins. We record the session for presenter use only, without uploading it online, to promote a more open exchange of ideas. We send both the recording and chat transcript to presenters after the session. Presenters thus receive a substantial amount of information. In a virtual seminar, audience members lose the physical proximity of in-person discussion. However, they have the opportunity to communicate feedback without being concerned about interrupting or taking time from other audience members. Presenters can review the feedback later in a more relaxed setting and identify areas for improvement.

Challenges

To help colleagues who are interested in establishing a virtual seminar series, we conclude by reflecting on three challenges. First, JPOSS sessions have been timed to maximize attendance by scholars based in the United States and Japan, which results in limited participation by researchers in other time zones. Abandoning the fixed time slot may help, but the consistency also has considerable organizational benefits.

Second, we have received relatively fewer applications from early-career scholars than anticipated. One reason for this may be our relatively large audiences. There is a tradeoff between broad participation and enabling intimate, low-stakes discussions of works in progress. We are exploring strategies to make JPOSS more inviting for junior scholars, such as potentially holding closed or limited attendance sessions.

Third, virtual seminars will face greater competition when in-person gatherings resume. As circumstances evolve, we will continuously adapt JPOSS to sustain and grow what has become a vibrant intellectual community. ■

NOTE

1. The late Frances McCall Rosenbluth was a founding member of JPOSS and coauthor of this article. She passed away on November 20, 2021. She was a brilliant scholar, inspirational mentor, and generous friend. A special session of JPOSS was scheduled on April 14, 2022, to remember and honor her contributions.

MINORITY POLITICS ONLINE SEMINAR SERIES

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Scholars of minority politics are found across disciplinary boundaries, including in political science, sociology, economics, and psychology. They also can be found across countries and continents because the study of groups and their oppression has relevance cross-culturally. A key challenge for the field—and, indeed, for most fields in the social sciences—is the creation of intellectual connections across disciplinary and national boundaries. Historically, however, numerous constraints restricted interactions and scholarly dialogue across large swaths of the field, further siloing scholars in their already-narrow communities. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, invitations to scholarly presentations, attendance at conferences, and opportunities for presenting papers were largely dependent on financial resources and personal networks that often are available exclusively to individuals at elite institutions that are proximate to one another geographically. Indeed, the costs of attending a conference vary greatly among participants. These costs are particularly high for academics from low-income countries, scholars from countries located far from the conference destination, those who must secure visas to be able to travel professionally, and many who are caregivers and disabled individuals. These costs also are problematic for graduate students who are in precarious non-tenure-track positions and academics who work at institutions that provide minimal or no travel funding (Nicolson 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, gave rise to a unique opportunity to begin to address and remedy these inequities. Talks, seminars, and conferences were canceled. Scholars who anticipated sharing their work and receiving feedback instead were faced with scholarly isolation. The Minority Politics Online Seminar Series (MPOSS; <https://minoritypolitics.netlify.app>) was developed to fill this void and broaden participation in the minority politics subfield.

MPOSS is a seminar series on minority politics and intergroup relationships in political science and social psychology. Social scientists have long studied the ways that groups define themselves

according to national origin, ethnicity, religion, race, caste, tribe, region, gender, and/or class markers. Yet, this research proliferated in different ways in different disciplinary silos, as observed in the different names that this subfield has for different disciplines. The aim of MPOSS is to bring these social scientists together to share and discuss new research on minority politics. Importantly, the online format “inspired” by the pandemic has opened the series to people from around the globe.

MPOSS was co-organized by three Michigan State University assistant professors. To build a listserv, they each contacted approximately 100 scholars in their subfield and asked them to share a link with their department and colleagues where people could sign up to receive information about the talks. The listserv link also was advertised on social media. Our listserv has since grown to include more than 1,200 people, including members from multiple disciplines and from inside and outside of academia, who receive information about all of our upcoming talks.

Between June 2020 and May 2022, MPOSS will have hosted 64 talks in ten different sessions by political psychologists, Americanists, and comparativists. Between 30 and up to 200 scholars regularly attended the seminars each week. In addition, people who could not attend the seminars at the appointed time watched videos of the talks at their leisure: some of the presentations were viewed at a later time by more than 700 individuals. This allowed us to further expand our viewership, particularly to areas of the globe where time-zone constraints make real-time engagement with the series impractical.

In organizing the talks, we intentionally highlight a wide variety of scholars and prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion in the identity of the speakers, their career stage, and subject matter of the presentations. We have hosted a series of talks by scholars on the job market (e.g., Hui Bai, Christine Slaughter, and Jangai Jap); early-career scholars (e.g., Davin Phoenix, Adeline Lo, and Calvin Lai); and established scholars (e.g., Colin Wayne Leach, Efrén O. Pérez, and Yoshiko Herrera). The talks covered topics relevant to minority politics in the United States as well as India, Kenya, Myanmar, Slovakia, Somalia, Russia, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. We use several approaches to identify potential speakers, with the goal of increasing diversity in terms of race, nationality, gender, and career stage. First, when individuals join our listserv, they indicate whether they are interested in presenting at a future MPOSS session. Second, because graduate students often are not yet widely known in academic communities, our professional networks of scholars are particularly helpful in identifying those who are close to completing their program or are on the academic job market. Third, we take advantage of resources such as People of Color Also Know Stuff, and we scour department websites to find potential junior speakers.

The online format provides three key benefits. First, the webinar enables us to reach a global audience. Currently, our listserv includes participants from 40 countries. We schedule the seminars so that scholars from time zones across the Americas, Europe, and Africa can comfortably attend. Importantly, and to be less US-centric, scholars from institutions across the globe have presented (e.g., Thekla Morgenroth, Prabin Khadka, and Maja Kutlaca). They also regularly attend these talks, and every continent (except Antarctica) is represented in the MPOSS audience.

Second, we record and post videos of most talks, with few exceptions, which allows them to live on after the presentations.