

THE PROFESSION

academic heavy-weights: the 'relevance' of political science journals

thomas plümpfer

Department of Government, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester CO4 3SQ,
UK

E-mail: tpluem@essex.ac.uk

doi:10.1057/palgrave.eps.2210112

Abstract

Journals are currently 'ranked' by their influential 'impact factor' and their 'total number of cites' – both published by Thomson, the company producing and selling the (Social) Science Citation Index. This article suggests an alternative view and ranks political science journals according to the number of articles published within a period of time that have 'frequently' been cited.

Keywords journal ranking; political science; citations

Most articles published in refereed journals are never cited, some articles attract a few cites, and a few articles become 'classics'. The vast majority of these classic articles are published by a handful of the leading journals. Since 1990, five journals, the *American Political Science Review* (APSR), *International Organization* (IO), *International Security*, *Foreign Affairs*, and the *Journal of Peace Research* (JPR), have published articles which were cited more than 250 times in SSCI journals.¹ With eighteen journals having published the seventy-one articles that attracted over 100 citations, more than half of these articles have appeared in the three leading political science journals

APSR (22), *American Journal of Political Science* (AJPS) (10), and IO (9).

This research note uses the number of frequently cited articles to approximate the 'relevance' of political science journals and to rank them accordingly. I dub this proxy the 'FCA score'. The FCA score counts the number of articles exceeding a certain threshold and published in a defined period. The definition of thresholds is less arbitrary than it may seem at first glance, since the rankings presented here are robust to variation in the threshold level. By comparison with the three alternative measures, 'impact factor', 'total cites' (Christensen and Sigelman, 1985), and journal perception indices (Giles *et al*, 1989; Garand,

1990; Crewe and Norris, 1991), the proposed procedure has important advantages.

The 'impact factor' ranking favours journals which publish articles that quickly attract a few citations. Contrary to what many seem to believe, the impact factor does not measure the average number of citations per article, but rather computes the number of citations of a journal's average article *in the first two years* after the year of publication. This explains why journals publishing articles related to a meta-theoretical debate perform relatively well. At the same time, articles stimulating scientific progress, and which become classics in the long run, often need more than two years to catch attention.

Similarly, the 'total number of cites' discriminates against new journals, journals that have long been ignored by the ISI's (Institute for Scientific Information) databases, and journals which publish only a small number of articles per year. While the FCA score cannot entirely avoid being biased in favour of large journals, the positive discrimination in favour of these journals turns out to be smaller. *Nation* and the *New Republic* perform reasonably well in impact factor and in total cites rankings. However, not a single article published in these journals between 1990 and 1999 has been cited more than ten times.

Finally, 'quality perception scores' have frequently, and I believe rightly, been criticised for being arbitrary and leading to somewhat astonishing results. For example, the study by Giles *et al* (1989) ranks *Soviet Studies*, a journal that published six articles between 1990 and 1999 with more than ten citations, ahead of *IO*, a journal which published 146 such articles in the same period.² As James Lester (1990: 445) observed, 'a journal within the profession may have the reputation of having made a significant contribution to the discipline and yet it may have very little influence in fact'.

'While the FCA score cannot entirely avoid being biased in favour of large journals, the positive discrimination in favour of these journals turns out to be smaller.'

The 'FCA' score measures importance and impact of journals in the long run; the discrimination against relatively new journals appears to be lower, and it responds relatively quickly to changes in the quality of a journal. If a journal publishes a number of articles that become frequently cited, its ranking improves immediately.³ This quick adjustment affects the ranking of new journals positively. For instance, the *Journal of European Public Policy* (JEPP), was established in 1993 and has been evaluated by the ISI since issue no. 4 in 1997. While the journal performs about on par with the *JPR* and *Comparative Politics* with respect to its impact factor and its total number of citations, over the last five years the JEPP has published significantly more articles with at least ten cites than *JPR* and *Comparative Political Studies* (CPS).

I believe that these advantages come with just one disadvantage: the FCA score requires a threshold; therefore, a small change in the number of articles passing the threshold may exert a relatively large impact on the ranking system. Table 1 presents the ranking based on the FCA score for articles published between 1990 and 1999. The number of citations was collected on 1 February 2006.

The FCA score hardly turns previously published journal rankings upside down. Journals ranked prominently in conventional contests also perform well in the FCA ranking. But it obviously was never

my intention to show that – say – *Political Theory* surpasses the APSR in relevance. In other words, I believe that the FCA score captures the concept of journals' relevance reasonably well.

Nevertheless, this ranking offers some surprising views. On the one hand, the FCA ranking records the *Journal of Politics* (JoP) less favourably than the journal's reputation would lead us to believe. The JoP makes it into the top ten, but it falls way behind the leading APSR and AJPS with respect to the number of frequently cited articles. On the other, other journals perform better than in impact factor and total number of cites rankings. The relative winners of an FCA score (relative to rankings based on total cites and impact factor) include *Politics and Society*, *Political Geography*, *New Left Review*, and *Political Studies*. The relative losers are JoP, CPS, *Public Choice*, and the *European Journal of Political Research*.

These results by and large hold if we standardise the FCA score by the number of articles published (see the last two columns of Tables 1 and 2). However, specialised journals tend to perform better in standardised scores, since the number of articles published in those journals tends to be lower in comparison with the large general journals. Thus, the JoP loses further ground when we standardise the number of frequently cited articles by the total number of articles published.

Table 2 presents a ranking based on articles published between the years 2000 and 2005. Since the number of cites per article is naturally lower, I rank the journals according to the number of articles that have been cited more than ten times. Rather than approximating 'relevance', Table 2 counts the articles which currently promise to become frequently cited. Time will tell whether articles and journals that perform well in the short run will keep their promise in the long run.

Both the change in the threshold level and the change in the period apparently affect the ranking. In the second tier of journals, the changes were apparently stronger. *Public Opinion Quarterly* and – above all – *International Security* have lost ground, while, perhaps surprisingly, the *Journal of European Public Policy* and the *Journal of Common Market Studies* entered the top ten. Again, the data do not allow us to say whether these changes reflect an improvement in the journals' quality, or simply mirror the fact that European matters gained importance for scholarly discourse, or are even driven by some undetected randomness in citation cycles. Nevertheless, the trend is fairly strong and depends on more than just a handful of successful articles. Among the new journals, *European Union Politics* and *Political Analysis* perform fairly strongly.

The top five journals remained the same as between 1990 and 1999, thus revealing some structure in the data of the last five years. Perhaps most noteworthy is the change in the top position. It seems as if the APSR has lost the dominant position it held in the 1990s. Yet, a comparison of annual FCA counts reveals that the APSR published more frequently cited articles between 1990 and 1996, while the AJPS then performed slightly better between 1997 and 2001. Yet, the differences in the FCA performance remain minuscule. Thus, the available data do not allow us to derive a clear ranking for the years after 2001. Table 3 displays the number of articles per year passing a certain threshold.

According to the *F*-test, neither journal has dominated the other over the last fifteen years, though the APSR has a small but significant advantage in publishing articles that are cited more than fifty times. Finally, Table 4 compares the top ten journals according to the FCA score and according to alternative rankings.

Table 1: Frequently cited articles published 1990–1999^a (ranked according to number of articles that have been cited more than 50 times)

<i>Order based on column 4^b</i>	<i>Column</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>8</i>
	<i>Number of articles (N)</i>	<i>>250 cites</i>	<i>>150 cites</i>	<i>>100 cites</i>	<i>>50 cites</i>	<i>>25 cites</i>	<i>>10 cites</i>	<i>>50/N</i>	<i>>10/N</i>
American Political Science Review	461	2	8	21	75	178	304	0.1627	0.6594
American Journal of Political Science	520	0	3	9	45	154	327	0.0865	0.6288
International Organization	201	1	5	8	36	76	146	0.1791	0.7264
World Politics	134	0	0	4	21	45	95	0.1567	0.7090
Journal of Conflict Resolution	319	0	1	2	18	51	141	0.0564	0.4420
Public Opinion Quarterly	258	0	0	5	12	48	128	0.0465	0.4961
International Security	196	1	2	2	11	31	68	0.0561	0.3469
Journal of Politics	408	0	0	0	11	61	186	0.0270	0.4559
Foreign Affairs	584	1	2	4	7	27	88	0.0120	0.1507
British Journal of Political Science	219	0	1	1	7	22	67	0.0320	0.3059
Politics and Society	180	0	0	2	6	13	45	0.0333	0.2500
International Studies Quarterly	234	0	0	0	6	31	92	0.0256	0.3932
New Left Review	368	0	0	0	5	11	32	0.0136	0.0870
Political Studies	393	0	1	2	4	8	31	0.0102	0.0789
Journal of Peace Research	299	1	1	1	4	18	55	0.0134	0.1839
Political Geography	283	0	0	0	4	18	58	0.0141	0.2049
Journal of Democracy	233	0	0	0	4	6	29	0.0172	0.1245
Journal of Common Market Studies	251	0	1	2	3	16	58	0.0120	0.2311
Political Theory	244	0	0	1	3	8	25	0.0123	0.1025
Comparative Political Studies	215	0	1	2	2	21	65	0.0093	0.3023
Party Politics	135	0	0	2	2	7	22	0.0148	0.1630
Comparative Politics	189	0	1	1	2	5	41	0.0106	0.2169
Public Choice	855	0	0	0	2	12	74	0.0023	0.0865

Table 1 (continued)

Order based on column 4 ^b	Column	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
	Number of articles (N)	>250 cites	>150 cites	>100 cites	>50 cites	>25 cites	>10 cites	>50/N	>10/N
Electoral Studies	322	0	0	1	1	5	39	0.0031	0.1211
Political Psychology	306	0	0	0	1	17	51	0.0033	0.1667
Legislative Studies Quarterly	247	0	0	0	1	9	63	0.0040	0.2551
Human Rights Quarterly	265	0	0	0	1	2	15	0.0038	0.0566
European Journal of Political Research	552	0	0	0	0	14	65	0.0000	0.1178
Political Research Quarterly	283	0	0	0	0	7	52	0.0000	0.1837
World Economy	422	0	0	0	0	3	35	0.0000	0.0829
Political Communication	141	0	0	0	0	3	23	0.0000	0.1631
Journal of Theoretical Politics	153	0	0	0	0	3	22	0.0000	0.1438
Political Science Quarterly	242	0	0	0	0	2	21	0.0000	0.0868
International Affairs	269	0	0	0	0	2	18	0.0000	0.0669
Review of International Studies	126	0	0	0	0	2	7	0.0000	0.0556
Foreign Policy	411	0	0	0	0	1	18	0.0000	0.0438
Political Behavior	46	0	0	0	0	1	6	0.0000	0.1304
Nation	1,887	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.0000	0.0000
New Republic	3,152	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.0000	0.0000
Total	16,003	6	27	70	294	938	2,612	0.0182	0.1621

^aNote that the table counts articles multiple times, since an article that satisfies the >250 cites condition also satisfies the >100 cites condition.

^bWhere two or more journals had the same value in column 4, I ranked them according to their scores in column 3; if columns 4 and 3 were identical for journals, I used column 5.

Table 2: Frequently cited articles published between 2000 and 2005 (ranked according to number of articles that have been cited more than ten times)

<i>Order of journals based on column 4 (then 3)</i>	<i>Column</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>
	<i>Number of articles</i>	<i>> 100 cites</i>	<i>> 50 cites</i>	<i>> 25 cites</i>	<i>> 10 cites</i>	<i>> 25/N</i>	<i>> 10/N</i>
American Journal of Political Science	332	1	2	10	60	0.0301	0.1807
American Political Science Review	243	1	4	9	52	0.0370	0.2140
International Organization	146	1	3	8	37	0.0548	0.2534
Journal of Conflict Resolution	220	0	0	5	22	0.0227	0.1000
World Politics	76	0	1	4	19	0.0526	0.2500
Journal of European Public Policy	293	0	0	2	19	0.0068	0.0648
Comparative Political Studies	236	0	0	0	18	0.0000	0.0763
Journal of Common Market Studies	276	0	0	2	17	0.0072	0.0616
Journal of Politics	322	0	0	1	17	0.0031	0.0528
Public Opinion Quarterly	156	0	1	3	14	0.0192	0.0897
Political Geography	202	0	0	2	14	0.0099	0.0693
European Union Politics ^a	119	0	0	3	13	0.0252	0.1092
Journal of Peace Research	206	0	1	3	12	0.0146	0.0583
British Journal of Political Science	189	0	0	1	11	0.0053	0.0582
Political Analysis ^a	140	0	1	2	10	0.0143	0.0714
Foreign Affairs	325	0	0	0	10	0.0000	0.0308
International Studies Quarterly	155	0	0	1	9	0.0065	0.0581
Legislative Studies Quarterly	154	0	0	0	9	0.0000	0.0584
Political Psychology	213	0	0	0	9	0.0000	0.0423
Political Studies	232	0	0	2	8	0.0086	0.0345
Politics and Society	102	0	0	1	8	0.0098	0.0784
Political Communication	141	0	0	2	7	0.0142	0.0496
European Journal of Political Research	381	0	0	2	6	0.0052	0.0157
Political Research Quarterly	266	0	0	0	6	0.0000	0.0226

Table 2 (continued)

<i>Order of journals based on column 4 (then 3)</i>	<i>Column</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>
	<i>Number of articles</i>	<i>> 100 cites</i>	<i>> 50 cites</i>	<i>> 25 cites</i>	<i>> 10 cites</i>	<i>> 25/N</i>	<i>> 10/N</i>
West European Politics	245	0	0	0	6	0.0000	0.0245
Journal of Democracy	321	0	1	2	5	0.0062	0.0156
International Security	75	0	0	1	5	0.0133	0.0667
New Left Review	224	0	0	1	5	0.0045	0.0223
Electoral Studies	232	0	0	0	5	0.0000	0.0216
Political Theory	147	0	0	0	4	0.0000	0.0272
Comparative Politics	121	0	0	1	2	0.0083	0.0165
World Economy	395	0	0	0	2	0.0000	0.0051
Journal of Theoretical Politics	110	0	0	0	2	0.0000	0.0182
Party Politics	187	0	0	0	1	0.0000	0.0053
Foreign Policy	155	0	0	0	1	0.0000	0.0065
Public Choice	482	0	0	0	1	0.0000	0.0021
Human Rights Quarterly	180	0	0	0	1	0.0000	0.0056
Political Behavior	97	0	0	0	1	0.0000	0.0103
Nation	1,077	0	0	0	0	0.0000	0.0000
New Republic	1,445	0	0	0	0	0.0000	0.0000
Political Science Quarterly	121	0	0	0	0	0.0000	0.0000
Political Science	52	0	0	0	0	0.0000	0.0000
International Affairs	207	0	0	0	0	0.0000	0.0000
Review of International Studies	221	0	0	0	0	0.0000	0.0000

^aIncludes citations of articles that were published before inclusion of the journal in the SSCI. For that reason, the total number of articles published is not given by the ISI database.

Table 3: FCA score comparison of APSR and AJPS over time

Year	APSR			AJPS		
	> 100 cites	> 50 cites	> 10 cites	> 100 cites	> 50 cites	> 10 cites
1990	3	8	23	2	9	27
1991	1	10	30	1	3	30
1992	4	10	34	1	10	34
1993	3	11	41	2	6	29
1994	6	12	30	0	4	31
1995	3	6	24	0	4	34
1996	0	6	32	0	4	35
1997	0	6	27	1	2	40
1998	0	2	29	2	3	38
1999	0	3	27	0	0	27
2000	1	2	21	1	2	26
2001	0	1	14	0	0	21
2002	0	0	11	0	0	11
2003	0	1	5	0	0	2
2004	0	0	1	0	0	0

Pairwise *t*-test: (APSR > 100)–(AJPS > 100) = 0: 1.46

Pairwise *t*-test: (APSR > 50)–(AJPS > 50) = 0: 2.84

Pairwise *t*-test: (APSR > 10)–(AJPS > 10) = 0: -1.53

The APSR, the AJPS, IO, and *World Politics* enter the top ten regardless of the criterion applied. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, the JoP, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *Foreign Affairs*, and *International Security* enter the top ten four times. With the exception of Giles *et al*'s perception study, the correlations among these methods are reasonably high, but not perfect.⁴ One can observe systematic differences in the rankings. As these differences suggest, short-term success (impact factor) is not necessarily durable (perception, FCA) and quantity (number of cites) is not quality.

Not a thrilling new insight for mankind, of course, but this knowledge may still influence the publication decisions of scholars and possibly even the hiring decisions of departments. As Giles *et al* (1989: 617) note: 'We tend to attribute to an article the quality of the journal in which it appears'. Often, the 'publish or perish' business uses just the fingers of one hand to count the number of 'quality

'If nothing else, the FCA ranking demonstrates that there are more journals, but not many more, in which frequently cited articles are published.'

journals'. If nothing else, the FCA ranking demonstrates that there are more journals, but not many more, in which frequently cited articles are published. Departments that make important decisions based on reputation-based rules of thumb may be reminded of the following: ninety-two of the articles published in the APSR and seventy-six articles published in the AJPS in the 1990s have been cited fewer than five times, and many of the articles published in the field's two most recognised journals have never been cited.

Table 4: The top ten political science journals: A comparison of rankings

<i>Total cites</i>	<i>Impact factor</i>	<i>Perception index (Giles et al)</i>	<i>Perception index (Garrand)</i>	<i>FCA score (based on Table 1 column 4)</i>	<i>Standardised FCA score (based on Table 1 column 7)</i>
American Political Science Review	American Political Science Review	World Politics	American Political Science Review	American Political Science Review	International Organization
American Journal of Political Science	International Security	American Political Science Review	Journal of Politics	American Journal of Political Science	American Political Science Review
Public Opinion Quarterly	Foreign Affairs	American Journal of Political Science	American Journal of Political Science	International Organization	World Politics
International Organization	International Organization	Journal of Politics	World Politics	World Politics	American Journal of Political Science
Journal of Politics	American Journal of Political Science	Soviet Studies	Foreign Affairs	Journal of Conflict Resolution	Journal of Conflict Resolution
Journal of Conflict Resolution	Journal of Democracy	International Organization	Comparative Politics	Public Opinion Quarterly	International Security
Foreign Affairs	World Politics	Comparative Politics	British Journal of Political Science	International Security	Public Opinion Quarterly
World Politics	Foreign Policy	Slavic Review	Western Political Quarterly	Journal of Politics	Politics and Society
Public Choice	Journal of Conflict Resolution	Administrative Studies Quarterly	Public Administration Review	Foreign Affairs	British Journal of Political Science
International Security	Political Geography	British Journal of Political Science	Public Opinion Quarterly	British Journal of Political Science	Journal of Politics

Notes

1 These are Huntington (1993) (470 cites); Beck and Katz (1995) (416); Jagers and Gurr (1995) (350); Wendt (1992) (322); Mearsheimer (1990) (313), and Russett and Maoz (1993) (273) – indicating a dominance of International Relations scholars.

2 Garand (1990) suggests a score that uses the Giles *et al* ratings but adds familiarity (multiplied by ten) to this score. His results are more closely aligned with scholars' expectations (see Crewe and Norris, 1991) and with rankings based on citations (see Table 4).

3 An evaluation of short-term fluctuations in the quality of published articles needs to analyse shorter periods of time than I report in the article. I suggest that moving averages are superior to analysing changes in journal quality.

4 This result mirrors Klingemann's (1986: 655) finding that there is a 'striking similarity between the rank order of the top departments' in citation frequency and reputation rankings.

References

- Beck, N. and Katz, J. (1995) 'What to do (and not to do) with time-series cross-section data', *American Political Science Review* 89(3): 634–647.
- Christensen, J.A. and Sigelman, L. (1985) 'Accrediting knowledge. Journal stature and citation impact in social science', *Social Science Quarterly* 66(4): 964–975.
- Crewe, I. and Norris, P. (1991) 'British and American journal evaluation: divergence or convergence?' *PS: Political Science and Politics* 24: 524–531.
- Garand, J.C. (1990) 'An alternative interpretation of recent political science journal evaluations', *PS: Political Science and Politics* 23: 448–451.
- Giles, M., Miziell, F. and Patterson, D. (1989) 'Political scientists' journal evaluation revisited', *PS: Political Science and Politics* 20: 613–617.
- Huntington, S.P. (1993) 'The clash of civilizations', *Foreign Affairs* 72: 22–49.
- Jagers, K. and Gurr, T.R. (1995) 'Tracking democracy's 3rd wave with the polity III data', *Journal of Peace Research* 32(4): 469–492.
- Klingemann, H-D. (1986) 'Ranking the graduate departments in the 1980s: toward objective qualitative indicators', *PS: Political Science and Politics* 19: 651–661.
- Lester, J.A. (1990) 'Evaluating the evaluators. Accrediting knowledge and the ranking of political science journals', *PS: Political Science and Politics* 23: 445–447.
- Mearsheimer, J.J. (1990) 'Back to the future. Instability in Europe after the cold war', *International Security* 15(1): 5–56.
- Russett, B. and Maoz, Z. (1993) 'Normative and structural causes of the democratic peace', *American Political Science Review* 87(3): 624–638.
- Wendt, A. (1992) 'Anarchy is what states make of it – the social construction of power politics', *International Organization* 46(2): 391–425.

About the Author

Thomas Plümper is Reader in International Relations at the University of Essex. His research focuses on international and comparative political economy, international politics, and methods of comparative research. Currently, he works on famine mortality, models for the estimation of time-invariant and almost time-invariant variables in panel data with unit effects, and on international unions. Articles have *inter alia* been published in *International Organization*, *British Journal of Political Science*, *European Journal of Political Research*, and *Public Choice*.