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REVIEW ESSAY



## Family-friendly academic conferences: a missing link to fix the “leaky pipeline”?

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### ABSTRACT

Traveling to academic conferences to present research and network is essential for scholars to achieve success in the academy. Scholars with family obligations face barriers to participating in conferences, partly because most regional and national conferences are not organized to be family-friendly. While balancing travel to academic conferences with family responsibilities is a challenge faced by all academics, this burden can be especially high for women. As such, improving the family-friendly features of conferences could be one way to patch the “leaky pipeline” of young female scholars leaving the academy, and facilitate the movement of female faculty through the ranks from Assistant to Associate to Full Professor. We identify these barriers to conference attendance and how they might contribute to the leaky pipeline and share innovations from family-friendly small conferences that minimize these burdens. We also review what the major political science association conferences are doing to be family-friendly, and offer details about further recommended changes. Finally, we highlight one exemplary institutional policy and examples from other disciplines. Our conclusion is that there are many simple and affordable ways to make political science conferences more family-friendly and that these changes are necessary to creating an inclusive discipline.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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Women; gender; conferences; political science discipline; parenting; academy

## Introduction

For academics, a vibrant research agenda is key to landing a first job, tenure, and subsequent promotion(s). Attending and participating in academic conferences is important to this progress, but barriers to doing so exist for parents. This was evident at the 2015 American Political Science Association (APSA) Conference when parents found that their children were barred from some of the conference activities. This included a ban from the exhibit hall, the primary location where scholars network with book publishers, vendors of statistical software, and funders like the National Science Foundation. APSA officials stated that the rule was required by the conference insurance policy (Jaschik 2015), yet exclusion from this venue could mean that a scholar was unable to pitch his or her idea to a book publisher, an important first step in publishing.

This exclusion of children underscores the incompatibility of academic conferences with life as a parent, but it is not really surprising. The culture in academia is, at best, challenging to those trying to balance work and family and, at worst, intolerant of dreams of having both career and family. This hostility becomes apparent early on in one's career. A survey of more than 8,000 graduate students found that a vast majority of both male and female graduate students (74% and 84%, respectively) were either somewhat or very concerned about the family friendliness of the fields to which they aspired (Mason, Goulden, and Frasch 2009). Female graduate students and junior faculty members alike are apt to express concerns about being taken seriously as a scholar if they are seen as too interested in their family or children (Evans and Grant 2008). A concerned mother will find both advice emphasizing the importance of maintaining one's presence at conferences (Evans and Grant 2008), and recommendations to cut back on conference travel to accommodate growing one's family (Ward and Wolf-Wendel 2012).

However, solutions for the work-life balance involved in traveling to academic conferences to present research and network are mostly left out of the conversation, despite the importance of conferences to networking, the publishing process, and being perceived as an active scholar. We believe that the challenges facing those with family obligations, particularly parents and especially women, are compounded because regional and national conferences are not organized to be family friendly. It follows that improving the family-friendly features of conferences could be one way for our discipline to patch the "leaky pipeline" of young female scholars leaving the academy, and facilitate the movement of female faculty through the ranks from Assistant to Associate to Full Professor.

While our paper highlights challenges to parents more generally in conference attendance, we underscore that these burdens are especially pronounced for female scholars. This stems from women's biological role bearing children and sometimes breastfeeding, coupled with women's increased housekeeping responsibilities and the demonstrated "mommy penalty" for women in the academy (Waxman and Ispa-Landa 2016).

In this paper, we describe the "leaky pipeline," the essential nature of attending academic conferences for success through the pipeline, and the burden parents face in attending conferences. We then offer insights from small conferences with family-friendly provisions that minimize these burdens. We further review what the major political science association conferences are doing to be family friendly, but detail many more recommended changes. Finally, we highlight one exemplary institutional policy and examples from other disciplines. Our conclusion is that political science conferences could be improved so that these events are less of an obstacle for parents. We hope this paper will start conversations within academic institutions and within professional organizations toward this end. The results would be a particular benefit for mothers, thus offering a straightforward way for the discipline to prevent women from exiting the discipline.

### **Can family-friendly academic conferences help fix the "leaky pipeline"?**

The problems that women face along the path from graduate student to full professor are well documented. Women are shown to be less likely to pursue academe, to become tenured, and to gain full professorship (e.g., American Political Science Association 2005; Diascro 2011; June 2009; Wilson 2002). When they achieve full professorships, they do so at slower rates (June 2009) and as associates they report higher levels of

service, more time focused on course preparation, and less job satisfaction than their male counterparts (Misra, Lundquist, and Templer 2012; Trower 2011). Navigating the academy is even more difficult for women who face a “mommy penalty,” said to be more punishing than those in the fields of law or medicine (Waxman and Ispa-Landa 2016). Indeed, some argue that marriage and children represent the most formidable barriers holding women back in the academy (Mason, Wolfinger, and Goulden 2013).

Institutions adopt a range of policies to address issues related to parenting that attempt to prevent women’s exit from the academy, such as adding a year onto the tenure clock or providing paid family leave. However, the challenges presented by conference travel are not typically addressed by institutional policies. Yet, conference attendance and presentations are essential to success in the academic tenure track, signaling engagement with the field to one’s home institution and facilitating publishing, an increasingly important demand for academics at all types of institutions (Hesli and Lee 2011; Hesli, Lee, and Mitchell 2012). Receiving feedback on a presented paper can set scholars on a course to revising the paper for publication. Conferences also fuel publication through opportunities for increased visibility. This visibility is additionally important for making sure that scholars cite one’s work, another area where women lag behind (e.g., Maliniak, Powers, and Walter 2013). Networking and exposure of one’s work at conferences is crucial for procuring tenure and promotion reviewers. Underscoring these points, economists estimated that the hurricane canceling the 2012 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association negatively impacted publications, collaboration, and publication quality.<sup>1</sup>

Academic conferences require costly travel for which many institutions have shrinking pots of money to support. Moreover, while the institution may cover the cost of the employee’s travel, parents face challenges in making – and paying for – additional childcare arrangements in their absence. Childcare costs can be daunting, and overnight care options may be unavailable. A group of female political scientists informally gathered information from institutions about whether their travel funds could cover childcare costs. Most institutions would not; at a few institutions, it would be seen as a special exception. When funds were allowed for childcare, the amount of funds available for other travel expenses were reduced. Without childcare options, a scholar faces the significant cost of traveling to the conference with her family, which eliminates options to share rooms with colleagues in order to stretch thin budgets. Conferences run several days with little attention paid to scheduling efficiency. Attendees typically have multiple obligations spread out across many days. This, of course, adds to the logistical challenges and costs of either traveling with family or accommodating them back home.

The need to travel to conferences that are often not designed to be family friendly poses a challenge for scholars, especially women, with family obligations. As such, changing political science conferences may help to address the problem of female scholars leaving the academy in their early years on the tenure track as well as the glut of female associate professors who are not being promoted to full.

### **Lessons from small conferences: a family-friendly alternative**

Two of the authors of this paper organized a couple of mentoring conferences specializing on gender and political psychology that were attentive to creating a family-friendly experience. Our approach offers ideas for conference organizers.

In the calls for papers, we stressed that the conferences would be family friendly. We made clear that we would provide childcare options and spaces for mothers nursing babies or expressing breastmilk. We also planned the conferences to be short and focused. The days were long, but this meant that for those whose family did not travel, they were away fewer days.

We asked participants to share their needs throughout the planning process. Participants let us know if family members would be traveling with them and we were able to send tailored information of interest (e.g., child-friendly experiences and restaurants in the area). With multiple nursing mothers in attendance, we provided each with a nearby private room with personal access and refrigeration. We located hotel rooms to best suit participants' family needs and even found reliable, local caregivers who were willing to watch children for daytime and evening events. Families were welcomed at dinner on the final evening, with toys for any little ones in tow.

By asking colleagues informally about their needs, and through modest effort, we were able to minimize the barriers presented by academic conference travel. Some of these ideas were borne directly out of our own frustrations in traveling to conferences – our panels being separated by days and requiring longer separation from our small children, seeming non-stop visits to our hotel rooms to express breast milk, and the dreaded containment of a toddler in a small hotel room. When organizers pay attention to participant needs, small conferences represent a promising way to address the barriers scholars with families face in attending conferences.

### **Large association conferences: current status and recommendations for the future**

Our small conference model is quite different from what an academic parent will find at a large association conference. When considering regional and national political science association conferences, we draw from our own experiences as attendees, discussions with our colleagues, our search of each organization's website, and from answers we received from e-mail inquiries to six main international, national, and regional political science associations.<sup>2</sup> We observe few conference accommodations for families, and we argue that more attention should be put into expanding services and communicating them clearly to conference participants.

### **Childcare**

The most commonly offered service at association meetings is childcare, although in some cases it is offered at very high prices or inconvenient times or locations. Details about services are not always posted early enough for potential attendees to fully plan for their – and their family members' – travel to the conference.

For their recent conferences, the APSA listed an on-site, care option during the formal conference program. However, the website notes that “Unfortunately, children may not accompany attendees to conference sessions, services or events,” which includes public areas like the exhibit hall. For the 2016 and 2017 conferences, APSA listed a child care company, and a document on family-friendly features of the hotel properties. Information on Mamava – a portable space to pump or nurse that was available in the Convention Center – was only available in 2016.

The MPSA links to two private childcare options, which charge \$20 and \$26 an hour, and offers childcare scholarships for up to \$300, a maximum of 11–15 hours of care. MPSA's conference director reported typically fewer than nine people request the scholarship and about half of those who do end up not needing the funds. The SPSA reimburses up to 50% of the costs for in-room childcare from a local provider, and for their 2013 conference, the WPSA linked to a nearby childcare option and reimbursed up to half of participant expenses, up to \$150, incurred for childcare. The ISA website lists an affordable, on-site childcare option for their conference more than eight months in advance; this allows potential attendees to weigh their options ahead of time as to whether they will take their children and/or a caretaker, or leave them at home. Since 2015, the ISPP provides a list of childcare options offered through the conference hotels. As childcare options are arguably one of the more important family accommodations to offer, it is a good start that most organizations offer options.

While the major political science associations connect families with childcare, associations should adopt policies to assess and improve these options to meet member demand. For instance, SPSA told us that offering a childcare room was deemed too expensive for the number of families served, leading them in 2015 to pursue subsidizing an in-room childcare option. This approach balances organizational costs with member needs.

In selecting conference locations, we have listed several considerations for conference organizers (see column 1 in Table 1). Ideally, organizations should post childcare options and costs well before conference submissions are due (like ISA does), so that potential participants can assess costs and make plans. Offerings should be convenient, affordable, and/or offset through reimbursement or scholarships. Further, care should be appealing and engaging for a wide range of ages of children, including those with

**Table 1.** Family-friendly features conferences should adopt.

Childcare options	Association planning and communication	Support breastfeeding	Conference scheduling	Other features
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Communicate options, cost prior to proposal deadline</li> <li>✓ Bonded, background checks</li> <li>✓ On-site</li> <li>✓ Affordable</li> <li>✓ Scholarships or reimbursement</li> <li>✓ Evening/extended hours</li> <li>✓ Appeal for all ages</li> <li>✓ Accommodate special needs</li> <li>✓ Flexible, drop in/out</li> <li>✓ Provide meals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Permanent association website tab for family-friendly policies</li> <li>✓ Clearly appointed "point person" within association staff</li> <li>✓ Clear policy on children's attendance at events, panels</li> <li>✓ Prioritize family-friendly elements in location selection</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Provide clean, quiet spaces to pump, nurse</li> <li>✓ Provide spaces at all hotels</li> <li>✓ Communicate nursing spaces</li> <li>✓ Easily accessible, near meeting spaces</li> <li>✓ Provide refrigerator access for storage</li> <li>✓ Assistance flying breast milk home</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Reduce conference days</li> <li>✓ Adjust scheduling algorithm to narrow time between obligations</li> <li>✓ Allow participants to select day they are unavailable</li> <li>✓ Virtual conferencing options</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Family/kids registration desk</li> <li>✓ Free child/family/caregiver registration and name badges</li> <li>✓ Provide a list of "family-friendly" options in conference city</li> <li>✓ Play room for caretakers with children</li> <li>✓ Offer enriching activities for older children</li> <li>✓ Schedule one family-friendly reception</li> <li>✓ Discounted family suites</li> </ul>

special needs. We speculate that the low usage of childcare relates not to parents having a multitude of other, preferable options, but rather that the childcare options are just not accommodating enough or posted with enough advance to outweigh other means of providing care for one's children.

## Beyond childcare

Our associations need to think beyond childcare toward how the conference experience can be improved for academics balancing family responsibilities. While not exhaustive, [Table 1](#) details some ideas; we explore a few of the most promising in greater depth.

## Association planning and communication

Associations could retain a family-friendly point person whom participants and potential participants could contact with questions. The role of this staff member would be to encourage the association's strong consideration of family-friendly elements (such as proximity to or access to affordable childcare, affordability of the conference city, hotel or space layout, or timing) much earlier in the planning process – when *securing* the conference location. This staff person could also guide the association toward clear policies (e.g., children's attendance at panels) and lead efforts to clearly communicate policies and offerings to members. Formalizing policies within the associations is crucial. Each time a conference contract is secured, the point person could consider more details on how the venue can support attendees with family obligations such as recommending child-friendly options nearby.

## Support breastfeeding women

Breastfeeding mothers face unique challenges at conferences both when their infants accompany them and when they do not (or cannot) come. Associations should ensure that there are clean, private, and quiet breast-pumping and breastfeeding spaces easily accessible and near to the conference happenings, with refrigerator access for storing milk. The conference program should clearly indicate what spaces are available and how to access them. This allows a breastfeeding woman to select a hotel based on these amenities. In the cases where conferences span multiple hotels, facilities should be provided at each location. One colleague reported that at two separate APSA conferences her panels were not located in the same hotel as the pumping accommodations.

## Conference scheduling

The conference agenda matters, too. An element that helps scholars balance work–family demands is to reduce travel time. To the extent that the scheduling algorithm can narrow time between conference obligations (e.g., putting presentations and discussant duties close together), less upheaval is created within a participant's family. For some parents, particularly from dual-income households, weekdays are better than weekend days in terms of the amount of stress and rearranging out-of-town travel puts on a home. One way to accomplish this would be reducing the number of days overall for the conferences



– for example, from five days to four. One colleague stated that she could “just about do it for 2–3 days” but that when “my presentations are scheduled on days one and four, this forces me to choose, and erodes my opportunities to network (which can be the whole point).”

We note that through the efforts of APSA members, the APSA conference has moved away from Labor Day weekend, a date that was distasteful to parents of school-age children, in addition to coinciding with the semester start. The grassroots efforts among both male and female scholars that produced such a change indicate that there is clear demand for change to make conferences compatible with busy family life.

## Other features

Associations can do more to welcome families to conferences. Simple things can signal a welcoming atmosphere, for example, a children’s registration desk with coloring sheets and a station to create-your-own nametag, book room goodies, and a list of child-friendly restaurants and activities nearby. SPSA, for example, gives out children’s badges at registration. Offering amenities such as discounted family suites could make the stay more manageable. We have heard more than one story from colleagues who spent hours sitting in a cramped hotel bathroom or hiding under covers reading papers after bedtime to avoid waking sleeping children.

Conferences could be an opportunity to offer enrichment for older children traveling with their parents. In other disciplines such as history, associations offer enriching camps for older children or hold a “kid conference” within the conference. Political scientists could lead sessions on topics of interest.

At a minimum, associations could specify one reception where it is clearly communicated that families are welcome. In addition to allowing networking opportunities for families, such an event would provide an important support for trailing spouses or caretakers of children who have done the difficult job of entertaining children in small hotel rooms and hotel lobbies while the other parent presents or networks. A colleague in another field noted that she had attended “an evening wine reception at a very fun all-ages science center” which was “very innovative and family-friendly.” Another colleague described an example of a family-oriented gathering at an academic conference; everyone had a great time and she conveyed that it was so refreshing to meet colleagues in the discipline with their children. Such an event would also serve to normalize having children in the academy as well as connect junior scholars with all-important role models to assist with their work–family balancing act. It is possible that there are spaces in our scholarly community where scholars do include children (e.g., section meetings), which would indicate that change is both possible and happening.

## Creative ideas from other disciplines

We posted an informal inquiry to the “Scholar Mom Society” Facebook page, asking participants for ideas for making academic conferences more family friendly. We thought perhaps other disciplines have figured out how to help those in the field balance conference travel with family life. That does not seem to be the case. Across fields, there is frustration with the timing of conferences, the long separation between assigned roles, a lack of



good and affordable childcare, and cultures that discourage parents and mothers in particular from revealing or displaying their roles as parents or caregivers. Even still, we found one excellent example in the Digital Humanities Summer Institute that offers a summer workshop and a concurrent week-long childcare camp.

### Family-friendly conference travel policies for institutions

While conferences should change, support should also come from our institutions. A summary of these recommendations can be found in [Table 2](#).

One exemplary institutional policy is Princeton University’s commitment to pay for not only an employee’s conference travel, but also for dependent care while the employee attends the conference.<sup>3</sup> We know of other institutions that offer limited versions of this policy (e.g., West Virginia University), and some that will reimburse the expense but only up to the amount specified for conference travel. Recall our informal survey indicated many institutions are unwilling to provide this type of support. Princeton’s policy recognizes that extended travel for work, even with reimbursement for travel expenses, creates financial burdens for the costs of care, in addition to the lost labor (e.g., grocery shopping, laundry) adults normally do on the weekend. Institutions ought to create supplementary funding – above and beyond the funds provided for the travel itself – to support dependent care during an employee’s conference travel. This recommendation aligns with the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) Statement of Principles on Family Responsibilities and Academic Work (2014).

At many institutions, conference funding expires yearly, in a “use it or lose it” fashion. These policies detract from the flexibility that would help scholars balance family life with conference travel. Specifically, during certain periods, for example, when one has a newborn child, travel to conferences may not be possible. When the barriers to travel lighten, a scholar may want to attend multiple conferences, only to find the funds are depleted. Rollover funding – and flexible systems where faculty have individual travel accounts to spend when and how best fits with their family demand – should be adopted. Similar to how institutions offer family leave or tenure clock delays for each pregnancy or adoption, institutions could deposit money in an employee’s conference travel account to cover expenses such as dependent care at conferences, flight costs for children, or shipping costs to transport expressed breastmilk home from a conference location (Zarya 2015).

### Obstacles

For conferences to become more family friendly, challenges are likely to come from our academic institutions, professional academic associations, and even the members of the

**Table 2.** Family-friendly conference policies institutions should adopt.

- 
- ✓ Provide faculty with flexible accounts to spend on conference travel
  - ✓ Allow faculty to “roll over” unused conference funds
  - ✓ Provide funding for dependent care during employee conference travel
  - ✓ Funds should allow transport of expressed breastmilk back from conference site
  - ✓ Provide funding to supplement flight costs to conferences for young children
  - ✓ Deposit funds into a faculty member’s conference travel account for each pregnancy or adoption
-

organizations. These barriers may stem from logistical, financial, or cultural concerns. Power dynamics within organizations and institutions create barriers even to the solutions that could work. Our goal in this paper is to present a list of suggestions to start a conversation with the hope that all stakeholders will be involved in the discussion of potential solutions.

Feasibility and costs will be different for every conference, association, and university. As a result, we are limited in our ability to make further recommendations, though we anticipate that some of our suggestions will be easy to implement and others will be hard. Stakeholders will look at the list and filter what might be possible through their institutional lens. For example, some university budget models may not allow for rollover funds or providing additional conference funding to accommodate a dependent for faculty who are state employees may violate state law.

As with policies like family leave, pre-tenure faculty are most likely to be negatively affected by the absence family-friendly conference policies, but they may also have the least power or voice in advocating for changes such as those proposed here. We argue that if colleges and universities want to recruit and retain women faculty, these policies need to be considered, and we call to tenured faculty to take up this cause. Where they exist, faculty unions could become engaged. A local AAUP chapter could assist specifically in advocating for supplementary conference funding for dependent care (which is included in the AAUP's Statement of Principles on Family Responsibilities and Academic Work).

## Conclusion

Conference travel is a necessity for success in the academy that presents an unaddressed work-life challenge facing scholars, particularly women. Thus, making conferences more family friendly is one way to address the "leaky pipeline" in the academy. By prioritizing changes to conferences themselves and adopting policies that facilitate flexibility for conference travel, political science conferences can become less of an obstacle to scholars seeking both work-life balance and the opportunity to compete for that first job, obtain tenure, or secure a promotion. Moreover, many of these simple and affordable recommendations can be imported to other similar academic situations such as invited talks, smaller conferences, job market interviews, and fieldwork. We are certain that we are not the first scholars to decline such professionally important activities because of our family needs.

As a discipline, we need to think critically about how our association meetings convey who we are and the culture we would like to foster in our corner of academia. Specifically, the current lack of attention to both creating family-friendly events and supporting scholars' need to attend them conveys that we are a discipline where scholars with care responsibilities are unwelcome and unsupported, regardless of their gender or family dynamics. We should, therefore, be unsurprised that some – particularly women – frequently choose to leave the academy in order to find alternatives that allow them to be more present for their families. Key changes, like those we have described, can serve to humanize our field, creating a culture that nurtures both our personal and professional lives.

## Notes


1. See <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/lost-storm-how-hurricane-blew-through-political-science>.
2. We contacted the APSA, Midwest Political Science Association (MPSA), Southern Political Science Association (SPSA), International Studies Association (ISA), Western Political Science Association (WPSA), and the International Society for Political Psychology (ISPP). We had a 30% response rate.
3. [http://www.princeton.edu/dof/policies/family\\_friendly/family\\_friendly/](http://www.princeton.edu/dof/policies/family_friendly/family_friendly/).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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