

## Revitalizing Conferences: Empowering Global Political Science through Inclusiveness

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### Abstract

*The 2023 IPSA World Congress in Buenos Aires showcased the transformative power of inclusiveness in academic conferences. While online gatherings have broadened access, this in-person event underscored the need for diversity and accessibility. Financial, visa, and language barriers often exclude students, scholars from the Global South, and marginalized voices. To address this, academic associations should actively involve students, provide travel support, and select conference locations thoughtfully. The IPSA Congress exemplified this approach, enabling students to organize panels and aiding Global South scholars through grants and regional collaborations. Such initiatives enhance the discipline's relevance, enriching cross-cultural dialogues and fostering equitable representation in political science.*

### Keywords

Inclusivity; Academic conferences; Global South scholars; Political Science; Diversity

The World Congress of Political Science, organized by the International Political Science Association (IPSA) in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on 15-19 July 2023, was the first in-person Congress since 2018. For many students and young scholars, it was the first academic conference in their careers. Although the last few years, characterized by upending norms and traditions, proved that online conferences are valuable in making academia more accessible, returning to in-person meetings and presentations was nonetheless welcome. As witnessed at the Congress in Buenos Aires, the convergence of intellectually curious people in one place creates a unique atmosphere where researchers from diverse domains of Political Science can further the horizons of their discipline. However, academic conferences are also an opportunity for Political Science as a discipline to become more inclusive and accessible by encouraging the participation of students and helping academics from the Global South to join discussions. Through this dialogue of researchers from different backgrounds, political science can stay relevant in the ever-changing world.

## Importance of Diversity at Academic Conferences

Although the Political Science academia is diverse, Political Science conferences tend not to reflect that diversity due to high entry barriers. Such barriers include financial costs, inaccessible destinations with restrictive visa policies, and language barriers (conferences are conducted primarily in English). These obstacles deter students, scholars from the Global South, and researchers from marginalized backgrounds from attending a conference. As a result, the conference audience is composed primarily of attendees who have the financial means, a privileged passport, and sufficient knowledge of English – which are scholars from the Global North who have access to research grants or university funding. Such an atmosphere is conducive to creating echo chambers attended by people discussing the same ideas. Including students and researchers from the Global South is essential to the relevance of the discipline of political science.

### *Supporting students to attend academic conferences*

Including students in academic conferences benefits all parties – students, academic associations, and established political scientists. Undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate students should have a chance to attend professional academic conventions to learn how to present their research, build their network, and expand their knowledge regarding what they want to do in their careers. Students may also bring new perspectives to existing research as they approach solving issues from a different angle than senior scholars. Including students is also beneficial for established academics who can dialogue with the younger generation of political scientists and learn about the issues that matter to them. The intergenerational dialogue in political science is a win-win for both sides of the conversation.

Usually, academic events are formally open to students, but professional associations need to provide more guidance and support in involving students in their conferences. For example, having dedicated conference staff members working on including students in the conference program can help to attract more students to attend their first academic conference. It is also possible to cooperate with student Political Science associations at universities in the city where the conference is being held. There should be opportunities for students to organize entirely student-run panels, where students can experience being a panel chair, discussant, or presenter. Certain conference sessions can choose to reserve a spot for a student presenter and promote it through the conference organizers. As a result of these efforts, conferences can become more inclusive to students, and there will be more interest in pursuing academic careers among undergraduate students, while graduate and postgraduate students will have an easier time launching their careers.

*Supporting Global South scholars*

The participation of researchers from the Global South is also highly important for the better development of political science. Although access to conferences has been greatly improved through a virtual component used extensively during the COVID-19 pandemic, there should be other options for including academics from the Global South. The in-person conferences provide an excellent venue for networking and presenting one's research. Sometimes, a conference can be the only venue for non-privileged scholars to receive feedback on their work. It is without doubt that the existing model of in-person conferences is far from perfect. However, academic meetings are still one of the primary ways for scholars of Political Science to build their careers. Unfortunately, scholars from the Global South face numerous hidden costs and challenges, be it visa problems, higher costs of inter-continental travelling, restrictions on work hours when staying in country destinations, bureaucratic issues, etc. Such issues pile up and create obstacles in building an academic career. Thus, the measures to counteract difficulties faced by Global South researchers in academic conferences are essential if the scholars of political science desire for their discipline to be equitable and reflect the diversity of issues being researched.

Academic associations can support political science scholars from the Global South in various ways. Those include travel grants, choosing more affordable and less visa-restrictive countries, providing support for obtaining visas by setting early submission deadlines for people in need of a visa, offering discounted registration fees based on a country of residence, and hosting regional conferences in the Global South regions to provide an opportunity for local scholars to present their research. Making academic conferences more inclusive to the attendees from the Global South will bring the perspectives and experiences of researchers from underrepresented countries in academia, which are vital in filling the gaps in knowledge that scholars from the Global North might lack the capacity to bridge. Ultimately, a diverse body of conference attendees fosters a cross-cultural dialogue that improves connections between scholars, universities, and institutions from countries far away from each other.

### **Improving Student Participation at the IPSA World Congress**

The IPSA World Congress in Buenos Aires welcomed student representatives from the International Association for Political Science Students (IAPSS). As is tradition, IAPSS has sent a delegation consisting of Political Science students to participate in student-run panels. Usually, IPSA provides IAPSS with an opportunity to host one panel, but this year,

IAPSS organized two panels. The organization of one of the panels took place in partnership with students from Seoul National University who came to the Congress with their Professor Euiyoung Kim, the Co-Chair of the World Congress Program. The first panel focused on assessing the effect of civic education on civil politics and the quality of democracy. In the second panel, the participants presented their research on political change and democratization in contemporary Latin America. The students took the full initiative in organizing these sessions, formulating the panel themes, and sending invitations to fellow students for paper submissions. Additionally, they assumed the roles of chairs and discussants in the panel discussions.

The experience of attending the IPSA World Congress has proven to be critical for the professional development of political science students who participated at the Congress as part of the IAPSS delegation. Large academic conferences can be intimidating for early-career scholars. The joint opportunity between IPSA and IAPSS gave students an opportunity to practice their research and presentation skills and receive valuable feedback on their work. Moreover, the cooperation between IAPSS members and students from South Korea through a co-organized panel has shown the high-reaching potential of transnational research collaboration when students are given the space to do so. The financial support of IPSA for the IAPSS delegation was done via two approaches: IPSA Travel Grants, and direct financial aid to IAPSS to cover the travel expenses of student representatives. The financial aid has helped bring six students to Congress who would not otherwise be able to travel to the conference. This model of supporting students logistically and financially should serve as an example for academic associations that wish to support the young scholars of their discipline who aspire to build an academic career.

### **Supporting Researchers from the Global South to Attend IPSA World Congress**

For this year's Congress, IPSA has put forth several initiatives to welcome as many Global South scholars as possible. The membership and registration fee structures were redesigned to be based on the country of residence of the Congress delegate, making the event more accessible for attendees from lower-income countries. IPSA has also provided Travel Grants that covered the cost of membership and registration and partially reimbursed the travel expenses. The location of the Congress venue in Argentina was also helpful in being more accessible for delegates from Latin America. Although there is no one effective solution for bringing more scholars from the Global South to academic conferences, the

experience of IPSA shows that many small steps can increase the accessibility of an international academic conference.

The 2023 Congress was organized in partnership with Sociedad Argentina de Análisis Político (SAAP), which helped with the event's organization in Buenos Aires. This year the IPSA Congress overlapped with the SAAP National Congress, providing the opportunity for local scholars to attend both events at the same time. In addition, the Local Organizing Committee Session at the IPSA Congress was organized in collaboration with representatives from neighboring countries' political science associations: the Latin American Studies Association (ALACIP), the Mexican Political Science Association, the Colombian Political Science Association, and the Brazilian Political Science Association. As a result, the Congress participants benefited from more than 170 panels on topics related to Latin America.<sup>12</sup> More than 43% of registered participants came from a South American country (38% of onsite participants).<sup>13</sup> The combination of efforts to organize the Congress in an affordable destination and including local researchers in organizing the Congress program resulted in an opportunity for hundreds of scholars based in Latin America to present their research on issues that mattered to them.

## **Conclusion**

Inclusivity, diversity, and equality of opportunity should not be only buzzwords but tangible goals for scholars and practitioners of political science. Although those goals may seem unachievable at times, incremental progress in making political science more accessible is being made through small-scale initiatives to help students, scholars from the Global South, and researchers from marginalized backgrounds, as was done at the 2023 IPSA World Congress. The actions outlined above may not represent the ideal approach for improving diversity at academic conferences. There is a potential to build upon current ideas and allocate more significant resources to improve access opportunities for scholars in the field of political science. As long as a genuine determination in professional political science associations exists to support scholars from less privileged backgrounds, novel concepts, and resources will naturally emerge.

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<sup>12</sup> Program Sessions, The 27<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Political Science, IPSA, 2023.

<https://wc2023.ipsa.org/wc/sessions>

<sup>13</sup> Oñate, P. 2023. Message from the IPSA President, 12 September 2023. <https://conta.cc/48c3R4e>.

### **Disclaimer**

Oleksii Zahreba is the President of the International Association for Political Science Students (IAPSS) and administrative assistant at the International Political Science Association (IPSA). He worked at IPSA to organize the 2023 World Congress of Political Science in Buenos Aires.