

## Notes from the Editors: The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) Guidelines for Ethical Reviews and Suspicions about Plagiarism

Reviewers serve a crucial role in academic journals, and we greatly appreciate the advice and feedback they provide to *American Political Science Review* authors and to our editorial team. Although the review process can be cumbersome and time-consuming, we would not be able to evaluate manuscripts or provide constructive feedback to our authors without these reviews.

While countless scholars serve as reviewers, many fewer know about the [Committee on Publication Ethics \(COPE\)](#), which provides guidance about ethical practices to assist reviewers as well as editors, authors, and others involved in the publication process. COPE helps us navigate a range of dilemmas that can arise in the review and publication process. For over 25 years, COPE has had the [objective](#) “of moving the culture of publishing towards one where ethical practices become a normal part of the publishing culture.” As part of this objective, it has developed a [strategic plan](#) to promote “scholarly integrity” in publishing. In this “Notes from the Editors,” we provide information about COPE guidelines for ethical publishing. Our primary intent is to provide clarification about conflicts of interest (COI) and how we respond to plagiarism allegations.

Among the efforts on which our team has focused since beginning our work as editors in June 2020 has been ensuring that ethical standards are upheld at every stage of the review process. In a previous “Notes from the Editors” (2021, v), we explained that we have “implement[ed] a system for considering ethical issues as part of our review process ... [to] provide a foundation for further advances in ensuring that scholarship with human participants is ethical.” In addition, it is unethical for reviewers to have serious conflicts of interest with authors.

### WHAT CONSTITUTES A CONFLICT OF INTEREST?

As scholars, we know that we should not review papers if we have a significant conflict of interest with the author(s) or with the research in question. But what, exactly, constitutes such a conflict? In its [Guidelines on Good Publication Practice](#) (1999), COPE explains that a conflict of interest occurs when authors, reviewers, or editors have interests that are “not fully apparent and which may influence [their] judgment” on what is published, and “[t]hey have been described as those which, when revealed later, would make a reasonable reader feel misled or deceived.” In addition, the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors

(ICMJE) explains that a [COI exists](#) “when professional judgment concerning a primary interest... may be influenced by a secondary interest.” These secondary interests may include issues such as a reviewer who works in the same institution as an author. A conflict of interest is also likely to exist if a reviewer has already read parts of a manuscript, read a manuscript in its entirety, and given extensive feedback on it in an academic or other context.

In addition to these relatively clear-cut conflicts, other COIs may be less obvious. For example, there is a COI in cases in which a scholar has mentored or been a mentee of an author(s) recently (usually within the past 3 years). Other examples of conflicting relationships include those in which a reviewer has had another type of close relationship or collaboration with an author, such as a familial relationship or being a co-investigator on a grant project. COPE guidelines also recommend that reviewers decline review requests if they are *only* interested in reading manuscripts to advance their own research agendas rather than to provide disinterested guidance to the author. [COPE refers to such cases](#) as those in which reviewers agree to read manuscripts “just to gain sight of it with no intention of submitting a review” or because the research topic is similar to one the reviewer is working on.

What about a reviewer who knows, or very strongly suspects that they know, an author’s identity? In cases such as these, COPE recommends that prospective reviewers inform the editors as soon as possible, and preferably before beginning to write the review, particularly if they believe that this knowledge may pose a potential competing or conflict of interest.

However, although it is technically unethical to agree to review a *friend’s* paper, editors might nonetheless decide to proceed with a reviewer who believes they know who wrote a paper if they believe that the reviewer is still able to provide a helpful assessment. Some authors’ profiles are so distinctive and some areas of research have such focused communities that it may be quite difficult to secure subject matter experts to serve as reviewers who do not know or cannot make a reasonable guess as to the identity of an author. In these situations, the fundamental question is whether the reviewer can provide a fair and unbiased review.

Please inform the editors of any other potential conflicting interests. If you are unsure, it is better to err on the side of caution and check with the editors. Please refrain from reading a manuscript or any supplementary materials until they have responded to your query. If there is indeed a conflict, the editors will acknowledge your willingness to serve, but will then select another reviewer.

## PLAGIARISM

These are just a few of the issues involving conflicts of interests, but other ethical dilemmas, such as plagiarism allegations, also surface during the review process. Plagiarism may have taken place at various stages of the research process, including while designing or conducting the research, writing the manuscript, or while a manuscript is out for review.

COPE classifies different levels of plagiarism. First, an obvious example of plagiarism involves the “unattributed use of large portions of text and/or data; presented as if they were by the plagiarist” (e.g., see [COPE Case 02-11](#)). Second, an author may repeat information included in a previously published manuscript that they themselves have written. Third, the author(s) may have copied data, a phrase, or phrases from another source. Finally, ideas themselves may be subject to plagiarism (e.g., see [Weyland 2007](#)), even if the author does not directly copy the language in which the originator expressed them.

In the case of these or any other suspected ethical violations, reviewers can be crucial partners in the enterprise of maintaining scholarly integrity. As editors, we encourage individuals to inform us immediately of any possible plagiarism or other ethical concerns. As COPE advises, we recommend that scholars who have found these violations contact our lead editors rather than attempting to identify and question the author(s), notify individuals whose work they believe has been plagiarized, or undertake additional investigations of the matter. We endorse COPE’s suggestion that individuals refrain from investigating these allegations and only provide additional information if it is requested.

When we are informed of possible plagiarism, we follow the process outlined in COPE’s guidelines. After thanking the individual who provided the information, we then investigate the concerns about which we have been informed. We first try to determine whether any proof exists of plagiarism, if it has not already been provided. If plagiarism is apparent, we then attempt to determine its degree of severity. If our investigation concludes that there is strong evidence of plagiarism, we first send a formal email to the author(s) informing the author(s) of our findings. The email includes any evidence we have discovered to support the plagiarism claims and will request a response from the author. Our next actions will depend on how and whether the author responds.

If the author responds with what COPE defines as a “Satisfactory explanation (honest error/journal instructions unclear/very junior researcher),” the editors will explain that this is nevertheless unacceptable, decide whether to reject the article or allow a revision, and inform the reviewers and the author(s) of the final decision. If the author(s) provides no response, the editors will then contact the author(s) of the manuscript’s administration (department chair, deans, or other superior) and/or person responsible for research ethics.

If no one responds, the editors will inform the reviewers of any decisions they make about rejecting the manuscript. They will also continue to contact the author(s) of the manuscript’s institution(s) every three to six months until a response is received. If the institution continues its failure to respond, the editors will decide whether to contact other research ethics authorities. COPE recommends contacting the Office of Research Integrity (ORI) for American authors. If the allegation is less serious, involving, for example, minor copying, the editors will nonetheless conduct an investigation. They will first contact the author(s) informing them of the allegation and request a re-writing of the copied information in their own words and the inclusion of references or a re-writing of the information as a direct quote with references. After this change is made, the editors will discuss the issues and changes without notifying reviewer(s) and allow the review process to continue.

If the author admits guilt (or denies guilt but the editors are unable to rule out plagiarism<sup>1</sup>), the *APSR* editors will then inform all of the manuscript’s authors of the consequences for the manuscript. These will include rejection of the manuscript, and in the case of serious plagiarism, they may include other sanctions as well, such as informing the administration and research offices at the individual’s institution as well as the author of the plagiarized source. It is also possible that upon investigation of the evidence and the response from the author(s), we will conclude that no violation has occurred. Regardless, after the matter has been resolved, the author(s) and reviewer(s) who notified us of the concern will receive an update about the final resolution.

In some cases, allegations of plagiarism are made after a paper has been already been published. In a circumstance such as this, the editors will express their appreciation to the individual who has reached out and will then investigate and assess the evidence. After determining whether or not a violation has occurred, and if so, the extent and severity of the violation, they will ask the author(s) to address the allegations. The author then has the option of responding in one of three ways: admit guilt, claim that the plagiarism was not intentional, or deny that plagiarism has occurred. The editors will then follow the same process as that outlined above and may also do the following: publish a notice that informs academic and other communities that plagiarism has occurred, refuse to accept future manuscripts from the author(s) of the plagiarized piece, retract the published paper, and inform relevant research offices. In extreme cases, [COPE guidance recommends retraction](#) of plagiarized published articles.

<sup>1</sup> If the author denies guilt, but the editors are unpersuaded by the author explanation, they may invite a suitably neutral third party, usually a senior scholar with sufficient expertise in the area of concern, to provide an independent assessment and advice.

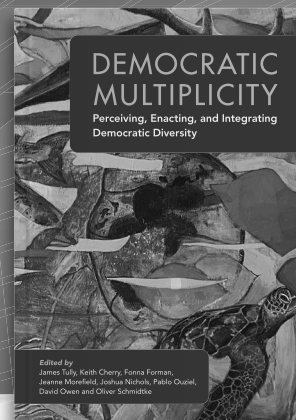
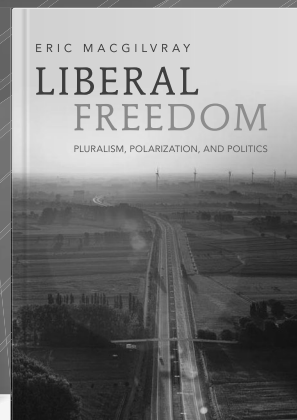
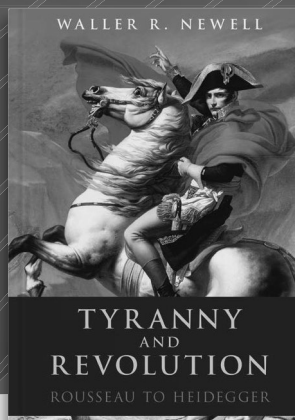
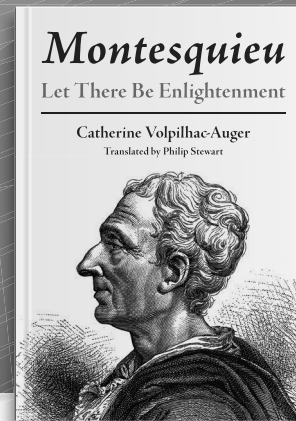
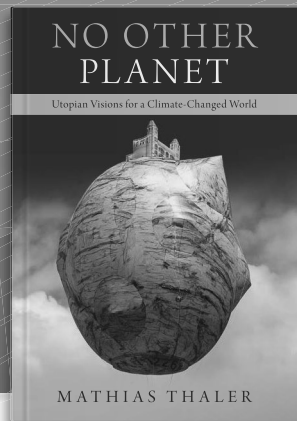
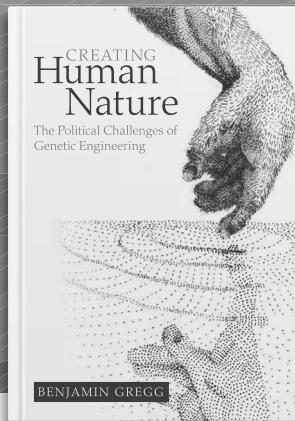
These are just some of the helpful guidelines and suggestions offered by COPE to assist editors, reviewers, and authors as they attempt to publish scholarly research that meets the highest standards of integrity. Interested readers can learn more about COPE [here](#).

## REFERENCE

- “Notes from the Editors.” 2021. *American Political Science Review* 115(1): v–viii.
- Weyland, Kurt. 2007. “How to Assess Plagiarism of Ideas?” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 40(2): 375–76.

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