

Whether and How to Apply to Ph.D. Programs in Political Science: FAQs

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1 On a humble note

I first wrote a version of this document in 2010. Since then, the academy in general and political science/government departments specifically have undergone significant structural changes. Even at well-endowed elite schools, the fallout from the Great Recession has reinforced long-standing competitive and financial pressures, the results of which remain difficult to predict. For example, the number of available Ph.D. funding packages has been in flux, and departments have been experimenting with different models: cut the number of available packages while increasing the benefits that admitted students receive; stratify funding packages in order to maintain or even increase the number of admitted students; and/or impose tougher review procedures in order to dismiss underperforming students over time. Equally relevant, by having faculty assume additional administrative tasks, their generosity to lend time and support for hands-on training of graduate students can no longer be taken for granted. One way to cope with the time crunch is for faculty to choose favorites, thus opening a chasm, invisible to outsiders, between students that are mentored and students that are left to fight for themselves.

There is good news, too. Departments have taken inspired steps to professionalize their Ph.D. students for an increasingly competitive job market. They have also rewritten program requirements to shorten time to degree so that graduate students can pursue non-academic careers. Long stigmatized, the pursuit of extra-academic job opportunities is now being actively promoted. The academy has caught up to the realities of project-based employment.

Amidst this uncertainty, more than ever, I offer the following answers with humility. As you reflect on whether and where to apply for a Ph.D., reach out to as many informed people in the academy and beyond as you can. Try to stay clear of those who claim that the academy is doomed as a place to work and

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thrive, and also those who believe that there is no more rewarding career than an academic one, or that pursuing a Ph.D. is non-sensical if you don't want to work at a college or university. To stay on top of professional developments in the academy, monitor the vigorous debate on the platforms of the Chronicle of Higher Education. For trajectories specific to political science, consult the resources provided by the American Political Science Association.

2 Do I need a Ph.D. to attain my professional goals?

Before applying, you must seriously consider what kinds of professional experience you are foregoing by entering a Ph.D. program for 5+ years. Since you must obtain a Ph.D. in order to become an academic, I will focus on this particular career path. That said, extra-academic careers for Ph.D. graduates have gained in importance recently.

3 What do academics do?

In everyday practice, an academic job entails a variable combination of two things: the conduct of rigorous research in a sub-field of your choice and/or instruction of political science undergraduates (primarily), and graduate students (secondarily).

4 Don't academics do more than read, write, and teach?

You may have encountered plenty of academics who transfer in and out of the policy world, for example, by testifying before Congress, working at non-profit think tanks, assuming a position in the government, or appearing on television news programs. This is true, but remember that in the absence of a solid research foundation, the academics you have in mind would not have access to the public sphere. They rarely put their academic jobs on hold, which means that they continue to be accountable to the institutions that employ them. Remember also that academics, should they ever enter the public sphere, do so much later in their professional lives than non-academics. Research and teaching always come first, policy second.

5 Should I obtain a Ph.D. if I want to primarily work in government or public policy?

It depends on what kind of policy work you see yourself doing in the future. I recommend that you peruse the educational credentials of those individuals

in your age cohort who hold the kinds of positions in government, think tanks, and the like that you aspire to holding. A relatively small number of them will have earned Ph.D.'s. Why? Because a terminal M.A. degree remains a strong enough signal of professional competence. What a Ph.D. in government or public policy tends to add to your portfolio is the option of landing an adjunct teaching position. But see how the weight of the equation has shifted: Policy now comes first, your research concerns are driven by your policy audience(s), and teaching comes last. Please consult with your faculty and preceptor as you are crafting a list of programs to apply to. As a general guideline, geographical proximity to the centers of policy pays off. Incidentally, academic institutions in and around DC, New York, and Boston offer Ph.D. programs that are tailored to those whose ambition is to enter the policy sector.

6 As someone primarily interested in an academic career, to what programs should I apply?

The academic job market is highly competitive. To maximize the likelihood of receiving rigorous training and appropriate job market preparation, you must aim high. Ph.D. candidates on the job market move laterally and down; they rarely move up. This does not mean that you simply apply to the top 10-15 political science programs as listed in the most recent edition of U.S. News and World Report. It does mean that you build a top-heavy portfolio of at least eight schools. Substantive fit matters most. As you research the top departments, you will learn that the breadth of their substantive coverage outperforms the lesser programs. Why? Because they are able to throw much more money at doctoral education. That said, there are top 10 programs which may not be very strong in your chosen specialty. Moreover, there are plenty of very fine programs outside of the top 10 which offer expertise in an area that you may want to study. It would be foolish not to apply to these. As you finalize your list of schools, solicit feedback from faculty and graduate students who have recently had to make the same choices you are facing.

7 As someone primarily interested in an academic career, should I even apply to a 2nd tier Ph.D. program?

There is little agreement about where the 1st tier ends and the 2nd tier begins. Some faculty think that the top ten programs exhaust the 1st tier. If you are swayed by this exclusivist mentality, you should definitely add some 2nd tier schools to your portfolio. Generally speaking, there are between 15 and 30 Ph.D. programs in the United States which offer rigorous training in the sub-discipline of your choice. Please talk to faculty and graduate students about how to identify the dozen or so schools that best match your substantive

interests. Faculty in particular may be knowledgeable about a crucial piece of information: the mobility of their peers. It would be unfortunate to apply to a given program because of Professor X, only to learn upon admission that Professor X is set to retire the year you would arrive, or has decided to take up a position at another institution.

The discussion about tiers in doctoral education tacitly presumes that every graduate student wants to maximize professional mobility after graduation. It is certainly true, all else equal, that the higher the prestige of your department, the more likely you are to find an academic job anywhere, including in many academic systems outside the United States. Over the years, however, I have encountered plenty of students who, for various reasons, choose to target a particular geographic area for employment. They don't see themselves relocate to Florence or Singapore; they can't envision working in most of the continental U.S. If you are one of these prospective students, you may want to apply a different heuristic for choosing Ph.D. programs. Pick the best programs in your target region, and go from there. To be sure, you do not want to compromise on quality altogether. And you must prepare for the day when you will compete against the hyper-mobile crowd from the top schools in the country. Still, many colleges recruit from within their region.

8 How do I maximize my chances of getting into a top academic Ph.D. program?

Let me be frank: You cannot “game” the admissions process. The error term is simply too large. Your stellar application may be rejected, because you are someone who wants to study mobilization by insurgent groups, and department X is about to lose the faculty member who happens to study insurgency; or, because department X, in the previous year, admitted a couple of students who study similar things; or, because department X's admissions committee does not count a faculty in your sub-field among its members, and proceeds to ignore all the files that fall outside their areas of expertise. That said, there is ample evidence that you can increase the likelihood of being admitted by:

1. Writing a compelling statement of purpose in the mode of a narrative of intellectual growth
2. Submitting at least 3 strong faculty letters of recommendation
3. Testing into the 80th percentile or better on all subsections of the GRE
4. Submitting application materials which signal your ability to
 - (a) reason analytically and
 - (b) persuade in a methodologically sophisticated way.

9 How do I craft a compelling statement of purpose?

See my “5 Rules for Writing a Strong Statement of Purpose.”

10 How do I solicit strong letters of recommendation from faculty?

Ask faculty who are intimately familiar with your academic work. Most of you will approach faculty who have evaluated your class performance. This is fine, as long as the class allowed plenty of face-to-face interaction between you and the professor. Also, you want to make sure that the professor actually read and graded your written assignments. This is absolutely crucial, and this is why it is not good enough to solicit letters from faculty who taught you in large lecture classes. Rarely do they have rich enough impressions of you to craft a personalized letter. Often do they ask their teaching assistants to write the letter for them. I have seen many a letter which consisted of one big block quote from a teaching assistant. This simply won't do. If you must rely on faculty who teach you in a lecture format, take advantage of their office hours. Don't be shy; they must get to know you beyond your student ID number. Ask if you can submit a personal information packet containing your transcript, statement of purpose, CV, and anything else which would help the professor write a non-generic letter.

Ideally, at least one of your three letters comes from a professor who has worked closely with you on a research project. Since graduate school is about turning students (consumers of research) into professors (producers of research), strong faculty letters speak to your potential for making this transition. There is no better evidence of this potential than already having undertaken research as an undergraduate or M.A. student. What counts as research at your level? Writing a B.A. or M.A. thesis, serving as a research assistant to a professor, or a supervisor at another research institution such as a foundation or think tank.

Give faculty plenty of time to write and submit letters. Ideally, you would approach them right after they have evaluated your performance, even if the application deadline is a year in the future. This way, you make sure that they remember you well. Professors can always update the letter later on. Some, but not all faculty, list detailed instructions for soliciting letters on their websites.

11 Do high GRE scores really matter?

Yes. The top programs receive hundreds of qualified applications per admissions cycle. Faculty on the admissions committee must cut upwards of 90 per cent of them. To make this daunting task easier, they eliminate a healthy portion of the applicant pool by looking at standardized metrics such as your grade point

average and your GRE scores. It would be a shame if you handed in a stellar application whose materials no one takes a close look at, simply because you missed the GRE cut-off.

12 How do I signal analytical and methodological rigor?

Your enrollment in the CIR program sends a strong signal of analytical rigor. CIR's reputation as a research/writing-heavy program is well-established. Your M.A. thesis will provide the basis for the writing sample you submit as part of your application. Since the thesis is longer than the required writing sample, you have the opportunity to cut your project down to its essentials. I strongly suggest that you write the sample from scratch, using your approved thesis as its ingredients. This is your chance to signal to the admissions committee that you know what a draft academic article looks like. Do not waste it by handing in some class paper that you received an A for.

Beyond the courses you are required to take, we encourage you to hone your analytical skills in as many seminar-level classes as you can digest. In addition, we urge you to become a (semi-)regular participant in at least one of the University workshops. The training you will receive during just one year of workshop participation will put you at an advantage vis-à-vis your peer competitors. As for methodological rigor, you need to be aware that the top programs require students, once admitted, to enroll in a fairly extensive sequence of courses in quantitative methodology. This does not mean that all students are required to employ these methods in their dissertation research. What it does mean, however, is that it has become conventional to expect Ph.D. students to become at least literate in these methods. This is even more understandable in light of the fact that many self-identifying qualitative methodologists employ the quantitative template.

To be very clear: Nobody expects you to excel at these methods at the time of application. However, admissions committees have become biased toward students who are able to signal a non-hostile attitude toward these methods. You can easily do this in a number of ways: showcase undergraduate coursework in mathematics and/or economics, have a very high score on the quantitative section of the GRE, or take a UofC graduate-level course that contains a quantitative methods component. If you already know that quantitative methodologies are not entailed by your way of thinking about some substantive problem, you must be able to signal rigor in a different methodology. Again, relevant undergraduate coursework, a very high score on the verbal and essay sections of the GRE, or a UofC graduate-level course in, say, case study methods or discourse analysis, will do the trick. Please consult your preceptor in case you are worried about your background in research methodology.