

Preparing for Political Science Careers: A Career in the Foreign Service

First, determine your eligibility. You must be a U.S. citizen, at least 20 years old by the time you submit your registration package, and between the ages of 21 and 59 when you are formally appointed. You must be willing to serve in any area of the world. There are no exceptions to this.

The next step is to register to take the Foreign Service Office Test. The only way this can be done is online, by going to www.careers.state.gov. As part of the registration process, you will be asked to choose one of five career tracks: consular, economic, management, political, and public diplomacy. Once chosen, these cannot be changed.

Tests are given three times a year, generally in February, June, and October, and seats are assigned on first-come, first-served basis. If assigned a seat, as most people are, you will be notified several weeks ahead of time. Candidates who do not appear on the date previously agreed upon and fail to give 48 hours notification will be fined \$50. You must bring government-issued identification with you, such as a passport or driver's license, and a credit card.

Test questions examine a candidate's knowledge of American government, history, and culture as well as international issues, English grammar, basic economics, mathematics, statistics, and computer usage. Sample test questions are available at the web site above.

Those who pass will be asked to provide answers to five personal narrative questions, which will be evaluated by a qualifications evaluation panel.

Those selected then proceed on to an oral assessment. The examiners will be looking for candidates with outstanding communications abilities and strong interpersonal skills. Of particular interest are candidates with knowledge of one or more SCNLs---super critical needs languages: Arabic, Chinese, Dari, Farsi, Hindi, and/or Urdu. Living experience in a country where these are spoken is also desirable.

Next come medical clearances and background investigations. Assuming satisfactory results, applicants are screened again to ascertain suitability for appointment to the foreign service. Those chosen are placed on rank-ordered career hiring registers for whichever of the five tracks the candidate chose at the beginning of the registration process. Bonus points are awarded to military veterans and those with SCNLs. Not everyone who makes the final list will be offered a job: the number of individuals actually hired varies from year to year depending on the State Departments needs and its budget.

For those who are selected, salaries vary according to education and professional experience . New officers undergo basic training in Arlington, Virginia, followed by up to seven months' additional training before their first overseas assignment. Since much of this is spent in acquiring language skills, those already fluent in the language of the country they have been assigned to may have a shorter training period. FSOs are reviewed after three years, and either tenured or terminated after a five-year period.