

Preparing for Political Science Careers: Getting a PhD in Political Science

Recommendations: Here is some advice on what to keep in mind as you get your undergraduate degree and consider Ph.D. programs. Highly ranked graduate programs in political science are very competitive, so you need to keep the following in mind while you are still in college. Graduate program admissions committees look at your GPA, your recommendation letters (usually three), your Graduate Record Exam (GRE—a standardized test similar to the LSAT) scores, your ‘statement of interest’, a writing sample, and your CV, in deciding whether to admit you into their program. Different programs, and different committees, value these items differently. Try to do your best in all of them! However, if you are not quite so strong in one area but are in others, don’t despair. Programs will look at the whole package.

Get to know your professors, especially in the fields that you think you may be interested in. Ask them for advice about where to go for graduate school. You will get lots of different kinds of angles on your career prospects. Be sure to take classes with regular faculty who are either tenure-track or tenured in the department. Departments often have tenured faculty, tenure-track faculty, full-time lecturers and adjuncts on contract. While lecturers and adjuncts can be excellent professors and often bring in invaluable real-world experience into the classroom, only the first two types of positions are research-oriented, regular faculty positions where a Ph.D. is a requirement of the job. It is these professors who know the state of the field, and also have professional reputations in the field. These are the professors who should be writing recommendation letters for you to get into graduate school.

Make sure you write research papers in political science when you are a junior and a senior, as admissions committees will ask you for a writing sample. One option is to do a departmental honors thesis—this will also give you a sense of what to expect in graduate school—, and the other option is to make sure to take 500-level political science courses with a research paper requirement. Remember that applications are often due late Fall for the following year, so you will want to have a strong writing sample on hand by that time.

Some graduate programs require specific courses as pre-requisites, so it is a good idea to peruse their departmental websites to check on this. Quite a few departments require introductory courses in micro- and macro-economics as pre-requisites, so it does not hurt to take these as undergraduate electives.

Practical experience can be an asset and make your application stand out among the many. If you are interested in American politics, an internship on Capitol Hill will look good. If you are interesting in studying other countries (for instance Brazil) experience in that country is, if not essential, highly recommended. Also, knowledge of a foreign language, in this case Portuguese, will make your application much stronger. If you are able to, consider taking a year ‘off’ in between under graduate and graduate school to gain practical experience in your proposed area of study. It is not necessary, but it will make your application stronger.

What to Study?: Political science, as you know, is divided into several sub-fields (American, comparative, theory, international relations..). Unlike undergraduate programs where students are exposed to a broad array of courses and subject matter, Ph.D. programs offer students the opportunity to specialize in a field. Students should spend time thinking about which field(s) they are interested in and what political problems and questions intrigue them. This will help narrow down the choice of schools.

Where to Go?: Pedigree (or the ranking of the graduate program) is very important in determining your career options after graduate school. Students should choose programs based both on the program's rank and the fields of study the program specializes in. Program rankings of graduate programs can differ significantly depending on the sub-field you are interested in. While one top-notch Ivy League school may have an excellent Ph.D. program in American politics, it may be poorly ranked in political theory. You will need to research different departments, look into what they say about their programs, and see who the professors are and where they place their graduate students after completion of their Ph.D. Before applying, seek out your professors for their guidance.

Also, look into what kind of funding they provide their graduate students. This funding comes in the form of outright scholarships, teaching assistantships and research assistantships. Some programs provide better funding for their students.

Costs: Most highly ranked Ph.D. programs provide funding for their graduate students. This can come in the form of outright scholarships, teaching assistantships, and research assistantships. In each of these, the student will generally have free tuition, a small paycheck or stipend, health insurance, and access to campus facilities. Graduate pay, either from an assistantship or stipend is about 10-20 thousand dollars per school year. Graduate and teaching assistants usually work 20 hours per week during the semester for a professor.

Length of Programs: A Ph.D. can take a few as four and as many as ten years to complete. This depends on the motivation of the student, the field of study, and the topic of the dissertation. Degrees in American politics generally take four or five years; degrees in Comparative politics may take longer because students will often perform field work and perform extensive data collection in their regions of interest.

If at the end of two years the student is no longer interested in pursuing the Ph.D., the student can leave the program with an M.A. in political science.

Benefits: Students who earn Ph.D.'s often go into academia and become professors. This will involve some amount of teaching along with some amount of research depending upon the type of university the student takes a job at. Being a professor offers competitive pay, stable employment, rich benefits, a flexible schedule, and the opportunity to explore many interests.

Students may also choose to work for international organizations, think-tanks, the government, or consulting firms.

Summary: Students should consult with faculty before applying to PhD programs. It is important for students to apply to the most highly ranked program that caters to their field as possible. Ph.D. programs are generally free to the student and take 4 to 10 years to complete.