Graduate Study in Political Science at U.C. Berkeley: De-mystifying the Program and Admissions Process

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Presenters:
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Presentation Outline

• What’s special about U.C. Berkeley?

• What does it mean to get a PhD in political science?

• What do we look for in PhD admissions?

• Program structure and funding

• Q and A Session
  – Anything else?
Berkeley’s Unique Profile

• Berkeley is an engine of social mobility
  • 23% of students URM
  • 29% first-generation college students
  • ~27% undergraduates receive Pell grants

• Berkeley is a world-class research university
  • Routinely ranked one of top universities in world
  • Type 5 departments across range of fields
  • Faculty very focused on PhD programs
U.C. Berkeley Political Science

• Intellectual culture encourages students and faculty to address “big questions”

• Intellectually plural

• Culture of collaborative research between students and faculty, between students
Living in the Bay Area

• Year-round hiking, biking, windsurfing, sailing . . .

• Amazing, multi-cultural cuisine, farmer’s markets

• Museums, live music, vibrant, diverse urban neighborhoods
What does it mean to get a PhD (in theory)?

- In short: learn to do research
- Becoming a producer of knowledge
- Not just a continuation of BA/MA
- Training to be a teacher to the next generation
- It’s a job! You get paid
What does it mean to get a PhD (in practice)?

- Depending on your questions and methods, could mean a lot of things:
  - Research
    - Designing and fielding surveys
    - Reading primary sources in archives
    - Interviews
    - Writing mathematical models
  - Working as Graduate Student Instructor (GSI)
What does it mean to get a PhD?

Meet Rebekah Jones, a third-year PhD student in our department.

Research Interests: Police Unions, Crime Politics, Political Economy
What do political scientists study?

Political Science typically broken into major subfields:
- International Relations
- Comparative Politics
- American Politics
- Political Theory
- Political Methodology

Other subfields span/combine the major subfields (many examples here):
- Political Behavior
- Race and Ethnic Politics
- Area Studies
Examples of Subfields/UCB Faculty

Prof. Martha Wilfahrt

- “How does the legacy of precolonial state institutions affect contemporary development outcomes in West Africa?”

- Primary subfields: Comparative Politics, African Politics
Examples of Subfields/UCB Faculty

Prof. Desmond Jagmohan

- *Dark Virtues: Booker T. Washington’s Tragic Realism*: Washington as a virtue theorist of the oppressed

- Primary subfields: Political Theory, American Politics
Examples of Subfields/UCB Faculty

Prof. Marika Landau-Wells

- How do the psychological and neurological underpinnings of threat perception influence policy preferences
- Primary subfields: International Relations, American Politics, Political Behavior
How can we generalize the results of experiments to other political contexts?

- Primary subfields: Political Methodology, American Politics
What do you do with a PhD?

- Designed to prepare you for faculty jobs: research, teaching, service

- Fully support other common pathways
  - Other work in higher education
  - Research-based jobs in the private sector: survey firms, tech
  - Research at think tanks (e.g., Brookings, New America, Heritage Foundation, Public Policy Institute of CA)
  - NGOs, IOs, government (e.g., Amnesty International, State Department, World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank)
How do I know if I should get a PhD?

- If you are here, there’s a good chance the answer is yes

- Not just about being able to get good grades/wanting the highest degree

- General qualities specific to successful PhD students
  - Self-driven
  - Creative
  - Enjoy sharing knowledge/teaching

- Two things which should not stop you:
  - (Typically) don’t need to take out loans
  - Don’t need to come from a background/family with lots of PhDs: range of perspectives valued
How do I know if I should get a PhD?

Meet Juan Campos, a current fourth-year grad student in our department and PhD candidate.

Research interests: Comparative Politics, Latin American Politics, Policing, Organized Crime.
How do I know if I should get a PhD?

People have different motivations for getting a PhD, but it might be useful to consider the following factors during the decision-making process:

- Understand what a PhD in political science is—i.e., what kinds of jobs does a PhD in poli sci will prepare you for?
- If research is for you, what kind of research do you want to do?
- What are the potential costs and benefits of getting a PhD?
- Are the programs you are applying to is the right fit for you?
- Are you okay with not pursuing an academic job?
- Can you handle constructive (and non-constructive) criticism?
What do we look for in admissions?

● Looking for reasons to be excited to admit you

● Interest in and capacity to do research
  ○ Can come from thesis, RA work, jobs

● Ability to complete coursework
  ○ Transcripts, Letters, GRE (secondarily!)

● Good citizens/colleagues/teachers
  ○ Personal statement, letters, other activities

● There is no perfect applicant
  ○ Want cohorts with varying strengths, backgrounds, perspectives
What do we look for in admissions, specifically?

- **Statement of purpose**
  - Understand what research is about, can propose an interesting research project, write clearly

- **Personal statement**
  - What about your personal story will add to our department?
  - What challenges did you overcome to get where you are?

- **Transcripts**
  - No specific required classes/thresholds
  - Ideally relevant/challenging courses, good grades adjusting for challenge/trajectory
  - If you want to do technical work, nice to see some coursework in Stats/Math/Econ/CS
What do we look for in admissions, specifically?

- GRE (Optional)
  - Flawed but somewhat informative
  - Recommend you take it because it can help make the case for you

- Letters of recommendation
  - Ideally from professors who know you well and recently
  - Want to see evidence you have the ability/interest to do research

- Writing sample
  - Most direct evidence of promise for research
  - Never perfect! Looking for original ideas, using what skills you have, clear writing.
“Pipeline” Programs can help you prepare applications and hone qualifications

Examples:

- Ralph Bunche Summer Institute (APSA)
- Diversity and Inclusion in Government Graduate Studies, UT Austin (for those living in TX, https://utdiggs.org/)
- U.C. Berkeley’s Political Science Pipeline program (for Berkeley undergraduates)
- King Center (Stanford) Pre-doctoral Research Fellows Program
- The Minority Graduate Placement Program (https://www.migapprogram.com/)
- The Society of Political Methodology Expansion Program
- UC Riverside’s Minority-Serving Institution Research Academy
- MIT Summer Research Program (https://oge.mit.edu/msrp/)
- Princeton’s Emerging Scholars Program (https://graddiversity.princeton.edu/pre-doctoral-fellowship-initiative)
Department Alumni

- Two Alumni: Steven Levitsky (1999) and Daniel Ziblatt (2002)
- Obama’s “Best Books of 2018”
- Professors at Harvard
Department Alumni

- **Justine Davis (2020),** Assistant professor at Michigan
- “Wartime Experiences of Civic Leaders: Legacies of Civil War, Rebel Control, and Democratization in Post–Conflict Africa”
Department Alumni

- Eugenia Giraudy (2015), Currently Research Scientist at Meta ("Data Science for Social Good Team")
- Dissertation on conservative political parties in Latin America
Department Alumni

- Lee Drutman (2010), currently Senior Fellow at the New America Foundation
- Advocate for electoral reform in the US
Job Placement Data (Position Type)

**Data from the past 5 years**
Quick overview of program: Coursework

- Primary focus of first year is taking classes

- Continues in second and third year, but typically less due to other requirements

- General subfield seminars, more specific topical courses, methods courses

- Can also take classes outside of the department (Statistics, Area Studies, Economics, Sociology)

- See website for more details about requirements
Quick overview of program: Key Milestones

• Exams in subfields typically in year 2

• MA paper written in year 2
  – Usually take a “Research and Writing” class to help

• Qualifying Exam in year 3: essentially a dissertation proposal

• After that, primarily writing dissertation
Teaching and Funding

• All admitted applicants receive 5 years of funding
  – Funding covers tuition, fees, health insurance, and provides a stipend/salary for living expenses.
• Funding packages vary by student
• Student may work on or off campus to supplement their funding package

Picture: https://www.cjr.org/analysis/foundation-funding-journalism.php
Teaching and Funding

- Most graduate students have a funding package that is a combination of
  - 2 years of teaching or research assistant
  - 3 years of department and university fellow

- 6th-year funding (and beyond) options:
  - Teaching for our department or another department
  - Graduate Student Researcher Position (GSR)
  - Apply for external funding through a fellowship or research opportunity
Questions?

Pictures: https://gallery.berkeley.edu/ and https://polisci.berkeley.edu/
Funding Websites

- Graduate Program Funding
  - [http://polisci.berkeley.edu/graduate-program/funding](http://polisci.berkeley.edu/graduate-program/funding)

- Graduate Division Fellowships
  - [https://grad.berkeley.edu/financial/fellowships/](https://grad.berkeley.edu/financial/fellowships/)
Helpful Links & Contact Information

- **Political Science Department Webpages:**
  - [https://polisci.berkeley.edu](https://polisci.berkeley.edu)
  - [https://polisci.berkeley.edu/graduate-program](https://polisci.berkeley.edu/graduate-program)
  - [https://polisci.berkeley.edu/graduate-program/applying](https://polisci.berkeley.edu/graduate-program/applying)
  - [https://polisci.berkeley.edu/graduate-program/applying/frequently-asked-questions](https://polisci.berkeley.edu/graduate-program/applying/frequently-asked-questions)

- **Job Placement Website:**
  - [https://polisci.berkeley.edu/graduate-program/job-placement](https://polisci.berkeley.edu/graduate-program/job-placement)

- **Contact Information:**
  - Email: pscadmit@berkeley.edu
  - Virtual advising is available by appointment
• **Political Science Department Webpages:**
  – https://polisci.berkeley.edu

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