10 Relax! They're Important, But Not Defining Choices: Choosing Your Subfield and Committees

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Introduction

Almost all political science PhD programs require their students to select at least one subfield specialization and populate a dissertation committee. These decisions tap two crucial questions in your graduate journey. First, what are you interested in studying and, given that, who do you wish to work with? You are already forming tentative answers to these questions when selecting a program that fits best with your interests (see chapter 2 on navigating the application process and chapter 4 on choosing a PhD program). However, even in the second or third year of a political science graduate program, people can and do take the opportunity to change their minds. Our goal with this chapter is to help you navigate these choices. After all, they are important. Which subfield you choose will affect which classes you take, what you read, which comprehensive exams you take, and which scholars you work with in your program. However, at the outset, you should know that these choices, while important, should not feel deterministic. The subfield you select will influence which literatures you are likely to contribute to, professional networks you build, and will be one indicator of suitability for specific academic jobs. The committee you form will shape the priority various aspects of your dissertation are given and the connections you will be able to tap during the job market. However, regardless of these choices, you can still contribute the research you want, and build connections with the people you want.

Selecting Your Subfield

The Subfields you Can Choose From

Most political science graduate programs organize themselves in similar ways. These subfield distinctions within graduate programs largely—yet imperfectly—resemble actual divisions in the discipline. Three subfields are almost universal across programs. They include:

- **American Politics:** The study of institutional processes, representation, and mass political behavior within the United States.
- **Comparative Politics:** Using cross-national comparisons to make generalizable inferences about political institutions and behaviors within nations (Clark, Golder, and Golder 2009). This subfield also includes scholars who specialize in the domestic politics of specific countries or regions that are not the United States.
- **International Relations:** The study of diplomacy and conflict between states and within international organizations (Clark, Golder, and Golder 2009). This can also include transna-

tional political behavior conducted by non-state organizations, as well as civil conflict within states.

Two subfields are quite common, but not universal:

- **Political Theory:** Approaching the study of the state and society with a philosophical and/or normative lens. Some programs have stopped offering political theory as a major field in the last 20 years.
- **Methodology:** The development and application of statistical, experimental, and computational tools for political science. Most programs have introduced it, but not all, and the majority of programs that offer it will offer it as a minor subfield only.
- **Race, Ethnicity, and Politics:** The examination of how race and ethnicity shape political institutions, mass political behavior, and even international relations. It is often seen as a subfield within American politics, but can and does overlap with comparative politics and international relations.

These are not the only way to organize the discipline. Some graduate programs, particularly Duke and UC Merced, organize more specifically by topic (e.g., political institutions vs. behavior). However, these are going to be your likely choices.

The Immediate Decision Before you

By the second or third year of your PhD program, you will administratively declare specialization in one or more subfields. The administrative requirements for programs across the discipline vary considerably. Out of the PhD programs for which we could find student handbooks (n=109), a significant plurality will require you to declare a major field and a minor field. Under this configuration, your major field is the one you will give the most attention, while your minor field is meant to supplement your expertise through exposure to another subfield. It is also common for you to have to select two major subfields on equal footing, sometimes with one or more minor fields attached. It is less common, but still possible, to select only one field or select more than two from a large list. Since the choice varies so much, you will want to find out the specific requirements for your program.

The subfields you choose have three likely administrative consequences. The first is the classes you take. In programs where you select one clear major field, most courses you take will fall into that field. Your coursework will certainly not introduce you to all the literature you will use in your graduate career, not even close. However, the literatures you discuss for years with professors and other graduate students will be easier to digest. The second is which comprehensive exams, if any, you will take. During the semester or two before the exam, you will live, eat, and breathe the required literature across the subfield(s) you choose to pass the exams (see chapter 12 on comprehensive exams). Finally, at least in some programs, your choice of subfield parameterizes who you can choose to be your advisor and who you can put on your dissertation committee.

The best way to approach these decisions is to work backwards from one key question. What are you ultimately interested in studying during your time in the program (and maybe beyond)? This is a daunting question, as you are likely still deciding this. The good news is that the answer does not need to be hyper-specific. You just need to know about your range of interests. They all have some non-zero chance of being your dissertation topic someday. If they clearly fit into one subfield, then think no further about this question. If they fit into two, the good news is that most programs accommodate that by having you declare two subfields. However, in many cases, you do have to figure out which to prioritize. Faculty who are more familiar with the workings of the graduate program can give you valuable insights and advice, as can graduate students who are further along that faced the same decision as you.

The academic job market in political science is tough, and so it can be tempting to try to select a subfield and research program that looks like it would perform well on the market. However, there are two reasons you should not take the market into account when deciding. First, the market is nearly impossible to game—what is popular one year is not going to be popular in another, seemingly without much rhyme or reason. Second, the academic job market is extremely tight, and very few people who

seek tenure-track employment are able to secure it. Navigating the market is hard enough—at least make it easier on yourself by doing what you love.

What Does this Mean for your Career?

Your choice of subfield does have some consequences for your career. It impacts which academic jobs you are likely to get. In a market where hundreds of people apply for the same job, whether a candidate specializes in the same subfield as the job ad is an easy way to whittle down the number of applications search committees need to look at. It also affects what search committees expect of you when it comes to classes you are willing and able to teach and which types of students and university activities you are likely to advise. In non-academic jobs, the distinctions are going to matter less than the skills you bring to the table, but it can still help you make your case on substantive knowledge.

However, your subfield does not seal your fate. No one you want to talk to at a conference is going to know what you administratively declared in your program. Not all jobs will be in a specific subfield, either. Some jobs are "open field"—that is, open with respect to your specialization. Others may specialize in more specific topics such as public policy, judicial politics, political behavior, etc., without regard for the initial subfield. No matter what you choose, these jobs are open to you. Additionally, once you build a research and teaching portfolio, these will be much more important signals than an administrative declaration. Finally, it is still possible—though don't bank on it—to get a job in a different specialization than the one you did in graduate school.

Forming a Dissertation Committee

Another incredibly important step in your graduate journey will be forming your dissertation committee. The most important part of this will be settling on an advisor (see chapter 13 on selecting an adviser vs a mentor). However, there are clear considerations you need to make about populating the rest of your committee (the typical graduate program will require two to four more members). In some cases, you will have a trial run at forming a committee with a master's Thesis. In others, you will be forming a committee for the first time. Here is our advice.

Think About What You Want Out of a Committee

By the time you have to form a dissertation committee, you will have had two to three years to figure out how you work best in an academic setting. You may like to work closely with your advisor and only consult committee members once key features of a project are done. In this case, you want to select people who won't present headaches for you. Alternatively, you may want input from all committee members at fairly regular intervals in the process. In this case, you will want to think much more carefully about how committee members complement one another. Regardless, your committee will be useful for feedback and for networking on your behalf, particularly if you plan to go on the academic job market.

You need to think about two things carefully: working style and topical fit, in that order. The best committee members don't always do exactly what you do. However, they can still be great social scientists who engage with your work meaningfully. They can still spot ways in which your approach could use some improvement and show you how to attain that improvement. They can still offer encouragement when you are stuck on a project, or the results did not turn out how you hoped. Topical fit is important too—someone who studies international organizations, as helpful as they may be to students studying international relations, might be a stretch for someone studying mass political behavior. However, if the tradeoff is between someone whose interests fit perfectly but falls short on mentorship vs. someone whose interests fit less well but whose mentorship is superb, pick the good mentor.

Listen to Other Peoples' Experiences

If you are unsure about how to populate your dissertation committee, ask faculty (particularly your advisor) and further-along graduate students. Other faculty can give you a good sense of how much time a given faculty member can give to you on your dissertation and their suitability on the topic. Other

graduate students can give you fairly honest feedback about what it is like to work with that person. We cannot stress this enough: if multiple people warn you about putting a certain person on your committee, especially if it comes with stories of bad experiences, listen to them. You don't want to bank on being one of the few with a good experience—chances are, you're not the one (see chapter 65 on navigating things that can go wrong). To a lesser extent, if multiple people speak the absolute world of a potential committee member, think carefully before foregoing that person.

Committee Conflicts of Interest

Second, in an ideal world, faculty will put aside their differences with one another for the benefit of their students. We do not live in such a world. Whether it is for personal reasons, disagreements over methodological approaches, departmental politics, or something else, faculty members can and do have friction with one another. Sometimes this friction means you get competing and irreconcilable sets of advice from different committee members.

Furthermore, that same friction might not lead faculty members to find a way to synergize their feedback, and it's left to you to affirm one person's vision or another. This leaves you in the middle to decide which faculty member to affirm. If you're alerted by multiple other graduate students or faculty members themselves about the possibility of such a dynamic, avoid it if at all possible.

Not All Mentors Need to Be on Your Committee

The average committee has three to five people, and you probably don't want more than that. Having too many people in a formal advisory role increases the odds of faculty members having competing visions for your project that you are left to reconcile. It also just creates more issues in terms of getting signatures on paperwork. However, if you are in the lucky position of having many (potential) mentors, remember that not all of them must serve a formal role. Acknowledgement sections of dissertations are filled with gratitude for faculty members (and graduate students, for that matter) who don't have official roles on the project. The acknowledgement section of your dissertation can look the same.

Don't Waste that Outside Member

A common requirement of most PhD programs is that someone on your dissertation committee must be outside of your department. In some instances, this person can be outside your university. All too often, the outside member, through nobody's individual fault, simply serves as a rubber stamp, asking a handful of clarifying questions at the dissertation defense and signing paperwork. However, in our view, that is such a waste. Scholars from other disciplines have much to offer. Rarely is it the case that political science is the only discipline concentrating on your research question, and an outside member can plug you in to that literature (especially if it uses different terminology). New methods applicable to what you're interested in might come to other disciplines earlier, in which case an outside member from that discipline can alert you to it. So, if you can, don't select an outside member as a perfunctory step, select strategically! It can come in handy.

Conclusion

Selecting a subfield specialization and dissertation committee are unavoidable during your PhD program, and each choice can be daunting for its own reasons. Selecting the wrong subfield means wading through a lot of literature that you don't find interesting and doing so at the expense of reading work that piques your interest. Selecting the wrong dissertation committee can add dysfunction to a step in your academic life that already comes with some inherent stress. It is easiest to get this right the first time.

However, take some comfort. Both decisions are reversible. It is not unheard of for people to change their subfield in the second year of the program. If how you designed your committee is not working for you, virtually all departments allow you to change the composition of your committee.

Second, neither decision fully defines you. Even after graduate school, people can pivot subfields. One of the authors of this chapter was trained as an Americanist but is currently a post-doc in a psychology department studying the public opinion of British adolescents and adults. Additionally, your

committee are not the only people who get to speak for you when you look for jobs. In the next few years of your graduate journey, you will attend conferences and workshops and meet all kinds of people (see chapter 21 on how to conference). The more people know you through first-hand experience and less through second-hand recounting of your committee members, the less you will need your committee to vouch for you. So go forth! You will make many more decisions than these along your journey.

References

Clark, William R., Matt Golder, and Sona N. Golder. 2017. *Principles of Comparative Politics*. Washington, DC: CQ Press.