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Expect the Unexpected: Choices and Challenges in the Political Science PhD Job Market

Bobbi G. Gentry¹, Kyla K. Stepp², & Jeremiah J. Castle³

1. Bridgewater College 2. Central Michigan University 3. Metropolitan State University of Denver

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Introduction

For most students earning a PhD in political science, the ultimate goal is to earn a stable, fair-paying job. For many decades, the modal employment opportunity for political science PhDs was a tenure-track job teaching political science. However, for reasons explored in this chapter, tenure-track jobs are becoming more scarce. It has become more common for candidates to spend time in post-doctoral fellowships, visiting assistant professor positions, or adjunct faculty positions before receiving a tenure-track offer. In addition, within the last decade or two, increasing numbers of political science PhDs have been turning to alternative employment opportunities, including private sector jobs (often labeled “alt-ac” careers). In short, the nature of the academic job search has changed considerably over the past few decades.

In this chapter, we provide an overview of the *job market* for political science PhDs. Our focus is primarily on the United States, but we also briefly cover opportunities in other countries. We begin by discussing trends in the political science job market, including an overview of some of the trends that have fueled the declining number of tenure-track jobs teaching political science. We then provide an overview of the timing of the market and the interview process, focusing mostly on the academic market. Finally, we give some practical tips for how students can prepare for the increasingly volatile academic market. Throughout the chapter we emphasize that the job market for political science PhDs is a decentralized and rapidly evolving one. While our discussion is centered around the “typical” experience, we recognize that individual experiences on the job market vary greatly. The solution for students is to prepare carefully, but “expect the unexpected.”

Trends in the Political Science Job Market

Even prior to 2008, higher education was becoming more corporatized and relying more heavily on adjunct labor (see Williams 2013). However, the last two decades in higher education have been defined by two major crises, further diminishing the already fragile market for tenure-track jobs in political science. First, during the Great Recession, many states compensated for reduced tax revenues by implementing major cuts to public university budgets (Marcus 2017). The result was a decline in the number of tenure-track positions in political science from a high of 730 during the 2006-2007 cycle to just 445 during the 2009-2010 cycle (Diascro 2011). Budget constraints also led institutions to undergo program restructuring and faculty layoffs, further contributing to the tight labor market for political science.

Just as colleges and universities were recovering from the Great Recession, they were hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic resulted in reduced revenues due to fewer students staying on

campus and therefore fewer students paying for room and board. In addition, in fall 2020 the modal higher education institution experienced a 0.1% to 5% decrease in enrollment, and about one-fifth of institutions experienced an enrollment decline of 10% or more (Gardner 2021). Facing such financial pressures, many institutions instituted hiring freezes, laid off faculty (particularly adjunct and fixed-term faculty), and left vacant positions unfilled. In November 2020, The Chronicle of Higher Education reported that colleges had shed about 10% of their total workforce (Bauman 2020).

Given these financial pressures it should come as little surprise that an analysis of 2020–2021 postings in APSA's ejobs job advertisement system confirmed an overall decrease in the number of positions available. The number of positions that are *tenure-track* are decreasing, and non-tenure-track instructor positions and contingent visiting professor positions are increasing by 9% and 13.5% respectively (McGrath and Diaz 2021a, 9). One reason for the growth in non-tenure-track positions is that such positions represent significant cost-savings in terms of salary and benefits for institutions (for a comparison of salary and benefits data between tenure-track and non-tenure-track positions, see Davis 2019, 3–4).

Not surprisingly, the reduction in tenure-track openings means that students are finding it more difficult to secure a tenure-track job. Data on graduate placements in political science between 2018 and 2020 reveal that, “only 28.4% of candidates found a tenure-track position” (McGrath and Diaz 2021b, 10), which is far below the 11-year average. Trends suggest that there are more non-academic placements (10%) (2021b, 10), more years on the job market (2021b, 16), and more placement opportunities in post docs (2021b, 10). In short, the path from a PhD to a tenure-track position is neither as certain nor as linear as it was a few decades ago.

At the individual level, a handful of predictors exert a powerful impact on a candidate's placement prospects. First, candidates with their PhD “in-hand” were more likely to be placed than ABDs (All-But-Dissertation) (McGrath and Diaz 2021b, 14). Second, across many academic disciplines, the institution where candidates receive their PhD has a large impact on job prospects, particularly at research-focused universities (Han 2003). Within political science, Oprisko (2012) finds that, “eleven schools contribute 50 percent of the political science academics to research-intensive universities in the United States.” Finally, demographic factors impact candidates' placement opportunities. While under-represented groups are more likely to be offered tenure-track positions, post docs continue to be dominated by men from the top quintile of institutions in political science (McGrath and Diaz 2021b, 10–13).

Although tenure-track positions are declining in the United States, opportunities may be increasing abroad. In their study of APSA ejobs postings, McGrath and Diaz (2021a, 9) find that international positions now make up about 20% of total APSA postings. This growth is driven, at least in part, by strategic efforts from governments in Asia and the Middle East (Saiya 2014). Many of the institutions being founded in these regions are branch campuses affiliated with American universities, and therefore are interested in hiring faculty from prestigious institutions in the United States and western Europe. International positions have their own unique costs and benefits (Saiya 2014), and interested job seekers are encouraged to learn more about international positions prior to applying (see chapter 42 in this volume for more on differences between United States and international institutions).

The Timing of the Market: What You Need to Know

Unlike the “year-round” cycle that characterizes private sector hiring, the academic job market is seasonal in nature (Miller and Gentry 2011). The tenure-track job market in political science follows a predictable hiring schedule. The first jobs tend to post in May or June, with application deadlines in August or September (for jobs starting the following year). Many of the earliest postings tend to be at research focused R1 universities. The posting of jobs typically peaks during late summer or early fall. Positions at liberal arts colleges and teaching-focused public universities tend to post a bit later in the fall, with application deadlines in October or November. That said, some institutions also prefer to set application deadlines in January or February (or even later) (Miller and Gentry 2011, 578). While the posting of tenure-track positions generally slows to a trickle by mid-spring, it is common to see a few late-spring postings. The timing of the international market is quite different; many regions operate on the calendar year rather than the United States academic calendar (see Saiya 2014). Candidates seeking

international positions are advised to become familiar with the customs in the regions where they are seeking employment (see chapter 42 in this volume for more on differences between United States and international institutions).

While the tenure-track job market in political science has long followed this relatively predictable cycle, several recent events create the potential for change. An important factor in many universities posting political science jobs relatively early in the season was a desire to have their advertisement “live” in time to conduct face-to-face first round interviews at the APSA conference traditionally held on Labor Day weekend. Given that APSA has moved its flagship conference back to after Labor Day (as late as October), institutions may shift postings slightly later in the coming years. In addition, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is likely to continue to disrupt academic hiring cycles for several more seasons.

There is even more variation in the hiring cycle for visiting assistant professor (VAP) and postdoc positions. Many research-driven institutions advertise prestigious postdocs relatively early in the fall cycle (at roughly the same time as tenure-track positions). However, peak hiring time for VAPs and teaching-focused postdocs is during the spring semester, with interviews happening roughly around spring break. Given the wide variation in postings, the best way to maximize your chances on the job market is to monitor the postings year-round until you have secured a stable position. See chapter 44 in this volume for more on adjunct, visiting, and fixed-term positions.

Most academic jobs in political science will be advertised on a small handful of websites. In the United States, the best source of jobs is APSA’s “eJobs” platform. Other good sources for job advertisements are the International Studies Association’s (ISA) website (<https://www.isanet.org/Professional-Resources/Employment/Jobs>), HigherEdJobs.com, The Chronicle of Higher Education, Insidehighered.com, and publicservicecareers.org. Adjunct positions tend to be less well-advertised than other types of academic positions. If you are seeking an adjunct position at a particular university, we recommend monitoring the university’s own hiring website and/or contacting the department chair. For job seekers, we recommend setting up a spreadsheet with the application deadline, university name, any specific subfields mentioned in the ad, and a link to the job advertisement.

The Interview Process: What You Need to Know

Because the academic job market is decentralized, there is wide variation in how universities carry out the hiring process. While we do our best to describe the “typical” process, readers should be aware that their experiences may differ.

Given the shortage of tenure-track openings, it is not uncommon for tenure-track searches to yield hundreds of qualified applicants, meaning that an important step for hiring committees is to narrow down the pool of candidates to a manageable number. Most institutions handle this process in two stages: the “long-list” (roughly eight to 20 candidates deserving of a first-round interview), and the “short-list” (generally three to five candidates selected for on-campus interviews). That said, not every institution takes the process in two stages; some institutions proceed directly to on-campus interviews. In addition, some universities hire a candidate based on a first-round interview alone (especially for VAPs and postdocs).

First round interviews can take place in a variety of ways. Many institutions conduct interviews with “long-list” candidates via either phone or digital conferencing technologies like Skype, Zoom, or Webex. Another option for universities is to conduct face-to-face first round interviews at the APSA annual meeting. No matter the method, the goal for institutions is to use these interviews to get to know candidates and evaluate their fit with the institution. While interpretations of fit may differ, fit usually means easily matching the needs of the department in terms of research interests, publication record, teaching expertise, pedagogical approach, and diversity (Fuerstman and Lavertu 2005). Many common first-round questions are targeted toward determining fit, including inquiries about teaching philosophy, teaching experience, research interests, how candidates foster diversity, equity, and inclusion, and what makes the candidate a good fit for the institution.

Most second round interviews involve the institution flying three to five candidates to campus

for a one to three day visit. The most stressful aspect of the on-campus visit for many candidates is the “job talk” or “research talk,” in which candidates give a roughly 30–45-minute presentation of their current research followed by a question and answer session with attendees. Another increasingly common component of on-campus interviews is the “teaching demonstration,” in which candidates teach a class. Candidates may be asked to “guest teach” a real class or a random selection of students; candidates may be given a topic (and reading) or may be given the option of teaching whatever they would like.

Beyond these key elements, on-campus visits can include a number of other events. Some of the most common include one-on-one meetings with members of the department, a meeting with the Dean, a meal with students, meals with members of the hiring committee, a benefits overview with human resources, a campus tour, and a “real estate tour” of the local town. Many academic institutions in Europe and elsewhere also include an intensive conversation with a panel as part of the interview process, and candidates from the United States may be asked about cultural differences in the classroom and how they will approach such differences (see Saiya 2014).

During interviews, candidates typically incur a few expenses for which they deserve reimbursement. Reimbursement procedures differ greatly from institution to institution. Many institutions will pay for the flight and hotel room in advance. However, the authors have also experienced situations where the institution asked candidates to purchase flights, hotel rooms, and rental cars and submit the receipts for reimbursement. In addition, the authors have incurred expenses like airport parking. Candidates should feel comfortable asking the department chair or search committee chair for reimbursement for interview-related expenses during or after their campus visit.

The largest post-interview concern for candidates is, of course, whether they will get a job offer. Once the final candidate leaves campus, the search committee votes on which candidate they would like to make an offer to. At some campuses, approval from the full department, department chair, and/or Dean may also be required. Some campuses may also have time-consuming human resources policies, including the need for representatives to confirm salary details for an offer. Therefore, the length of time between the interview and the offer varies between institutions. Stepp once received one offer while in the airport on the way home from an on-campus interview, while Castle’s offer for his current job took several weeks. One way candidates can get a general sense of what to expect is by asking the department chair and/or search committee chair, “What does the anticipated hiring timeline look like?” At the same time, candidates should expect to wait at least a few weeks for an answer. Although waiting to hear back from an interview can be excruciating, candidates should try to redirect their focus to their teaching and research interests and use the interview as motivation for writing. For an in-depth conversation about advice for each stage of the interview process, see chapter 45 in this volume. See also chapter 35 for maintaining your mental health through the job market season. Finally, see chapter 46 for how to negotiate your job offer.

What You Can Do: Be Prepared

The best way to handle such an unpredictable and quickly changing environment is through preparation. One aspect of preparation is familiarity with both academic and non-academic career paths. In addition to the other chapters in this book, we recommend Kelsky (2015) as a universal primer on gaining employment as a PhD.

Candidates can begin preparing themselves by engaging in professional development throughout their time in graduate school. On the research front, candidates should publish their work, present at conferences, and embrace professional development opportunities like training on working with human subjects or grant-writing. When it comes to teaching, candidates should gain experience teaching college courses, either as a teaching assistant (TA) or (ideally) as the instructor-of-record (see chapters 28 and 29 in this volume for more on being a TA and teaching your own course). In addition, candidates can seek out pedagogical training, such as training for online teaching, through their campus teaching and learning centers. In short, candidates should take advantage of all the resources their graduate program and university-at-large has to offer.

As students get closer to completing their PhD, they should carefully consider when to enter the job

market. Candidates generally enter the market the fall before their anticipated graduation date, but candidates should have candid conversations with their advisor and other trusted sources for individualized advice about the proper time to enter the job market. In addition, Kelsky (2015,70-71) provides a helpful list of ten indicators that a candidate is ready to enter the academic job market. Candidates should not apply to jobs that require a completed PhD by a particular date if they cannot be reasonably confident that all steps of the dissertation/graduation process will be completed in time.

Once you have made the decision to enter the academic market, preparing for common aspects of the application process is essential for reducing stress and achieving better interview performances. First, candidates should have candid conversations with potential letter of recommendation writers, send requests well in advance of application deadlines (one to two months is standard), and supply letter writers with a curriculum vitae (CV), sample cover letter, and sample working papers (see Carter and Scott 1998). See chapter 43 in this volume for advice on preparing these materials. Second, because many first-round interviews ask a predictable set of questions, preparing a few “stock” answers can help candidates do their best. Finally, candidates should extensively practice their job talks and deliver one or more practice job talks in front of peers.

Finally, candidates should recognize the possibility that spending multiple years in a national job search might have a negative impact on their mental health. Researchers are increasingly recognizing a mental health crisis among graduate students. Almasri, Read, and Vandeweerd conducted a survey of political science graduate students at seven universities and found, “About 30% of respondents met the criteria for depression and only a third of those were receiving treatment” (2021: 1). Recognizing the prevalence of mental health issues, candidates should closely monitor their mental health and actively seek out adequate support networks. Those networks may be academic; for example, a team of political scientists have organized a Slack channel (<http://supportyourcohort.com>) for job market candidates (see Kim, Lebovits, and Shugars 2021). However, those support networks may also include family, friends outside academia, and professional therapists. For more advice on maintaining your mental health while on the job market, see chapter 35 in this volume.

Conclusion

Our central claim is that the job market for political science PhDs is changing rapidly from the expectation that candidates will move from a completed PhD directly to a tenure-track job into a much longer and more uncertain process. In such a competitive job market, candidates should distinguish between the factors that are in their control and the factors that are not. Candidates cannot change recent trends in the market, but they can understand such trends and plan accordingly. While in graduate school, candidates should focus on preparing themselves to be competitive when they enter the market. Such preparation will help candidates no matter whether they pursue a career in academia or take a new opportunity in the “alt-ac” market. In the face of a rapidly changing job market, preparation is the candidate’s best resource in the event of the inevitable unexpected challenges.

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