

POLITICAL SCIENCE GRADUATE SCHOOL ADVICE

Should you go to graduate school in political science? It depends on your interests and career goals. If you really enjoyed your political science classes at EMU and did well in them, and your overall GPA is good (at least 3.3, preferably over 3.5), you might think about it. It's essential for an academic/university career, and can also be a valuable preparation for careers in government, think tanks, advocacy, politically oriented non-profit or non-governmental organizations, or teaching in high school or community college.

What's the best undergraduate preparation for political science graduate school? Take a range of rigorous courses in the social sciences and do well in them. The required courses for the PLSC major are a good start, then take additional upper-division courses in political science, as well as some courses in history, sociology, and economics. If you can take the advanced methods class (PLSC 310), do so. If you can do a relevant internship or participate in some of the departmental student organizations (Pi Sigma Alpha, Mock Trial, Model UN, Pre-Law Society, Amnesty International), that's great too. If you're planning to specialize in international affairs, take a few courses in a foreign language; study abroad is also valuable.

What kind of graduate degree programs are there? A Masters program will typically take about 2 years, and will give you a broad skill set that you can use to work in a variety of applied settings that use political analysis. Besides an MA in political science, there are Masters programs in public policy (MPP) and public administration (MPA), as well as some that focus on international affairs or interdisciplinary area studies (e.g. Latin America, Middle East, etc.). A doctoral (Ph.D.) program is harder to get into and typically takes 5-7 years to complete. It will give you a solid grounding in the theories of the discipline as well as specialized knowledge in your research field, and prepare you for an academic career of university teaching and research.

What are the main areas of political science? The major subfields are American government, comparative politics, area studies, international relations, political theory, public administration, public law & government, and political methodology. Usually in a Ph.D. program you will choose one main subfield and two minor subfields. You will spend the first 3 years or so taking courses (mainly seminars) and preparing to take comprehensive exams in your subfields. Once you pass those, you will submit a prospectus outlining your proposed dissertation research. Then you do the research, write the dissertation, defend it before a committee of specialists, and walk.

Is it expensive? Yes, but you won't pay for it. Graduate schools only accept a limited number of applicants (the typical size of an entering class in a Ph.D. program might be 5-40 students), so if they accept you it's because they want you to come, and they will put together a financial package to make it possible. Almost everyone gets a combination of scholarships, fellowships (subsidized work as a teaching or research assistant), and loans.

What are the admission criteria and procedures? Usually the main things they will look at (in roughly equal proportions) are your GRE scores, GPA, and letters of recommendation from your undergraduate professors. Most applications also ask for a short (1-2 page) personal statement explaining your interest and motivation to go to grad school, and some also ask for a writing sample (such as a paper you wrote for one of your college courses). Your personal

statement will not be a major determinant in admission, but be sure to ask one or two of your professors to look at a draft before you send it. Application deadlines are usually around December-January, and you'll hear back from them around April for enrollment in September. Most schools these days have online applications, but you'll need to leave time for your professors to write letters of recommendation and EMU to send transcripts.

How should you choose a graduate program? First you should decide whether you want to apply to Masters or Ph.D. programs. If you want to go into university teaching and research, you will need a Ph.D. Next you should decide which subfield(s) you are most interested in. Then based on your GRE scores and GPA, start identifying the programs that are strongest in those areas and where you have a competitive chance of getting accepted. (Your EMU professors can help you with this part.) Then start looking at their websites (see links below) - you usually click on "People" and then "Faculty" and check out the areas of specialization of the faculty. (Are there some who share your interests? Have you read any of their work or have a sense that you might find their ideas stimulating?) By the time you get to grad school you will be specializing much more than you did as an undergraduate, so it is important to pick a program where there is a community of scholars who focus on your areas of interest. Most students apply to about a half dozen graduate programs. Remember, don't think about price at this point because nobody pays the sticker price for grad school; once you get some acceptances you can compare the financial packages they offer and weigh that among the other factors influencing your choice.

Useful resources:

APSA, American Political Science Association,
links to all Ph.D.-granting institutions in political science in the United States:
http://apsanet.org/content_6947.cfm

APSIA, Association of Professional Schools of International Affairs,
links to main graduate programs in international affairs:
<http://www.apsia.org/apsia/search/schoolSearch.php>

Princeton Review, summary information on graduate programs in political science
http://www.princetonreview.com/grad/research/programs/lists/political_science_and_government.asp

APPAM, Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management,
directory of public policy graduate programs:
<http://www.appam.org/membership/institutional/search.asp>

PPIA, Public Policy & International Affairs consortium, search engine for graduate programs:
<http://www.ppiaprogram.org/consortium/>

NASPAA, National Association of Schools of Public Affairs & Administration:
<http://www.naspaa.org/>