

Writing Statement of Purpose for Graduate School Application: Political Science as a Case

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CONGRATULATIONS! You have decided to apply for graduate school in political science. You will embark on a wonderful journey to explore interesting political phenomena around the world and use cutting-edge tools to understand why politics happens in certain places and at certain times. The first hurdle you need to overcome is to get into a graduate program. Unfortunately, by the time you decide to apply, most of the things that matter for your application are already out of your control: undergraduate GPA, GRE, and letters of recommendation. Fortunately, however, there is still one thing that you have total control, and it matters a lot for your application – your statement of purpose (SOP). Admissions committees take SOP very seriously and get to know what kind of scholar you are through reading your SOP. Here are some of the things that I think are important in preparing your SOP.

Focus on your research interests. While you must have interesting stories about your upbringing, hobbies, and journeys, they are irrelevant unless they are tied to your research interests. Graduate programs are looking for scholars who have some ideas about what they want to study. Start the essay with your research interests. Then say something about why you are interested in a certain question. It could be a personal story, a course you took, or a book you read. Next,

tell people how your previous training has prepared you to address this question. You can discuss the courses you have taken, professors you have assisted, and research projects you have participated in. Here, focus on what you have learned from these courses and projects. Have you discovered some patterns that defy the conventional wisdom? Have you had an “aha!” moment that makes you excited? Have you been trying to figure out something that keeps you up at night? Have you learned how to tackle a technological challenge by learning a new method? Then say something about how you want to pursue the topic if you are enrolled in graduate school. Here, avoid sounding like you have solved the problem. If you have solved the problem, you need not go to graduate school. Keep your curiosity and lay out a plan about how you plan to further our understanding of this question. This part is more like a mini research design: testable hypotheses, the methods you plan to use and why, potential challenges, and how you plan to tackle them. Lastly, say something about how a certain program can help you pursue this research agenda. Are there faculty who share your research interests? Does the department’s theoretical and methodological strengths fit your research agenda?

Talk like a political scientist. SOP is the place where you can signal you have been professionalized and you can talk like a scholar. Do some readings before writing your SOP, including canon in the discipline, recent journal articles, and SOPs of successful applicants. Use the terminology that political scientists use, but don’t overdo it. For example, rather than saying “I am interested in office politics,” say “I am interested in bureaucratic politics.” Instead of studying “the fate of the Chinese Communist Party,” you want to explain “the durability of authoritarian regimes.” Don’t say “I talked to my father’s friends,” say “I conducted semi-structured elite interviews.” These are a few examples. You get the idea.

Show your passion. Admissions committees care about whether you have a clear idea about research. They are also looking for people who have the determination to carry out their research ideas. Doing research is tough and, sometimes, lonely. You need to be genuinely passionate about your research to enjoy being a scholar. Show your passion in your SOP. Why does this

particular question interest you? What does addressing this question mean for you personally and for the people you care about? Political scientists cannot cure cancer, but we do what we do because we believe it can make the world better or at least make ourselves feel fulfilled.

Start early. Lastly, write and rewrite. Most programs have a December 15 deadline. Start writing the first draft of your SOP in the summer. Send it to your friends and professors for feedback. Revise relentlessly. Remember: this is the only element in your application package that you can still control at this point. Make it perfect.

I am here to help you. I am happy to offer written comments to aspiring political science applicants from China for their SOPs. If you would like to receive some feedback for your SOP, please send it to me (yuhuawang@fas.harvard.edu) by December 1st. I will do my best to get back to you within 10 working days.