

Economics PhDs and the political science job market

I hear a familiar question from economics PhD students as every August rolls around:

“Should/how do I go on the political science job market?”

In the interests of saving myself future emails and phone calls, and possibly creating a public good, I'll venture the best answer a relative newbie like me can offer. Advice is below the fold.

You can also see my generic job market advice [here](#).

Now, to the poli sci PhDs who are thinking, “Oy! Blattman! Why are you trying to make my life even harder!?”, let me offer a few assurances:

- The poli sci job market is [actually pretty healthy](#);
- Competition is a good thing for the discipline (at least from the perspective of those inside the discipline); and
- It's harder to break into political science from economics than economists tend to think.

Food for thought (circa 2007): like many economics PhDs, I applied to roughly 150 academic jobs, including about 30 or so in political science. For my efforts, I got just one poli sci interview, and was lucky to get even that. Any one job market experience is too idiosyncratic to take seriously, but there are good reasons why my yield was low.

First, political science doesn't really interview at their annual meetings (at least not the leading departments). They fly candidates out for a job talk straightaway, which means they meet fewer candidates, and can take fewer risks.

Second, economists are a risk. Economics PhDs typically have a preference for an economics job, and face uncertainty and costs in switching disciplines (not least of which: they can probably never go back to economics). Political science, for all its rewards and advantages, also offers lower income growth than economics, mainly because there's less competition from biz schools and law schools and the private sector. And the poli sci market happens sooner, so much so that poli sci offers are usually arriving before the econ market even starts.

So, the average political science department thinks you will probably turn down their offer. Those scarce, costly offers. If they have just one or two slots, will they wait until March for you to decide, when it's too late to grab their second choice from political science? Probably not. And no matter how much you tell them you prefer politics, it's all cheap talk, and they know it.

There's a subgame perfect equilibrium in here somewhere, and whatever it is, it does not look good for the econ PhDs.

I'm going to get more hopeful and constructive in a moment, but first a few more reasons why the political science switch is not so straightforward:

Politics is a big intellectual tent, and they don't always get along. Now, the methodological and ideological divide that separated the quantitative from the qualitative folks, and the rationalist people from everyone else, is closing. When you look at senior scholars in the top departments, most them do one well but dabble in the other. The younger generation of scholars are also mostly comfortable in both areas, and even if they specialize, there's an openness and a collegiality that (I think) is new. People get along. But that doesn't mean they easily agree on the best new hire.

A caricature of economists: they only respect papers, they tend to like small questions answered ridiculously precisely, and they use a narrow set of mathematical tools for the job or simply don't bother with the question.

The caricature of political scientists: they write books that often would have been better off as papers, they think small and precise questions are useful but rather boring, and they'll use whatever tools they need to tackle the big questions that matter.

If you are trained in the economics culture, the politics culture is a big shift. You can make it if you want it though.

Some advice:

1. Apply if your interest in politics is sincere. Otherwise you waste your time and their time, and make the path harder for the sincere people who will follow you.

2. Send costly signals. Cheap talk is ineffective. Build relationships with political scientists in and outside your university. Attend conferences. Submit a side paper to a political science field journal. Take politics grad classes for credit. Have your advisors write tailored letters, and contact their friends in political science departments.

3. Present your work early. Economics PhDs seldom present outside their department, especially early works and side papers. It's quite the opposite in political science, where graduate students are treated more like junior colleagues than faceless rabble. Getting you and your work out there is an important rite and (besides) a costly signal. The economists are right to be

cautious—a first impression is an important one. But since norms and expectations are different, presenting draft work in political science carries fewer downside risks.

4. Read books. If you don't know the field, why bother trying to enter it?

5. Have a respected political scientist on your committee. Ideally this is not the one economist in your political science department. You want someone who can advise you, write letters, and help shape your research agenda. It's also a costly signal.

6. Link your research to a big question in political science. Even if you are only answering a small bit of that big question. If you can't find articles in *IO* or *APSR* or *Political Analysis* that are asking similar questions, you may not be doing as much politics as you think. Economists publish a lot of good politics papers in *QJE* or *JPE* or *AER*, but these are narrower, less influential, and maybe less important than you think when it comes to the big questions in political science.

7. Be prepared for more fundamental questions. In my job talk at Yale (and subsequent seminar presentations), most questions were technical and not unlike what I encountered in economics. But I also get what seem like curve-ball questions: "What exactly is this a case of?" or "On what philosophical basis do these things actually measure well-being?" The questioners were essentially asking me to justify the very basis of my research agenda, the philosophy of my methodology, and other fundamentals I had never considered. At the time I was puzzled, but over time I've come to see them as sublime. (That would be another blog post).

8. Know your hats. Where will you fit in political science? Are you a comparativist? A methodologist? International relations or American politics? If you're not sure what these hats look at feel like, and the people who wear them, get moving. You need to position yourself to market yourself.

9. Hope for lots of slots. A department with a single slot may not take the risk on you. One with three or four or five openings can now start to take risks (and log roll enough in the department that one side gets their quant jock in return for the other side's political philosopher).

10. Don't wait to the last minute. If the application window is Aug 15 to Oct 15, avoid applying on Oct 15. There's a good chance that the department does rolling reviews and invitations, and may even have started job talks before the application window closes. Unlike economists, who wait until after the ASSA meetings to get rolling, nothing stops a politics department from making offers to someone before they even know you exist.

Other questions I didn't address? Ideas or ire from fellow political scientists? And by all means, remember I am a relative neophyte, and have yet to sit on a hiring committee, and so perhaps should not be taken too seriously.