

Comments for APSA Panel: “Hard Times and Ph.D.s: The Political Science Job Market and Non-Academic Careers,” September 2, 2010¹

Roy T. Meyers
Professor of Political Science
UMBC (University of Maryland, Baltimore County)
meyers@umbc.edu

Thanks for the invitation to be on this panel. It’s a nice time for me to think back on the start of my career, as I recently dropped a responsibility for program development and administration to return to full-time research and teaching. As requested, I will talk about my own employment in government, so I won’t have much to say about the non-government part of the non-academic labor market for political scientists. I also will comment on the wide gap between political science and government service as professions. I hope my observations are useful for both graduate students and graduate study directors.

My Experience

In 1981, I was an ABD at Michigan who started working at the Congressional Budget Office (CBO). I left CBO in 1990, having finished my dissertation and accepted a job at UMBC.² I’ve been at UMBC ever since, in part because of its location just outside the (Washington) Beltway, which has provided research, service, and consulting opportunities. So I have had an “in and out” government career, but only in once, and then out for good.

¹ Devin Hagerty and Laura Hussey provided useful comments and suggestions on a draft; mistakes and interpretations are mine alone.

² For budget insiders, I came during “Gramm-Latta” and left during the Budget Enforcement Act, nicely framing that decade of budget horrors. . .

I don't recall having a well-thought out career plan in 1981. I had gone straight from college to graduate school, and after completing my coursework I wanted to do something "real." I had chosen Michigan because of its reputation in what was then called political behavior, and took courses from Converse, Miller, and Eldersveld. I found I was much more interested in policy issues, policy process, and political institutions. With mentors like Kingdon, Anton, Aberbach, and Walker, it was easy to consider going to Washington for a few years before finishing my Ph.D.

But the timing in 1981 was bad for me, for I wasn't enchanted with the Reagan revolution. Many legislators for whom I would have gladly worked either had lost their jobs, or had lost staff slots, and competition was intense for those positions. So I looked elsewhere, and found a professional internship at CBO; after a few months I converted to a full-time job. In retrospect, this was great luck. While I have political preferences that are generally "progressive," I'm not that ideological or partisan; I'm much more comfortable in an analytical position. CBO, like other budget agencies, had an organizational bias towards fiscal conservatism, which I generally shared, unlike most elected officials at the time. And my first boss, and then his successor, were incredibly supportive to me even though I was likely to return to academia. So even when the political tide turns against your preferences, you may find it possible to enjoy working in government.

At first, my main job was to help CBO figure out how to do cost estimates for federal mandates on state and local governments. My graduate training included excellent courses on intergovernmental relations from Anton, on regulation from Taylor, and public finance from Courant. Each involved familiarity with current issues and government data, so I was ready to

go. But my job then morphed into being the CBO specialist on budget process issues, as part of a special studies unit that focused on budget concepts and complicated financial transactions. In effect, I helped create this job for myself by applying the knowledge I had to issues that frequently confronted CBO. The political scientist John Ellwood, now at Berkeley's policy school, had previously handled some of this work as Alice Rivlin's special assistant. The few others at CBO who have worked on budget process issues have usually been trained in the law or public administration. At times it was a bit uncomfortable being the sole political scientist in an agency dominated by economists. Partial compensation was that, perhaps thanks to my Michigan background, I won every election pool during my time there!

As an undergraduate, I was inspired by Wildavsky's classic on budgeting, but my experience at CBO convinced me that a different approach to understanding the process could be my dissertation topic. In the end, I won the APSA L.D. White dissertation prize, and after significant revisions, the National Academy for Public Administration Brownlow book award.³ I could not have done this without my participant observation experience. While it would be far-fetched to compare the federal budget process to the authoritarian schemes described in Scott's classic *Seeing Like a State*, being an employee of the state allowed me to see things that would be much more difficult to pick up in interviews, and almost impossible to understand through remote data analysis.⁴ Perhaps more important than seeing was doing, for being part of the government encouraged me to internalize its values, which I did to some degree. This did complicate interviewing lobbyists whose business it was to outwit budget agencies; I dealt with

³ Roy T. Meyers, 1994. *Strategic Budgeting*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

⁴ James C. Scott, 1998. *Seeing Like a State*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

this in part by taking a short leave of absence. That cost was outweighed by the benefit of being confident in my observations, having lived them on a daily basis.

I would strongly recommend a similar experience for most aspiring or new Ph.D.s-- though perhaps not for the near-decade that I had. Why? To counterbalance the scholasticism of political science, about which Mead recently wrote an excellent article in *Perspectives on Politics*.⁵ My experience reviewing budget articles for journals in political science supports Mead's indictment. I have often found that authors know little about the realities of the budget process. Their proposed articles often include basic errors in understanding of budget rules, practices, and historical events. I sometimes even wonder whether the authors have ever looked at a budget or talked to someone involved in budgeting. And when I have seen the comments of other reviewers, in many cases these reviewers have not noted those basic errors, instead focusing on detailed aspects of formal models or of statistical methods (revealingly called econometrics by some political scientists). Some of the proposed articles cite only to other journal articles, ignoring even academic books on the topic, and many adopt highly reductionist models and an inaccessible writing style which virtually guarantee the articles will not be read or understood by relevant practitioners.

You can avoid making such errors, regardless of your topic of study, by adopting a participant observation or similar methodology. To put it more positively, working in government is pretty likely to help you discover something that political scientists don't know yet.

⁵ Lawrence M. Mead, 2010. "Scholasticism in Political Science," *Perspectives on Politics*, 8:2, June, 453-464.

That is, you should consider getting a non-academic job not just to tide yourself over during the hard times for finding academic positions, but to become a better political scientist. Of course, the downside will be that you may find it much harder to read some journal articles after the experience. . . Or to be blunter, should you answer the siren call of relevance you will risk marginalizing yourself within part of the discipline. While this may make you less competitive for jobs at some universities, it will enhance your competitiveness at many others.

Why did I leave CBO? It was tempting not to leave. Compensation in government was better than in academia (and it can be even better in non-government positions). And it was usually interesting to be near the center of the action in a highly-respected agency. But I was also sometimes bored intellectually with the routine. Since becoming a professor, I have learned to value even more my academic freedom to follow where my curiosity points; the same goes for my ability to work outside my office and at different hours than expected in government (whether the hours be 9-5 or 8-7. . .).

How Much Distance (from Government and/or the Discipline) Need a Political Scientist Have?

I don't use the "truth to power" construction, as I find the "truth" component to be somewhat presumptuous. But I want to discuss briefly the challenge of doing quality political science within government. My comments draw simply on my experiences in the domestic policy area; I suspect there are more interesting and more common anecdotes to be told in the international area.

In 1990, when the creation of PAYGO was being discussed on the Hill, I wrote a CBO working paper on the topic, and sent it to some academic experts for their reaction. The one I

remember was from Wildavsky, who said that I had spent enough time in government and belonged in academia. I had just accepted the UMBC job, so I thanked him for the generous confirmation of my choice. Though I think he also was making the point that it can sometimes be challenging to be a political scientist in government. He would have figured out that my PAYGO piece didn't exactly please Ways and Means staff, as it implied that the committee had an excessively large jurisdiction. Similarly, that year I wrote a report on supplemental appropriations, which concluded in a short section that some supplementals were unnecessary. This minor political infraction led the House Appropriations chief clerk to berate the head of my division for several hours; luckily my bosses had spines and we released the report unchanged.

Yet I heard the message loud and clear: it would be much better if I were to just describe, rather than criticize or propose changes to the status quo. Consequently, I left Washington with a somewhat negative feeling in my gut about Appropriations clerks. Not that I don't respect their technical and political professionalism--quite the opposite. But I was primed by the experience to become more skeptical than Richard Fenno was in his interview-based *The Power of the Purse*.⁶ I strongly recommend that anyone considering participant observation read Fenno's *Watching Politicians*, which includes insightful discussions of the dilemmas involving the practice.⁷

In a recent *PS* article on "Political Science as a Vocation," based on a talk to British graduate students, Keohane argues convincingly that though political science is a field in which it is relatively difficult to make causal inferences, quality work still can contribute significantly

⁶ Richard E. Fenno, Jr., 1966. *The Power of the Purse: Appropriations Politics in Congress*. Boston: Little, Brown.

⁷ Fenno, 1990. *Watching Politicians: Essays on Participant Observation*. Berkeley, California: Institution of Governmental Studies Press. Note, though, that Fenno did all of his field work as an academic, and felt so strongly about keeping distance that he did not vote--a remarkable decision, I think.

to society.⁸ But some decision-makers who understand our findings will reject them, sometimes quite cynically, because doing otherwise might threaten their power. Though being a political scientist within government may provide the benefit of access, there may be associated costs of being ignored, rejected, or even the target of retribution.

Eventually removing oneself from the constraints of the Beltway can not only help one avoid these costs, but also provide the intellectual benefit of post-observation distance. I mentioned above that I had partially internalized CBO's values, but I found myself thinking somewhat differently once I left. Beyond the Beltway, it was much easier to challenge certain assumptions and practices that most everyone in Washington takes for granted.⁹

So is it any wonder that most self-defined "political scientists" work in academia and that few work within government? That distribution is reinforced by our discipline's self-imagery. In Keohane's article, when discussing the benefits of teaching, he mentions as one reward of the classroom that "over the long run, one may see former undergraduate students become politicians or even rise to high position. . . . With former Ph.D. students ties are much stronger, since they remain in the profession."¹⁰ His examples of the latter are all academics. Perhaps the full implication re "in the profession" was unintended, but I don't think it will be unfamiliar: the real political scientists are in academia rather than in government. Sadly, even the Congress reinforces this impression by preventing most Americans from easily accessing the excellent work done by the political scientists of the Congressional Research Service.

⁸ Robert O. Keohane, 2009. "Political Science as a Vocation," *PS*, 42:2, April, 359-363.

⁹ And that distance has progressed over time. E.g., see Roy T. Meyers, 2009, "The 'Ball of Confusion' in Federal Budgeting: A Shadow Agenda for Deliberative Budget Process Reform," *Public Administration Review*, 69:2, March/April, 211-223.

¹⁰ p. 360.

Over the years, though, I've run across many people in government with political science training, including a surprising number of Ph.D.s; some of them have been extraordinarily smart and fully capable of holding positions at leading universities. That they have been willing to work within government for their entire careers means that in one sense they were not fully socialized by the discipline; I would guess that many were not retained as APSA members.¹¹

To construe this positively, it is often the case that working in or around government requires a broader set of skills and interests than those that are core to the discipline (even a discipline as heterogeneous as ours). You need not have all these skills when you start. While on the job at CBO I was able to learn a great deal about economics, accounting, policy, policy analysis, and writing. That is, a government job can be equivalent to a second graduate training, though one that is not disciplinary. You might go into government as a political scientist, but with experience may define yourself also as a social scientist, or even as a civil servant. I embraced this recasting of my identity, which has a strong historical basis.¹²

So if you do look for a government job, you should be broad-minded in thinking about what skills and knowledge you might bring to the table. Don't expect to read many position descriptions which resemble what you did in graduate school. You can start at usajobs.gov, but don't stop there. Identify the substantive expertise and methodological skills you possess, and run targeted searches of agencies and other government employers that have responsibilities and processes that might match your capabilities. Look particularly at agency units with daily

¹¹ I will confess that given the scholasticism of political science and its lessened interest in public policy and administration, I too have sometimes let my APSA membership lapse, participating instead in public policy, public management, and government finance circles. Yet I was pleased to see this conference's Working Group on Practicing Politics: Political Scientists in Government, Policy Centers, and Policy-Related Organizations, and wonder what will come of it.

¹²Robert W. Pearson and Lawrence W. Sherman, 2005. "The Achievements, Frustrations, and Promise of the Social Sciences," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 600: pp. 6-13.

activities that resemble academia to an extent, such as policy analysis shops. Then make some phone calls, drawing particularly on any personal contacts you might have.

Whether your specialty be area studies or electoral politics, the interests of intelligence agencies and elected legislators will be different than those of your graduate school mentors. In particular, they will wonder how well you can communicate to a non-academic audience. Reconsider showing potential employers your best academic article, particularly if it has an appendix that includes the word “lemma;” you will probably be better off using a writing sample that can be read by a normal person. The best graduate training asks students to write for audiences other than academic journals, such as for the media or in a professional internship. More generally, I would hope that more graduate programs consider the extent to which their current curricula provide sufficient preparation for the non-academic market.

Much like with any job search, academic or otherwise, you should “interview your prospective bosses” to see how supportive they might be of someone with an academic training and a potential aspiration to return to academia. It’s also important that you not undersell your expertise as a political scientist. It may be useful here, though also depressing, to compare economists and political scientists. There are far more government jobs for economists than for political scientists, perhaps by a full order of magnitude.¹³ Is this higher demand for economists because they can supply greater expertise on a wider range of issues than can political scientists? Perhaps so, though I think the actual range of political scientists is very impressive. Is the remaining gap because economists are more comfortable being hired guns than are political

¹³ A 8/30/10 USAjobs.gov search for “political science” vs. “economics” returned 66 and 707 positions, respectively. And I would guess that this difference is smaller than that separating the number of economists who comment in the media and the number of political scientists who do.

scientists becoming hacks? Have too many political scientists withdrawn to the ivory tower? Should more political scientists risk the challenges of working in government?

A possible answer is suggested by Keohane's recommendation that graduate students (re)read Weber's two "vocation" essays. That's good advice. In the "Science" essay, Weber wrote that "the primary task of a useful teacher is to teach his students to recognize 'inconvenient' facts--I mean facts that are inconvenient for their party opinions."¹⁴ Most political scientists who seek vocations in government will find their positions inconvenient at times. How could it be otherwise given the nature of our political system these days?¹⁵ But if more political scientists tried to apply Weber's advice within government, at least briefly, then they might find that their careers are enhanced and that they will have contributed to the improvement of our politics.

¹⁴ H.H Gerth and C. Wright Mills, 1958, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, p. 147.

¹⁵ After Saturday's event on the Mall, I can't imagine a better example for myself than the possibility that I would have to work with an elected official who takes Glen Beck seriously.