

# Do Political Science Majors Succeed in the Labor Market?

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## ABSTRACT

Despite some stakeholders' concerns about the practical value of an undergraduate degree in political science, our graduates actually do quite well in the labor market. Based on analysis of a sample of 3.4 million college graduates (including 86,000 in political science) from the 2009–2014 American Community Surveys, our majors earn two-thirds more than demographically similar high school graduates if they stop with bachelor's degrees, but they are among the most likely to obtain graduate degrees, especially in law. Only engineering, economics, computer science, and health science majors make at least 10% more than our graduates, who make nearly as much as those who major in business and 10% to 25% more than those who major in most other social sciences and humanities. Political science majors have relatively high unemployment rates in their 20s, however, and may end up in very different occupations than they imagined when they chose political science.

Although most political science faculty probably hope students choose our major to think more deeply about really important things, many students and parents (and even a few faculty) worry that political science will not prepare graduates for careers. Responding to “jokes ... that political science majors ... have not acquired the necessary practical skills to make a living, let alone to acquire a lucrative career,” Breuning, Parker, and Ishiyama (2001, 657) argue that political science departments need to be much more explicit about the tangible skills they are delivering. In the provocatively titled “Would You Like Fries with That?” Bobic (2005, 349–50) suggests eliminating the BA in political science altogether, because “the standard program of study in Political Science ... virtually guarantees that a student with a Bachelor's degree will be unable to find employment using those skills or interests.” Although APSA's Task Force on the Political Science Major (Wahlke 1991) recommended restructuring the political science curriculum to prepare students for the world, Ishiyama, Breuning, and Lopez (2006) find that undergraduate political science education has changed very little over the past century, and that departments place little emphasis on career preparation (Ishiyama 2005; Collins, Knotts, and Schiff 2012).

Clearly, however, college graduates are more prepared for lucrative careers than are high school graduates. People with bachelor's degree earn 84% more over their lifetimes than people

with high school diplomas (Carnevale, Rose, and Cheah 2011), though the payoff to a college diploma varies widely by major, by as much as a factor of four (e.g., Altonji, Arcidiacono, and Maurel 2015; Altonji, Blom, and Meghir 2012; Black, Sanders, and Taylor 2003; Carnevale, Strohl, and Melton 2011). Analysis of earnings by majors shows that economics majors, for instance, earn more than graduates of most other programs (exceptions include engineering and computer science), whether they stop with a bachelor's degree or earn an MBA or law degree (Black, Sanders, and Taylor 2003; Craft and Baker 2003; Winters 2015). Similarly, Chen and Johnson (2016) find that political science majors fare better than comparable graduates of other fields (collectively) in the federal civil service.

I look more broadly at the success of political science graduates in the labor market. Using recent census data, I follow labor economists' methodology to compare unemployment rates, educational attainment, and earnings of political science majors to graduates in other fields, controlling for sex, race/ethnicity, age, and educational attainment. The findings are mostly positive: although political science majors have above-average unemployment rates in their 20s, they are among the most likely to obtain graduate degrees and earn meaningfully more than those in most other social sciences and humanities.

## DATA AND METHOD

Since 2001, the US Census Bureau has fielded the American Community Survey (ACS) to gather the detailed information on Americans' personal and work characteristics that was traditionally collected on the census long form. Since 2009, the ACS

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has asked college graduates the field of study for their undergraduate (but not subsequent) degrees. Combining ACS data for 2009–2014 yields information on a random sample of 3.4 million college graduates, including 86,000 political science majors.

Samples are so large that almost all relationships are statistically significant, allowing a focus on the size of differences.

The key independent variables are 28 fields of study (listed in all tables). I use broad categories for most fields, but break out the social

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**Table 1**  
Probability of Unemployment for 21-to-30-Year-Olds, by Major

	Unemployed	Difference from Political Science After Controls
Health Sciences	2.8***	-3.5***
Agriculture	2.9***	-3.0***
Education	3.1***	-2.8***
Theology	3.7***	-1.8*
Physical Fitness	3.8***	-2.5***
Engineering	3.9***	-2.6***
Mathematics and Statistics	4.0***	-2.4***
Physical Sciences	4.2***	-2.2***
Computer Science	4.5***	-2.2***
Biology	4.5***	-1.9***
Social Work	4.6***	-1.6**
Business	4.6***	-2.0***
Psychology	5.4***	-1.0**
Criminal Justice	5.6*	-1.4***
Communications	5.6**	-1.1**
Economics	5.8	-1.5***
Interdisciplinary Studies	5.9	-0.5
Environment	6.1	-0.2
Sociology	6.1	-0.8
History	6.2	-0.2
Languages	6.4	0.1
English	6.4	0.1
Philosophy and Religion	6.4	0.1
Political Science	6.6	.
Liberal Arts and Humanities	6.7	0.0
Fine Arts	6.8	0.0
Other Social Sciences	7.0	0.3
Architecture	7.5	1.1
Observations: 384,765		

Differences from political science are significant at the \*\*\*.001, \*\*.01, or \*.05 level. Logit model for unemployment includes college graduates aged 21-30 living in the U.S. and not currently attending school. Model uses dummy variables to control for age, educational attainment, race/ethnicity/gender, relationship type, year, and state of residence. Logit coefficients were converted to probability differences using Stata's *margins* command to calculate average partial effects.

**Table 2**  
Educational Attainment of College Graduates Aged 34 and Above, by Major

	Bachelor's Degree Only	Master's Degree	Professional Degree	Doctoral Degree
<b>Percentage</b>				
Political Science	45.7	24.9	23.9	5.5
<b>Differences in Percentages after Controls</b>				
Biology	-10.5	-2.3	3.7	9.1
Philosophy and Religion	-5.3	7.0	-7.2	5.5
Physical Sciences	-1.3	1.9	-10.3	9.8
Psychology	0.2 <sup>N.S.</sup>	8.4	-12.9	4.4
Languages	0.5	8.7	-12.5	3.2
Mathematics	1.5	11.2	-16.3	3.6
History	1.9	4.7	-7.6	1.0
Education	3.5	15.6	-17.4	-1.7
English	4.2	6.1	-11.5	1.2
Social Work	5.8	14.7	-17.8	-2.7
Other Social Sciences	8.3	5.4*	-14.2	0.6*
Theology	8.7	5.8*	-16.8	2.3
Economics	9.4	3.9	-12.5	-0.8
Interdisciplinary Studies	10.2	0.8	-11.1	0.2*
Engineering	11.1	7.7	-18.2	-0.6
Sociology	12.9	2.6	-15.0	-0.5
Health Sciences	13.4	-2.8	-11.0	0.4
Architecture	15.1	3.9	-15.6	-3.4
Physical Fitness	16.9	-0.8	-15.9	-0.2
Environment	19.7	-1.1	-17.6	-1.0
Agriculture	20.6	-5.3	-16.1	0.7
Liberal Arts and Humanities	20.9	-4.0	-14.9	-2.0
Computer Science	21.3	1.2	-19.7	-2.8
Fine Arts	22.1	-2.2	-18.0	-1.9
Communications	25.8	-6.0	-17.2	-2.7
Business	26.6	-4.9	-18.0	-3.7
Criminal Justice	26.8	-6.9	-16.8	-3.2
Observations: 2,807,200				

Differences from political science are significant at .0001, except \*.05 or <sup>N.S.</sup> not significant. Multinomial logit model for educational includes college graduates aged 34 and over, living in the United States. Model uses dummy variables to control for age, race/ethnicity/gender, relationship type, year, and state of employment and for whether currently attending school. Logit coefficients were converted to average partial effects.

Table 3

### Top Occupations for College Graduates Who Majored in Political Science

	Mean Salary	Percentage in Occupation
<b>Bachelor's Degree Only</b>		
Managers and administrators, n.e.c	92,762	9.4
Salespersons, n.e.c	92,203	4.8
Supervisors and proprietors of sales jobs	79,341	4.3
Managers and specialists in marketing	103,623	3.9
Legal assistants, paralegals, legal support	47,196	3.8
Chief executives and public administrators	155,730	2.6
Police, detectives, and private investigators	76,551	2.5
Computer systems analysts and computer scientists	68,499	2.3
Other financial specialists	102,000	2.3
Primary school teachers	41,145	2.3
Retail sales clerks	54,840	2.3
Secretaries	39,669	2.1
Customer service reps, investigators and adjusters	45,600	2.0
Management analysts	84,876	1.9
Personnel, HR, training, and labor relations	69,482	1.8
Financial managers	107,879	1.8
Accountants and auditors	66,851	1.6
Real estate sales occupations	63,108	1.6
Office supervisors	67,311	1.6
Military	62,835	1.5
<b>Master's Degree</b>		
Managers and administrators, n.e.c	115,406	12.0
Primary school teachers	55,084	7.0
Managers in education and related field	82,875	3.8
Chief executives and public administrators	171,816	3.8
Management analysts	95,174	3.5
Managers and specialists in marketing	119,866	3.4
Salespersons, n.e.c	95,625	2.7
Accountants and auditors	99,255	2.6
Supervisors and proprietors of sales jobs	104,132	2.4
Other financial specialists	134,739	2.4
Financial managers	151,839	2.4
Subject instructors (HS/college)	50,724	2.4
Computer systems analysts and computer scientists	86,059	2.4
Managers of service organizations, n.e.c.	77,911	2.3
Military	91,331	2.2
Secondary school teachers	56,091	1.9
Lawyers	116,180	1.8
Personnel, HR, training, and labor relations	93,602	1.6
Social workers	50,806	1.5

(continued)

Table 3 (Continued)

	Mean Salary	Percentage in Occupation
<b>Professional Degree</b>		
Lawyers	133,225	72.9
Managers and administrators, n.e.c	136,805	3.1
Physicians	176,777	1.7
Chief executives and public administrators	185,774	1.5
<b>Doctoral Degree</b>		
Lawyers	118,819	33.9
Subject instructors (HS/college)	85,514	24.9
Managers in education and related field	115,863	4.8
Managers and administrators, n.e.c	126,890	4.5
Chief executives and public administrators	162,561	2.4
Management analysts	112,858	1.9
Physicians	161,025	1.6
Primary school teachers	71,863	1.5

sciences—the most likely competitors for our students—into more detailed majors. Regression models use 27 dummy variables for field of study, with political science majors as the reference group; thus, coefficients represent differences from political science majors with similar characteristics on factors that influence career success.

The three dependent variables are unemployment, educational attainment, and annual earnings. The first is coded 1 for those who are unemployed and 0 for those with jobs. I restrict the sample to 21-to-30-year-olds (those with the highest unemployment rates), who are not in school and are in the labor force. I run a logit analysis and convert coefficients on the majors to expected differences in unemployment rates from political science majors, using Stata's *margins* command to calculate average partial effects (APEs).

Second, educational attainment has four values (bachelor's, master's, professional, and doctoral degrees). I restrict the sample to those aged 34 and above.<sup>1</sup> I use multinomial logit analysis, as the values do not have a clear order, and translate coefficients into probability differences using APEs.

Third, I run the earnings models on full-time, full-year employees aged 25 and above, who were not in school. The dependent variable is the natural logarithm of annual earnings, a coding that assumes that the independent variables have consistent percentage (rather than dollar) effects on earnings. I exponentiate the 27 major coefficients, subtract 1, and multiply by 100 to yield expected percentage differences in earnings from political science majors.

I control for a variety of factors that affect career success—age/experience, race/ethnicity/gender, sexual orientation, education, time, and location—using dummy variables for each unique value of each independent variable. (See the online technical appendix for justification.)

To tease out how majors affect earnings, I enter variables into the model sequentially. The first only includes major to show average percentage differences in earnings. The second adds educational attainment to compare those with the same degrees. The third adds race/ethnicity/gender, relationship status/sexual orientation, military service, age, and year to see how the type of people who choose each major affects the apparent

earnings differences. The fourth includes state of employment and 69 dummy variables for hours worked per week, to examine the impact of where and how much one works. The fifth model repeats the fourth, but limited to people without graduate degrees.

I present the original regression analyses in the online appendix, but show only the percentage differences by major in the tables. In each table, I arrange the majors in order of their success on that measure and present differences from comparable political science majors.

almost evenly between master's and professional degrees (table 2). The remainder of the table shows differences from political science in probabilities of each degree after a full set of controls (also see appendix tables 2 and 3). Only biology, philosophy, and physics majors are more likely to obtain graduate degrees, with the difference primarily in doctorates. Political science majors stand out for professional degrees: only biology majors are more likely to earn them, and only history majors are within 10 percentage points as likely as comparable political science majors to do so. One-fifth of political science graduates complete law school.

*Only 46% of political science majors stopped with a bachelor's degree; 5.5% earned doctorates, and the remaining 49% were split almost evenly between master's and professional degrees (table 2).*

**Limitations**

Students with different interests and abilities choose different majors, and ability has a substantial impact on earnings (Arcidiacono 2004; Webber 2014, 2015) and, presumably, educational attainment. Students in the highest-paying majors have the highest mean SAT-math scores (Altonji, Blom, and Meghir 2012), and math ability and classes have important impacts on earnings (Rendall and Rendall 2013). Because ACS data do not include any measures of ability, this research cannot test the possibility that differences in abilities among people choosing different majors explain all the differences in unemployment, educational attainment, and earnings. Political science graduates may not have earned more if they had majored in computer science, nor less if they had chosen English.

**FINDINGS**

**Unemployment**

Unemployment rates are high for those in their 20s, but substantially lower for college graduates than for the less-educated (4.9% versus 11.7% in 2009–2014). Political science majors' unemployment rate of 6.6% was nearly the highest among college graduates, however (table 1), and a logit model controlling for individual characteristics did not substantially alter that picture (also see appendix table 1). The first column shows unemployment rates; the rate of 2.8% for health science majors, for instance, is 3.8 percentage points lower than for political science majors. The second column shows the differences in unemployment rates (relative to political science) after controlling for education, age, race/ethnicity, gender, relationship status, year, and state; this difference remained at 3.5 points. Graduates of half the majors—including business, social work, psychology, criminal justice, economics, sociology, and communications—were 1 to 3 percentage points less likely to be unemployed than comparable political science majors. No major had a significantly higher unemployment rate than political science.

**Educational Attainment**

This possible difficulty in starting a career may contribute to political science majors' decisions to pursue further education. Only 46% of political science majors stopped with a bachelor's degree; 5.5% earned doctorates, and the remaining 49% were split

Table 4  
Mean and Median Salaries by Major, 2009–14

	Mean	Median	Sample Size
Economics	\$116,271	85,000	42,026
Biology	107,541	75,000	95,349
Engineering	105,182	93,000	170,818
Physical Sciences	102,605	80,000	61,205
<b>Political Science</b>	<b>99,651</b>	<b>75,000</b>	<b>53,889</b>
Mathematics	98,892	80,000	28,135
Computer Science	88,695	80,000	64,061
History	88,302	62,000	42,333
Business	84,791	65,000	432,755
Total	81,450	62,000	1,889,755
Philosophy & Religion	81,347	57,000	13,192
Health Science	79,344	69,000	132,177
Architecture	76,554	65,000	15,383
Interdisciplinary Studies	74,778	55,000	14,914
English	74,677	56,000	55,010
Other Social Sciences	74,378	60,000	23,758
Languages	73,175	58,000	17,033
Communications	69,761	55,000	72,876
Liberal Arts & Humanities	69,581	53,000	24,654
Environment	69,553	58,000	13,669
Psychology	69,368	55,000	82,936
Sociology	66,049	52,000	29,561
Agriculture	65,954	50,000	27,768
Criminal Justice	64,839	55,000	35,226
Physical Fitness	59,856	50,000	15,412
Fine Arts	57,380	46,000	65,878
Education	55,790	50,000	196,957
Social Work	52,347	45,000	20,857
Theology	50,725	41,000	11,984



Table 5

## Percentage Differences in Expected Earnings Relative to Comparable Political Science Majors, 2009–14

	All Degree Levels				Bachelor's Degree Only
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Engineering	13.5	26.5	16.3	20.1	19.7
Economics	11.1	20.2	15.4	13.1	10.8
Biology	4.0	-2.5	-0.5 <sup>N.S.</sup>	4.9	-3.6
Physical Sciences	3.3	4.6	0.3 <sup>N.S.</sup>	5.3	-0.5 <sup>N.S.</sup>
Mathematics and Statistics	1.7	8.7	5.6	9.6	10.5
Political Science	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Computer Science	-3.0	13.3	10.9	15.8	14.3
Business	-13.3	1.8	0.3 <sup>N.S.</sup>	3.6	2.1
History	-13.6	-10.7	-13.0	-10.4	-12.0
Health Sciences	-13.8	-4.8	3.1	14.1	16.3
Architecture	-15.7	-5.0	-8.8	-6.1	-3.3
Philosophy and Religion	-20.9	-21.0	-22.7	-19.5	-17.6
Other Social Sciences	-22.8	-15.6	-14.4	-9.9	-11.4
Environment	-23.9	-12.8	-18.0	-11.2	-12.0
English	-24.1	-19.0	-15.2	-12.0	-11.7
Interdisciplinary Studies	-24.1	-17.1	-10.9	-6.3	-8.1
Languages	-25.1	-21.0	-15.5	-12.5	-12.8
Agriculture	-26.7	-16.9	-22.3	-17.1	-19.2
Communications	-26.9	-14.1	-9.4	-6.2	-6.1
Psychology	-27.3	-22.5	-16.4	-11.3	-11.9
Liberal Arts and Humanities	-28.2	-17.9	-16.0	-12.4	-13.4
Criminal Justice	-29.5	-17.1	-15.4	-10.0	-9.9
Sociology	-29.9	-21.6	-15.8	-11.5	-11.5
Physical Fitness	-35.4	-26.3	-22.1	-15.7	-18.1
Education	-37.4	-30.9	-27.2	-21.1	-22.5
Fine Arts	-38.1	-27.8	-23.4	-19.5	-18.8
Social Work	-41.0	-34.3	-26.7	-19.2	-20.2
Theology	-45.3	-39.9	-44.6	-39.5	-36.1
<b>Model controls for:</b>					
Educational Attainment	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Race, gender, age, veteran, year	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hours worked, state	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Observations: 1,808,514 (1,102,644 for bachelor's only model)					

All differences from political science are significant at the .0001 level unless indicated by <sup>N.S.</sup>

### Occupations

Although career guidance for political science majors (e.g., American Political Science Association 2001; Clark 2004) typically emphasizes government careers, three-quarters of political science majors work in the private sector. The most common jobs of those with bachelor's degrees are in management and sales (table 3). Government jobs include public administrators, police officers, and primary school teachers. Those with master's degrees are most typically in management or education, and most of those with professional degrees or doctorates work as lawyers, though management is also common.

### Earnings

Political science majors with bachelor's degrees earn, on average, 67% more than comparable high school graduates; those with master's, professional, and doctoral degrees earn 99%, 170%, and 128% more than high school graduates, respectively (not shown). Table 4 shows mean earnings by major, and model 1 of table 5 shows percentage differences from political science majors, controlling for year; only engineering, economics, biology, and physics majors earn more. Political science majors' mean salaries are slightly higher than those for computer science and business majors and are 20% to 30% higher than for those in English, communications, psychology, criminal justice, and sociology.

One reason is political science majors' high educational attainment. When model 2 controls for degree, most majors' pay rises by at least 10% relative to political science. Individual demographics also explain some of the pay advantage in the most lucrative majors. Engineering, computer science, and economics majors are disproportionately male, white, and Asian (appendix table 4), groups that tend to earn higher salaries overall; when those factors are controlled in model 3, the pay differential shrinks (see appendix table 5). The pay advantage to majoring in the health sciences jumps, however, because of their over-representation of women, blacks, and Latinos.<sup>2</sup>

Adding hours worked and state of employment also shifts political science majors downward (model 4), partly because they are among the four majors who work the longest hours and the three majors who work in the highest-paying states. (In particular, 5.4% of political science majors work in Washington, DC, 4.6 times the rate for college graduates overall and nearly twice the rate even for economics and foreign language majors.) With all these variables in the model, political science majors earn 10% to 20% less than engineering, computer science, health science, economics, and math majors, but only 4% less than business majors and at least 10% more than those in other social sciences and the humanities.

## CONCLUSION

Studying political science seems to have a positive impact on students' careers. Political science majors with bachelor's degrees earn two-thirds more than comparable high school graduates, and most obtain graduate degrees. Only engineering, economics, computer science, and health science majors make at least 10% more than demographically similar political science majors working the same number of hours in the same states. Our graduates make nearly as much as those who obtain far more career-oriented business degrees, and they earn 10% to 25% more than comparable majors in most other social sciences and humanities, even after controlling for our majors' higher probability of pursuing graduate degrees. That higher pay depends, in part, on working somewhat longer hours in high-wage, high-cost locations; but a 1-in-20 probability of a career in Washington, DC, may be an attraction to our majors.

Our majors' relative ranking in the economic hierarchy may have more to do with their innate abilities than with what they learn from us, of course. The ACS data do not include any ability measures to test that possibility, but Altonji, Blom, and Meghir (2012, supplementary table 2) find that political science majors' SAT-math scores are markedly lower than those in the highest-paying majors, somewhat lower than those in history and philosophy, and as high as or higher than those in psychology, English, business, other social sciences, and social work. If their findings hold more generally, we can probably claim some credit for our students earning more than history and philosophy majors and reject claims that majoring in business, the other social sciences, or the humanities offers better paths to good careers.

Two weaknesses do stand out. First, young political science graduates had fairly high unemployment rates in recent years. Efforts to smooth the transition to the labor market (e.g., internships, career counseling) could have high short-run payoffs. Second, our career advice should probably recognize more explicitly that political science is a generalist degree. Very few of our graduates go into politics, and only a quarter of them end up in government jobs, many of which are in schools. Substantial percentages work in sales. High unemployment rates in the 20s may partly reflect an unwillingness to accept that reality. Nonetheless, our majors are developing the writing and thinking skills that allow them to succeed in many venues, and many may be deciding to save their professional training for graduate school.

## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096516003012>. ■

## NOTES

1. Most people who are going to earn graduate degrees have done so by age 34. The percentage who had graduate degrees rose nearly a full point between ages 33 and 34, then fluctuated with a slight upward drift at higher ages.

2. Using a different subset of the ACS and different model specifications, Altonji, Blom, and Meghir (2012) also find political science pay lagging behind engineering, computer science, and economics (and slightly behind mathematics and chemistry) and leading communications, biology, English, history, sociology, and criminal justice (and barely ahead of business).

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