

# Anatomy of a Cover Letter



UNIVERSITY OF  
NOTRE DAME

College of Arts & Letters  
Department of Political Science

Print your letter on University letterhead.

State where you heard about the position.

Offer a brief description of your dissertation project.

Identify the position by rank and sub-field.

Dear \_\_\_\_\_ Search Committee Members,

Offer a reasonable and optimistic estimate of your timetable for completion.

I am writing to apply for the assistant professor position in American politics as advertised on the American Political Science Association's e-jobs website. I am currently a Ph.D. candidate in political science at the University of Notre Dame and expect to complete my dissertation entitled "Political Inequality in the American States" and graduate in May (2010).

I enjoy the challenge and commitment required to be an engaging teacher and feel these beliefs connect well with \_\_\_\_\_'s dedication to excellence in undergraduate education. During my time as a graduate student at Notre Dame, I have had the opportunity to teach two of my own undergraduate courses. In the fall of 2008, I taught a course called "Campaigns, Elections, and American Democracy," which covered topics including the history of American elections, campaigns at the local level, candidate emergence, voting behavior, and political representation. I also taught a course called "The Politics of Poverty and Social Welfare," which analyzed trends in

Research Paragraphs

poverty (who tends to be poor, how poverty is measured), competing theories about why poverty persists in the United States, public and private efforts to combat poverty and inequality, and culminated with a final project where students were asked to develop and present their own plan to reduce poverty in the nation. I have included the syllabus for both courses in this application packet along with copies of my instructor evaluations and student comments.

Teaching Paragraphs

Teaching these two courses has provided valuable experience in developing and scheduling the content for a class, assessing which methods most effectively convey information to students, and managing class discussion and evaluation of assignments. In addition to these two classes and potentially related topics, my graduate training has also prepared me to teach courses in research design/methods, general American politics (introductory course), public opinion and polling, the U.S. Presidency and Congress, political parties and interest groups, American state and local politics, political participation/voting behavior, the public policy process, and race/ethnicity in American politics. For more information about the specific methods I employ as an instructor, please see my "Teaching Philosophy" included in this application packet. In regards to my specific experience with teaching quantitative research methods, I was employed as our department's graduate student methods consultant for the 2007-2008 academic year where I aided fellow graduate students in gathering and formatting data, setting up a research design, and then analyzing the data and interpreting the results. As a faculty member, I can draw on this experience when encouraging research collaboration with undergraduate students both as part of the courses I teach and as an advisor to students doing independent study.

Provide a general description of your research interests.

My research agenda aligns with my teaching interests. I am principally concerned with political representation in the United States – the link between citizens and their government. Using large public opinion surveys and a wide range of policy data, my dissertation examines inequalities in representation by explaining why the political opinions of the poor are less reflected in state public policies than the opinions of the affluent. While political scientists have warned for decades that wealth and political influence are closely tied in American politics, little research has actually assessed inequalities in

government responsiveness to public opinion and we know even less about how and why these inequalities arise. My dissertation systematically tests different mechanisms that explain unequal policy responsiveness and directly speaks to the quality of American democracy. I find that opinions are weighed more equally in states with more competitive party systems and more professionalized legislatures, while policy tends to be more biased toward the opinions of the rich in states that have fewer restrictions and disclosure requirements for campaign donations and hold their state elections in congressional or odd numbered years (elections where the upper class bias in the electorate is the highest). As my adviser Rodney Hero can attest, I am on track to complete my dissertation next spring. Of the four planned empirical chapters of my dissertation, three are fully completed and the data analysis for the fourth is finished and I am in the process of crafting the text that explains the results.

I am also interested in the way in which government policies and elected officials affect citizens' political attitudes and behaviors. In a recent article I coauthored in the *Journal of Politics* entitled "Policy, Preferences, and Participation: Government's Impact on Democratic Citizenship," we found that when the government makes a major policy decision, both those who strongly agree and those who strongly disagree with the decision are spurred to increased political involvement, but for different reasons. From the standpoint of political inequality, a planned extension of this study will investigate whether one reason disadvantaged citizens participate at lower levels in politics is simply because they are accustomed to not being represented by their government.

Indicate future directions for research.

In addition, I am interested in how politics impacts citizens' quality of life. Political scientists have devoted enormous attention to the inputs of the public policymaking process, but much less attention has been paid to the "output" side of public policies – their eventual consequences. I am particularly interested in how variation in political factors and public policies lead to different quality of life outcomes. For example, in an article I recently coauthored in *Social Indicators Research* entitled "Public Policies and Suicide Rates in the American States," we found that states with more generous spending on social services such as public assistance and subsidized medical benefits tend to have demonstrably lower suicide rates even after controlling for traditional predictors of suicide. I plan to continue this research program by exploring additional ways in which "politics matters" by producing normatively better or worse social outcomes. More detailed information about my research interests and agenda is available in my "Research Statement" included in this application packet.

I have included my curriculum vitae, three confidential letters of recommendation (from Rodney Hero, Benjamin Radcliff, and John Griffin), a copy of my teaching philosophy and statement of research interests, a writing sample (Chapter 3 of my dissertation), a copy of three recently published articles, the instructor evaluations/student comments and syllabi from the two classes I taught at Notre Dame, and my graduate transcript. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require additional information. Thank you for your consideration.

Note enclosures.

Sincerely,

Patrick Flavin

Ph.D. Candidate  
University of Notre Dame

University Writing Center

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