SYMPOSIUM ON ADVISORS AND THE DISSERTATION PROPOSAL

Developing the Dissertation Prospectus

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The central research questions that I wanted to pursue in my dissertation were clear to me early in my graduate school career. I wanted to explore why some groups in the United States were so woefully unrepresented in many of the nation's high-level political offices. In 1991, when I began to think more concretely about my topic, there were only two women serving in the U.S. Senate, and the literature exploring the experiences of women candidates was very limited. Because of the seeming injustice of this situation, I quickly knew I wanted to jump into this area of research to see if I could shed some light on what was causing the enormous discrepancy in the number of men and women being elected to top offices.

Converting the broad outlines of an idea or topic into a compelling research proposal, or in this case, dissertation prospectus, was somewhat daunting. As a relatively young graduate student, I could see around me many who got bogged down in finalizing their prospectuses. The ultimate task before me was to take a broad question of substantive importance in U.S. politics and turn it into a theoretically sophisticated and methodologically sound proposal. At the very least, I knew that for this topic it would be essential to gather original data, as most of the large data sets generally available to political scientists would not allow me to explore the subtle effects of gender in the electoral arena. Thus I would have to demonstrate in my prospectus a solid grasp of the theoretical debates and questions in the literature on elections, political representation, and women and politics, and put forward a creative plan for carrying out field research.

As I think back on how I developed my prospectus, I realize that my committee did a number of things that helped me complete the proposal in a timely manner and get my research underway. Within the dissertation committee, the chair and second reader set the tone for developing the prospectus, including the pace, while the third reader generally deferred to the two more active members of the committee while offering important substantive comments along the way. What stands out most is that overall, the committee took a "low-key" approach in guiding the development of my proposal.

In this case, a low-key approach is not to be confused with indifference; it means the committee members allowed me to develop the topic on my own, rather than constantly providing me with a multitude of instructions, suggestions, or new avenues to explore. Their low-key approach may have been a result of their unanimous support of the general topic of inquiry; they may also have thought that it was important that I take the time to figure out the exact approach myself. A low-key approach assured that I would be writing *my* dissertation. If the committee had pursued a more structured and rigid approach it may have diffused the passion I felt for my topic.

Beyond their general low-key approach, my committee emphasized three things that helped me to embark successfully on my dissertation research. I think dissertation advisors and committee members would do well by their students if they also employed some of these approaches. First, the committee did not make me write the perfect prospectus. While friends and peers appeared to be very frustrated by advisors who were trying to have their students write the most thorough prospectuses possible, my committee felt that a clear, compelling, and relatively short prospectus would be enough for them to let me get started. They were not out to have me prove that I had read every possible piece of relevant literature or to have me spend weeks exploring tangential subjects that might not have helped me think about my topic. After several drafts, and only a couple of months of discussion, the prospectus—only 21 pages long—was quickly approved, allowing me to begin my research.

The committee approved the prospectus knowing full well that, down the road, I would have to fill in some holes in my knowledge and refine my theoretical conceptualization. They viewed the prospectus as part of an evolving process that would ultimately become the introduction to the dissertation, with any flaws in the proposed organization of the dissertation to be dealt with as we encountered them. The committee thought that the most important thing was for me to commence the fieldwork that was critical to my dissertation's original contribution. In this approach the committee demonstrated that they valued promise over perfection.

Second, the committee focused heavily on ensuring that my research methods were carefully designed and well presented in the prospectus. I was proposing a mixed-methods approach, combining elite interviews, content analysis, and polling data. In most of their revisions to my prospectus, the committee intended to make certain that the methods I proposed would allow me to explore thoroughly the role of gender in the electoral process. The committee was confident that as long as my basic theoretical underpinnings were developed and the methods employed were sound, the project would require only minor modifications that could be worked out as the project evolved. The committee needed to be certain that my research design—which involved closely monitoring 38 U.S. House elections in California, 19 with a woman candidate running and 19 without—would allow me to assess the gender dynamics of the electoral process.

Third, from the beginning, the committee, particularly my chair, suggested that I think of this document as a prospectus for a book manuscript and not simply as a dissertation proposal. This suggestion to conceptualize the prospectus as a book proposal had both psychological and methodological benefits. From a personal standpoint, trying to

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develop a proposal for a book gave me a sense of energy and pride regarding the prospectus. Frequently, the idea of writing a dissertation becomes imbued with a sense of dread, largely based on the realization that one might be working for years on a very narrow and arcane text that few beyond the committee ever read. Regarding the prospectus as a book proposal caused me to think more broadly about the importance of the entire endeavor and turned me toward the goal of trying to speak to a broader audience.

In the end, I think that all of these suggestions speak to the need to view the dissertation prospectus as a proposal for an engaging and connected work, not as a typical dissertation with separate parts, like literature review, methods, findings, and analysis. When the prospectus and dissertation are divided this way, these sections often become a set of disconnected tasks. Allowing me to discover my own topic, focusing on the relationship of the methods to the theory, and conceptualizing the project as a book set the course for having a personally and professionally successful dissertation experience.

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