Project, Person, Place: Navigating Postdoctoral Transitions in Political Science

William L. Allen *[1]

[1] Department of Politics and International Relations (PAIR), University of Southampton, UK

This Version: 1 June 2026

Abstract

Much advice on navigating academic job markets provides guidance on preparing application materials and handling hiring procedures. While this is obviously valuable, there remain deeper questions about how to develop and present one's profile and record which matter for how early-career scholars navigate the postdoctoral period. By reporting my job search from 2017 to 2024, mainly in political science and in the UK, I outline how answers to three questions featured in my approach: (1) why does this idea or puzzle matter (*project*), (2) why is this the best candidate to address that puzzle (*person*), and (3) why is this the most appropriate institution and/or funding body (*place*). Systematically reflecting on these questions with mentors helped me produce increasingly clearer and stronger evidence-based answers. Meanwhile, although my journey had a modal result of rejection, I believe transparently reporting this is important to shape professional norms.

Keywords: early-career researchers, job market, mentoring, political science, UK

*Contact: william.allen@southampton.ac.uk. This version prepared as part of the *Postdoctoral Job Market* roundtable at the 2025 European Political Science Association Annual Meeting.

Introduction

This note reflects on my academic job search, specifically by sharing data about my successes and (much more often than not) failures, and then using these to illustrate some guiding questions which helped me develop what I think were stronger applications for a range of jobs. These thoughts have developed over several years in conversations and events among other early-career and fixed-term researcher colleagues.

My motivation stems from two observations. First, while there is a tremendous amount of helpful advice about the academic job market generally, and the social sciences specifically (including political science where I am primarily based), this tends to stay at the level of technical guidance about formatting, presenting content, and hiring procedures. Obviously, these tips are important: heed them. Yet well-meaning senior scholars, mentors, and colleagues repeatedly asked about my "research agenda," "where I saw my work in five years," or "the golden thread" that ran through my application materials. Clearly, procrastinating with Overleaf margins and *ggplot2* was not going to help me answer those kinds of questions. Therefore, this note tries—imperfectly—to describe one possible way that I personally found helpful for thinking about these questions more systematically.

Second, although I was well-aware about how competitive that searches for permanent faculty positions would generally be, I did not find many resources that actually put numbers on this beyond some postdoctoral fellowship programs which publish aggregate success rates. At one level, having some data would have been helpful for calibrating my expectations beyond "it will be tough" vibes. At another level, by sharing my actual application numbers, I want to contribute to a wider professional norm of reporting rejections in the hope of learning from them. **To be clear: I am not making any claims about *relative* performance beyond my own data,** as each candidate's circumstances will vary. Comparison, after all, is the thief of joy: since one doesn't know other applicants' advantages and disadvantages, the fairest (and kindest) self-evaluation is based on where one is now compared to where one was previously.

My Job Market Experience

Table 1 displays my outcomes from 2017—the year before I submitted my dissertation—to 2024. I applied for 25 positions at 17 institutions across the UK and Europe, excluding two cases where the position was withdrawn midway through the process or where I withdrew my application. These positions spanned several types, as seen in Table 2, but were mainly permanent lectureships at assistant professor level.[1]

Table 1: Job Market Outcomes by Cycle[1]

Cycle	Successful	Unsuccessful	Total	Success Rate
2017-18	1	4	5	20.0%
2018-19	0	1	1	0.0%
2019-20	1	3	4	25.0%
2020-21	1	3	4	25.0%
2021-22	1	1	2	50.0%
2022-23	0	6	6	0.0%
2023-24	1	2	3	33.3%
	5	**20**	**25**	**20.0%**

[1] Excludes withdrawn applications and positions.

Table 2: Job Market Outcomes by Job Type[1]

Job Type	Successful	Unsuccessful	Total	Success Rate
Fellowship	2	2	4	50.0%
Project-Based	0	1	1	0.0%
Teaching[2]	1	0	1	100.0%
Fixed-Term Lectureship[3]	0	1	1	0.0%
Lectureship[4]	2	16	18	11.1%
	5	**20**	**25**	**20.0%**

[1] Excludes withdrawn applications and positions
[2] Majority teaching role, but still with research expectations
[3] Can be similar to an assistant professorship, but time-limited
[4] UK-equivalent of an assistant professorship. Out of 18 applications at this level for searches that completed, I was offered three interviews.

This leads to a few key observations about my particular postdoctoral journey. First, it **spanned multiple cycles**: seven in total. This was partly due to the serial nature

[1]The lectureships comprised university-wide cross-disciplinary searches (2), open-field searches in political science (3) that sometimes asked for specialization in quantitative methods (2), and searches within subfields including comparative politics (3), media studies and/or political communication (3), political behavior (2), public and/or social policy (2), political economy (1), and migration studies (1).

of my employment, where my ability to "stay on the market" required me to seek ways of further extending my time horizon. Second, it **involved roles of various types**: moving from a research fellowship, to a teaching role, to another fellowship, and finally to a lectureship. Consequently, the objectives and criteria I needed to address changed over time and between applications. Third, **rejection was the modal outcome**—both overall, and for all but one cycle. I made more applications during the last year of the PhD (2017-18) and the penultimate year of my second fellowship (2022-23). Fourth, **when success did strike, it was singular**.

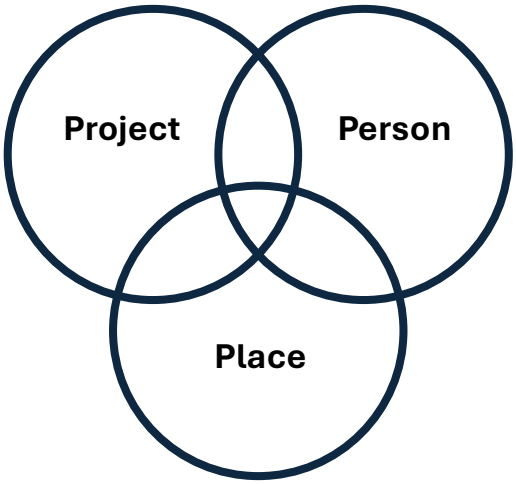
Project, Person, Place

Reflecting on these transitions with the help of mentors, I have identified three connected questions that helped guide my efforts while on the job market.[2] First, why does this idea or problem matter, and is it worth pursuing? Second, why is this the right person in terms of their skills and experience to address that problem in a substantial way? Third, why is this institution and/or funding body the best fit? Here, I organize them under the heuristics of "project," "person," and "place" as shown in Figure 1. Developing answers to these questions, as well as the underlying evidence and examples to support them, was a key part of my job search. While this discussion might give the impression that the three aspects have equal relevance, they likely carried different precise weightings depending on the nature of the role to which I was applying.

Project: Why This Idea?

The "project" component may refer to an actual project, in the cases of fellowships where applicants propose plans for a discrete piece of research, or to a fuzzier set of "next projects" comprising areas of ongoing and future work that they will pursue as a lecturer. (In my case, I tended to refer to these as "strands" of a broader question in

[2] It is important to note that, as seen in Table 2, I mainly applied for positions with a significant focus on research. While my discussion of these questions is framed in those terms, I think much of the underlying logic about addressing and showing *why* someone is best-suited for a role is still valid, particularly in the UK system that tends to focus on meeting "essential" and "desirable" criteria.



Project: Why does this research matter now? What will it change? How will it contribute to knowledge?

Person: Why is this the right person? What essential skills or experience do they have?

Place: Why is this the right location for the research and researcher?

Figure 1: How Project, Person, and Place Intersect

cover letters). For postdoctoral roles connected to an already-existing project, usually involving working with a Principal Investigator (PI) who has won a large grant, the broad scope of this aspect might already be set. Whichever form it took, my discussion of the project explicitly linked to some kind of broader problem that would be recognized by, and matter to, other political scientists—or the PI of the project to which I was applying. What is more, it had to be reasonably clear: several senior scholars talked about the importance of having "a hummable tune." These examples illustrate how I tried to do this, with added emphasis:

> Across three strands…I explore **how voters use information to form and change their preferences,** and how factors like political trust shape this process. This matters because knowledge is a key component of **understanding how voters incentivise politicians to produce policies that maximise public welfare. If processes of selection and sanctioning are based on misperceptions, this has worrying implications for democracies**, as demonstrated by misinformation and its threats to institutions and norms.
> *—Cover letter for a lectureship in political science*

> My research…addresses **how citizens engage with information** about political and economic issues, and **what consequences this has for attitudes, voting, and policymaking.**
> *—Cover letter for an open-field fellowship leading to a permanent lectureship*

> Growing public concern about migration has **fuelled illiberalism and populism**, amplified by mobility shifts such as refugee flows to Europe, mass Venezuelan emigration, and internal displacement due to conflict and climate change. As a result,

> political scientists and civil society organisations have **prioritised how to best understand and address these concerns. One approach gaining significant traction involves conveying factual information** about migration, either to correct false statements or beliefs (as in "fact-checking") or to promote more accurate knowledge that leads to attitude change. (Facts, in this context, refer to verifiable statements about issues). This raises a crucial question which my project will address: **what types of information, if any, can change citizens' minds** about migration?
> *—Research proposal section, British Academy postdoctoral fellowship*

> My current research, **centred in political communication**, addresses how the press impacts what people think about migration…[It] helps scholars understand how immigration attitudes may change in the shorter- and longer-terms **given different kinds of information and evidence.**
> *—Cover letter for a postdoctoral position on a project about fact-checking, short-listed for interview*

Importantly, all of these examples come from text that was early in the materials—if not the very first paragraph as in the British Academy proposal. I distinctly remember spending a lot of time reflecting on how to convey the key problem or puzzle with which I was preoccupied while keeping the level of abstraction reasonably high to capture and hold readers' attention.

Person: Why This Candidate?

Next, the "person" element conveys why this candidate is best-positioned to make significant progress on the project's core objectives either *as defined by them or the PI*. This last bit is important: ideally, the candidate's profile and skills present a clear solution to the problem already identified. In my case, defining the next project as an empirical examination of messages' effects on a range of political outcomes (knowledge, attitudes, voting) set up opportunities to highlight (1) how my dissertation focused on text-based mass media, which is partly but not exclusively how people encounter information, and (2) that I had some experience with designing and analyzing experiments, but was looking for ways to become even more proficient.

Publications—ideally peer-reviewed ones—on related topics and using similar methods to those of the project are the clearest pieces of evidence for this element. But here,

mentors correctly advised to "show, don't tell." I eventually landed on emphasizing *what* a study revealed and how it relates to broader ideas that were recognizable to a broader field, while weaving in the venue and current status:

> …The second strand examines how information impacts preferences. While fact-checking generates belief accuracy, **whether it changes what people want in polarised settings is unclear.** In response, I **use survey experiments to show that information conveyed visually** about EU migrants' economic impacts moves British attitudes and preferences in pro-migration directions, especially among Leave voters with more negative views (in *International Migration Review)*. That the information changed policy positions **contrasts with prior scholarship**, which I attribute to the messages' visual aspects. I **develop this explanation in a survey experimental study** (R&R, *Comparative Political Studies*) by showing how voters use visual comparative information ("benchmarks") to evaluate their government. This mechanism has implications for how policymakers can effectively communicate their objectives and achievements.
> *—Cover letter for a lectureship in political science*

Meanwhile, in instances where the project was already well-defined, I explicitly linked my substantive interests and methodological skills to those required by the role. Here, unless the larger project or lectureship specifically called for migration expertise (rarely the case), I usually emphasized how migration was a good example of a politically salient issue through which I could either contribute to a project's aims or political science more generally:

> My ability to use quantitative, qualitative, and computational methods uniquely **equips me to analyse both perceptions and practices surrounding misinformation.** I would especially be attuned to the psychological, social, and political mechanisms and outcomes of citizens' engagement with scientific research.
> *—Cover letter for a postdoctoral position on a project about fact-checking, short-listed for interview*

> Although scholars from multiple disciplines have investigated how media and other information sources influence attitudes, **several important questions remain unanswered**…Can media have effects on longer-term public concern, and if so, which aspects of coverage are more powerful?…What impacts do different message styles have on perceptions?…Although political scientists speak of press and policy agendas, are there ways of reliably and efficiently identifying the presence of these concepts in large amounts of text? **Using the case of immigration in the UK**, I address these questions in several ways…
> *—Research proposal for a postdoctoral fellowship*

This question also provided me with opportunities to reflect on other employment and activities that could demonstrate additional skills, networks, and experiences beyond

conventional research. Funding bodies and departments increasingly value and look for abilities related to public and/or policy engagement, writing for audiences outside of universities, leading groups, and contributing to the profession through activities like reviewing or organizing events. These "value-added" aspects, while secondary to research-based signals like publications, can still be consequential for shortlisting purposes—especially if they are listed as desirable criteria.

Place: Why This Location?

The "place" component required me to reflect on how my responses to the previous sets of questions could connect to the department, team, and/or funding body to which I was applying. For some postdoctoral positions already embedded within a team or project, this was reasonably straightforward to do: my profile would fill a specific need, which would in turn help the project succeed. For research fellowships, especially those like the British Academy which require support from a named mentor as well as commitments from a host department, this required more detailed reasons explaining the added value of bringing my project to them. Crucially, this had to involve specific reasons beyond merely being around other like-minded senior scholars: in my case, this usually involved accessing networks, resources, and opportunities for professional development that were unique to that location. It also involved responding to the department's or university's priorities where they stated them:

> ...[M]y interests **closely align with the priorities** of [your research cluster].
> *—Cover letter for a lectureship which would be connected with a particular group within the department, shortlisted for interview*

> ...[T]his post's **early focus on developing credible funding streams** fits well with my objectives...
> *—Cover letter for an open-field lectureship with an emphasis on grant capture*

> My trajectory **strongly links with [your] interests** in public policy, Big Data, and diversity.
> *—Cover letter for a university-wide fellowship leading to a permanent lectureship*

A minor observation: as I applied for permanent lectureships, I tended to focus on drawing links with thematic strengths of the hiring departments *rather* than mention

specific faculty members. This practice helped mitigate risks of connecting myself to people who may themselves be moving institutions in the near-future (or retiring, as happened in one of my first fellowship applications).

Practical Planning

Table 3 displays the rough timeline I ended up using, though each person will have different tolerances and tastes. The precise timings also varied over time: I found that the first few cycles required more time to get my core materials in order, while updating and refining in subsequent years took comparatively less time.[3] I also tended to underestimate the amount of time that developing applications would take, especially when a position or scheme would require standalone research statements (9 cases) or responses to additional questions beyond the cover letter (8 cases). Assuming that an application would take four working days—itself probably a conservative estimate—this means that I likely spent about 150 hours on materials in my first year on the job market, or about 0.09 full time equivalent (FTE).[4] Adding 10% more work while in the final year of a PhD or during another fixed-term contract clearly matters.

Three moments are worth highlighting. First, building in time to honestly take stock of my priorities and development over the past year was useful for identifying the one or two areas in which *I could practically move the needle* by the time I would send applications. Second, getting my core materials in order over the summer—and securing feedback from senior scholars before everyone goes on holiday—reassured me that I could respond to announcements if and when they arose: I found the UK job market to be less structured than others, and that positions could be advertised throughout the year at short notice. Third, once I had my materials updated, I recontacted and shared these with my referees for that cycle. Not only did I find this to be a more efficient way of regaining their consent to use their names throughout the year, but also it provided

[3] Though this was offset by greater time spent on interview preparation.

[4] Using the UKRI assumption of 37.5 working hours per week for 44 weeks per year, totaling 1,650 working hours.

an opportunity for me to highlight key points or developments in my record since their last reference.

Table 3: A Template Plan[1]

Month	Activity
April	Reflect and take stock of gaps/priorities
May	Make progress on (e.g. submit or fully draft) key outputs
June	Draft/update core materials and seek feedback
July	Prime, (re)-consent, and update referees
August	Refine core materials, but also REST
September	Start sending applications

[1] Assumes a "job-market" start of September. Adjust accordingly.

Overall, the heuristics of "project", "person," and "place" have helped guide my approach to applications spanning several types. Their value, for me, lies in how they flexibly prompt reflection on the reasons for *why* an application should be considered further. As such, I fully expect they will resonate with some people and contexts more than others, depending on the circumstances.

Acknowledgments

These reflections have developed through professional development talks given for the Department of Politics and International Relations (DPIR) at the University of Oxford (2022), the British Academy (2023 and 2025), the Department of Political Science at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst (2024), the DPIR Early Career Researcher Network (2024), the UK Political Studies Association (2024), and the European Political Science Association (2025). Many thanks to the participants at those events for their feedback.

Versions

1.0: First draft, in preparation for EPSA 2025 (June 20, 2025)

2.0: Revision in preparation for EPSS 2026: added interview data to note 4 in Table 2; minor cosmetic edits to tables 1-3 (June 1, 2026)