

Political Science; The Reflection of a Journey

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Abstract

This essay is a reflection on my educational journey through the Master of Arts in Political Science program and evaluates how the program changed not only my understanding of government, leadership, institutions, and public policy, but also how I approach situations involving those systems. The main argument of this paper is that prior professional experience gave me a practical knowledge base, while graduate study provided the academic understanding needed to explain those same experiences and expand on them further. Using previous papers focused on federalism, campaign finance, education and crime, and China's Belt and Road Initiative, I demonstrate how the program learning objectives were achieved. The essay also examines growth in writing, research, critical thinking, evidence use, and the ability to analyze complex political issues. In addition, it discusses instructor feedback, artifact revision, and how revisiting earlier work changed my expectations of academic writing. Finally, the paper connects my past, present, and future by explaining how early attempts to better understand my profession helped reshape my goals beyond this classroom and into my own classroom.

Political Science; The Reflection of a Journey

Experiences are what make each person different, and my experiences have given me a truly amazing life and story. While many experiences are shared, no two people follow the exact same path. I believe my Education is a valuable part of understanding my experiences. Because of this, these courses have helped me understand things I may have already experienced but did not fully understand at the time. Before entering this master's program, I spent years as a father, an Airman, a technician, instructor and evaluator, world traveler, and special operations aircrewman. Those experiences exposed me to leadership, accountability, and decision-making, but they did not always give me the academic background to explain why organizations and governments work the way they do. This master's degree in political science has helped bridge that gap.

I began this program while working for Air Force Special Operations Combat Operations Division, commonly known as "the COD." My role was to secure diplomatic clearances for countries our aircraft needed to fly through for missions, exercises, or just transiting to replace other assets. Through discussions, negotiations, and careful communication, I learned how relationships between governments can be both important and fragile. I worked within these systems every day and a lot of nights, but I did not fully understand why they existed, how they were formed, or how they connected to larger political structures. It was not just other countries that had boundaries, but working within our own nation's restraints as well. Before this program, I understood these systems operationally because I worked inside them daily. Political science helped me understand them academically. It helped explain why governments make the decisions they do, how competing interests shape outcomes, and how policy,

institutions, and leadership influence decisions at every level. This program helped me understand how power is distributed, how policy is created, and how leadership decisions affect people, communities, and nations (Carey, President Obama's Balance of Federalism and State Independence, 2026b).

Learning more about the American system of government helped me better understand the differences found in other countries (Carey, The Widening Gap: A Look into the Belt and Road Initiative and Its Effects in Countries Leading to China's Increasing International Influence, 2026d). Through the program, my writing, negotiation skills, and ability to frame options and courses of action became stronger. Demanding instructors and critical feedback helped refine those skills while also improving my ability to analyze issues, support arguments with evidence, and view decisions from a broader perspective. I have a lot to be thankful for because of this program, and I've found it difficult to explain.

One of the things that surprised me most while working on diplomatic clearances was how different each country's restrictions could be, even when the country was considered an ally. I had assumed that allied relationships would make movement simpler, especially during emergencies such as hostage rescue support or embassy evacuations. Instead, I learned that every country still protected its own rules, airspace, politics, and interests. Even urgent missions could be slowed by clearance requirements and national decision-making. Political science helped me understand that alliances do not erase sovereignty (Carey, The Widening Gap: A Look into the Belt and Road Initiative and Its Effects in Countries Leading to China's Increasing

International Influence, 2026d). Countries may cooperate with the United States, but they still act based on their own laws, interests, and political limitations. This experience also taught me to see that government systems are slow to change on purpose, that the system is built on it, even when there is an urgent need, this class helped me understand why. At first, that could be frustrating, but this program helped me understand why those systems exist. Slow processes can protect sovereignty, prevent mistakes, and force governments to think through consequences before acting (Carey, President Obama's Balance of Federalism and State Independence, 2026b).

Working diplomatic clearances also changed how I viewed alliances and international relationships. Before that role, I viewed allies as countries that would automatically support one another, especially during urgent situations. My experience showed something more complicated. Allied nations were often willing to help, but they still operated on their own timelines and under their own rules. Ireland for example will not allow any aircraft with munitions to overfly it. Luckily their location is not as strategic as others, like Spain. Some countries had very specific requirements or restrictions that had to be followed regardless of operational urgency. Political science later helped me understand why. Countries cooperate, but they remain independent governments pursuing their own interests, priorities, laws, and political realities. Alliances matter, but sovereignty still shapes decision-making. This program changed how I viewed international partnerships because I began seeing allies less as automatic supporters and more as independent governments balancing cooperation against their own interests. This class has also helped me understand that it is not too different from how parties

interact in Congress. Groups pursue their own interests, but compromise is often necessary to accomplish anything meaningful.

This program also changed how I view leadership and local decision-making. Before studying political science, I may have looked at a school board or district decisions and judged it only by the final results. Now I find myself watching the process a lot more closely. For example I have been watching the school board, district leadership, and teachers' union negotiate over teacher raises. I understand that the district has a budget and competing priorities, but I also see how the decisions about money reflect values, public image, and political pressure. During the most recent negotiation, the district and the teacher's union failed to compromise, this led to the decision going directly to the school board. Teachers ultimately received a 2% increase, and the Superintendent was not happy. Before this program, I may have only focused on whether that number felt fair. Now I also look at the process, the incentives that were offered or refused, the competing interests, the political pressure behind the outcome, and the failsafe that was initiated.

This program also helped me better understand elections and voter strategy at the local level. When a teacher ran for superintendent, I noticed that his campaign seemed focused heavily on teacher support rather than building broader support with parents and the general public. Because of this program, I understood that winning an election requires more than support from people who already agree with you. A candidate has to reach beyond the natural base of support and persuade voters who may not already be committed. His failure to build that wider coalition helped explain why he lost. That experience showed me that political science does not only apply to national politics. It also helps explain local leadership, school

governance, public messaging, and how decisions are made in the communities where I live and work.

The course and paper that changed how I think the most was my work on China's Belt and Road Initiative. In my artifact, *The Widening Gap: A Look into the Belt and Road Initiative and Its Effects in Countries Leading to China's Increasing International Influence*, I examined how China was expanding its influence through infrastructure projects, trade relationships, and long-term investments rather than relying solely on military power. The paper explored examples in Pakistan, Africa, ASEAN countries, and Europe to evaluate how economic partnerships could be used as tools of geopolitical influence. My conclusion was that the Belt and Road Initiative represented more than economic development; it was a strategic effort to increase China's international influence through interconnected economic and political relationships (Carey, *The Widening Gap: A Look into the Belt and Road Initiative and Its Effects in Countries Leading to China's Increasing International Influence*, 2026d). Before that course, I understood international relationships mostly from an operational and military perspective, and to be honest I thought my interactions gave me a superior view then most. I experienced how countries cooperated, delay, negotiate, and protect their own interests, but I had not fully connected those actions to larger political and economic strategies, I didn't know what I didn't know. Studying the Belt and Road Initiative helped me understand that international influence is not only built through military power. It can also be built through infrastructure, trade, investment, debt, and long-term partnerships.

This topic connected directly to my own military experience. I spent time in Djibouti City while China was building its military base there, and I also traveled through Ethiopia, where Chinese influence was visible even in the airport. At the time, I recognized that China was expanding its presence, but I did not fully understand the larger strategic picture behind it. The Belt and Road Initiative paper helped me connect what I had seen in person to political science concepts involving economic leverage, international dependency, and geopolitical competition. Revisiting this artifact during the capstone process showed me how much my analytical writing had improved. When I originally wrote the paper, I focused primarily on demonstrating China's growing influence. During revision, I found myself spending more time examining competing perspectives, including the benefits participating countries received through infrastructure investment and economic development. This shift reflected a broader lesson from the program: political issues are rarely one-sided, and understanding multiple viewpoints often leads to a stronger analysis and a more complete understanding of international relations (Carey, *The Widening Gap: A Look into the Belt and Road Initiative and Its Effects in Countries Leading to China's Increasing International Influence*, 2026d). I truly feel this was one of the most awesome experiences I have had academically.

That paper also changed how I view international competition overall. It made me realize that every country sees itself as the main character in its own story. Each nation pursues its own mission, interests, security, and influence. Political science helped me understand that international relations are rarely as simple as good actors and bad actors. More often, they are shaped by competing national interests. Every country wants to be the one others look to,

depend on, or follow. That understanding made my earlier military experiences more meaningful because it gave me the academic language to explain what I had already observed.

The paper that challenged me the most was my work on federalism and President Obama's balance between federal and state authority. In my artifact, President Obama's Balance of Federalism and State Independence, I examined how the Affordable Care Act, Race to the Top, ESSA, and DACA each showed a different relationship between federal authority and state power. The paper argued that Obama often used incentives, funding, and executive action to encourage state cooperation rather than relying only on direct mandates. This helped me understand federalism as a working negotiation between levels of government, not just a simple division of power (Carey, President Obama's Balance of Federalism and State Independence, 2026b). Unlike some other topics, there were very few simple answers. Healthcare policy, education policy, immigration, executive action, and state authority all involved competing interests rather than clear right and wrong positions. Working through those issues forced me to think differently. Political science helped me understand that leadership decisions are often made with incomplete information, competing priorities, budget limitations, and political realities.

Studying federalism also changed how I think about government authority. Before this course, I often viewed federal policy as the driving force behind change. Through this program, I learned how much power states still hold and how national policy often depends on state implementation to become reality. Revising this artifact helped me better explain how federal

policy can look powerful on paper but still depend heavily on state choices, court decisions, funding rules, and local implementation. The ACA Medicaid expansion, ESSA education flexibility, and DACA's legal challenges all showed me that government authority is often limited by the institutions meant to balance it (Carey, President Obama's Balance of Federalism and State Independence, 2026b). As a teacher, this changed how I viewed educational leadership and local government decisions. Watching school board decisions, district priorities, and negotiations over teacher compensation became less about immediately agreeing or disagreeing with outcomes and more about understanding competing interests behind those decisions. My father used to tell me that true compromise is when everyone gets something, but nobody is happy. Political science gave me a better understanding of that idea. Whether discussing Congress, education policy, or negotiations at the local level, compromise often determines whether progress happens at all. This program taught me that understanding leadership requires understanding tradeoffs, constraints, and the reality that complex decisions rarely create perfect outcomes for everyone involved.

Studying Super PACs and campaign finance also changed how I understand elections and political influence. In my artifact, *Buying Influence: Super PACs and the Evolution of Political Power in America*, I examined how campaign finance changed after major court decisions such as *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* and *SpeechNow.org v. Federal Election Commission*. The paper argued that Super PACs became powerful because they operate independently from candidates while still shaping campaign messaging, voter perception, and political momentum (Carey, *Buying Influence: Super PACs and the Evolution of Political Power in*

America, 2026a). Before researching the topic, I understood that campaigns needed money, but I did not fully realize how much money could work parallel to elections while still independently shaping them. Super PACs may be legally separate from candidates, but they can still influence messaging, voter perception, momentum, and the tone of a campaign. That helped me see that political influence does not always move directly through parties or candidates. Sometimes it operates beside them.

This topic also pushed me to understand that there is no perfect answer. I believe Super PACs and outside political organizations should be able to exist because they can expand political speech and allow groups to support causes they believe in. At the same time, I have concerns about how powerful they have become and how much influence wealthy donors and outside groups can have over elections. Studying this issue helped me understand why campaign finance is so difficult to reform. Protecting political speech matters, but so does protecting fairness and public trust in elections. How Super PACs operate is not very clear as well, voters can easily confuse that the messages are not coming from the candidate directly. I do not think there is an easy fix, and that realization helped me see politics as more complicated than simply identifying a problem and assuming there is a clear solution. Revising this artifact helped me move past a simple argument that Super PACs are either good or bad. Instead, I learned to evaluate the tension between First Amendment protections, outside political spending, donor influence, negative advertising, and public trust in elections. This paper strengthened my ability to analyze political systems where constitutional rights and democratic fairness can conflict with one another (Carey, *Buying Influence: Super PACs and the Evolution of Political Power in America*, 2026a).

My research on education and crime also affected me personally because it connected directly to my work as a teacher. In my artifact, *Education and Crime: Understanding the Effectiveness of Education on the Incidents of Crime*, I examined the relationship between educational attainment and criminal activity. The paper explored how educational opportunities, graduation rates, and early intervention programs could influence long-term social outcomes. My conclusion was that education serves as one of the most effective preventative tools available to society because it can address risk factors long before criminal justice systems become involved (Carey, *Education and Crime: Understanding the Effectiveness of Education on the Incidents of Crime*, 2026c). The paper helped me understand what can happen to students who fall between the cracks. In some ways, it explained things I had already seen in schools, but it also made the long-term consequences feel more serious. Education is not only about grades, test scores, or graduation requirements. Classrooms shape opportunity, confidence, identity, and the choices students believe are available to them. This realization honestly scared me for the future. As a teacher, I see how early some students begin to struggle, and this research helped me understand how important those early warning signs can be. When students miss key academic or developmental milestones, the effects can carry forward into adulthood. This does not mean failure is guaranteed, but it does mean intervention matters, resources dedicated to intervention matters. The paper reinforced my belief that education is one of the most important public policy tools available because it can change a person's direction before other systems, like criminal justice or incarceration, ever become involved. Revisiting this artifact during the capstone process reminded me why I chose education as a second career after military service. While writing the original paper, I viewed

the topic primarily through a policy lens. Looking back as a classroom teacher, I now see the students behind the statistics. The research reinforced my belief that teachers, schools, and early intervention programs can have a lasting impact on a student's future opportunities and quality of life (Carey, *Education and Crime: Understanding the Effectiveness of Education on the Incidents of Crime*, 2026c).

The revision process in this capstone was one of the most frustrating parts of the program because it forced me to look back at my own work and judge it honestly. It is easier to keep moving forward than it is to return to older papers and admit where they were weaker than they needed to be. When I revised my artifacts, I did not feel like my main opinions or conclusions had completely changed. In most cases, my original thesis still held. What changed was my ability to support those arguments with greater depth, stronger evidence, and clearer structure. What surprised me most was how much I wanted to change the flow and writing of my older work. The main ideas were there, but the organization did not always guide the reader as clearly as it should have. Revising the papers showed me that good academic writing is not only about having a strong argument, but also about leading the reader through that argument in a clear and logical way. Writing flow matters almost as much as the content. The biggest improvements were in my writing and argument structure, but those improvements came from a deeper change. My thinking underneath the writing had improved.

Revision felt less like fixing grammar and more like seeing how my thinking had evolved over time. I found myself asking harder questions, looking for stronger support, and wanting to provide deeper context than I originally had. The process helped me understand that growth in

graduate education is not simply learning new information. It is learning how to think more critically about information, evidence, and the arguments built from them.

This program increased both my confidence and my humility. I have more confidence now because I better understand decisions made by local leadership, including school-level and district-level decisions, as well as broader government operations. I am more comfortable looking at a policy issue, breaking it apart, and asking what interests, institutions, and constraints are shaping the outcome. That has made me a stronger teacher, communicator, and citizen. At the same time, this program also made me more humble. My Scoutmaster used to say, "The more you know, the dumber you find out you are." That became true during this degree. The more I learned about policy, federalism, diplomacy, campaign finance, and political institutions, the more I realized how much context exists behind every decision. Completing this degree has not removed every doubt I have about my potential, but it has shown me that I am capable of more. Instead of seeing this program as the end of my development, I see it as proof that I can continue growing as a teacher, leader, and thinker.

The purpose of this program was not simply to earn another degree or complete a set of assignments. It helped me connect my military experience, professional growth, and personal understanding of government into a stronger academic framework. I entered the program with experience in leadership, operations, teaching, and international coordination. I leave it with a better ability to explain those experiences through political systems, policy decisions, institutional limits, and evidence-based analysis. Political science taught me that government

decisions are rarely simple. Whether looking at alliances, school board decisions, Super PACs, federalism, education policy, or international competition, the same lesson continued to appear: power is shaped by interests, limits, compromise, and consequences. This program helped me become more patient, more analytical, and more aware of the complexity behind decisions. Overall, this degree program helped me bridge the gap between what I had experienced and what I could explain. I entered the program with experience, and I leave with a stronger ability to analyze, communicate, and apply that experience, and for that I am thankful.

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