

I didn't understand the value of an interdisciplinary education until one day last semester. I was talking with one of my professors, Nate Adams, and I asked him something along the lines of "If I want to learn more about legitimacy and power where should I look?" He replied, "Well, if you ask me, a philosopher, I'll tell you to take a philosophy class, but if you ask a political theory professor she'll tell you to take a politics class. If you ask an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or economist they'll probably tell you something similar." The answers to my broader questions about legitimacy and the political realities we construct are scattered across disciplines, and if I want to determine the legitimacy (pun intended) of any one department's answers I need to learn about the critiques developed in other disciplines.

I've been struggling to comprehend the American body politic since before I arrived at UVA. I want to understand why millions of Americans think the US is representative of meritocracy and egalitarianism when America is anything but meritocratic or egalitarian. The area studies I proposed are integral in understanding this. I first need an idea of how ideologies and political beliefs are formed generally, which I can apply to contemporary American society. A critical piece of this ideology is that the US is a legitimate democracy. As such, understanding theories of legitimacy could provide critical insights. However, what people think is only half of the equation. It is equally important for me to understand the structures and practices that have led to the dearth of socioeconomic mobility in the US. Each of these areas of study is important for me to understand the gap between American ideology and practice.

When I was deciding what area studies I wanted to put in my application I started questioning why I was applying to PST. A lot of my interests are political in nature; maybe I could answer my questions by double majoring in Philosophy and Politics, or something along those lines. My choice of major would be made much easier if I had a way to verify that I could study what I want to study in PST. But then it hit me; I have a way to verify this! I can look at past thesis abstracts to see if my interests align with what PST students were writing about. It took less than ten minutes of reading to recognize that I needed to apply to PST. Examining the ideological construction of the Islamic State, as Omar Elhaj did in 2020, means getting to the root of how ideology is formed. Investigating how regimes in Algeria changed historical narratives to legitimize their existence, as Ella Shoup did in 2017, engages deeply with questions asking what legitimacy even is. I ended up reading a half dozen more abstracts that didn't just seek to answer questions I concern myself with; they seemed like papers I would beg my book club to read. More than anything else, reading past thesis abstracts convinced me that PST is the perfect major for me.