

College Statement of Purpose

I happened to live in Oklahoma in 2008, and to see history running faster than anyone would have ever expected when on November 21st the first African American president was elected.

In that circumstance, I wondered what brought all those people together on streets and squares, both in the US and abroad, some cheering and crying, others complaining and fearing the worst. What did these people expect from politics and what did they fear? How does politics work and how does it differ from one country to another? Above all, how does a single event in a single country, such an election, has such effect across the board?

Once back in Italy, I decided to pursue a Bachelor Degree in political science and particularly in International Studies at the University of Bologna. Although my main interests lie in the field of International Relations, my curiosity has also been stimulated by domestic political events. Indeed, I did not hesitate to study national politics when the now famous Italian 5 Star Movement made its first electoral appearance in 2013. Thus, I embarked in a research project that culminated in a conference paper presented by professor Aldo Di Virgilio at the 3rd Annual Conference of the European Political Science Association. As the first political movement to overtly define itself as “beyond the right-left dimension”, the goal was to identify the main explanatory variables of the members’ legislative behavior in an Italian regional assembly.

During this experience as research assistant, I created a database of roll call votes ex novo. In order to develop a spatial bi-dimensional model and identify the main explanatory variables, I first utilized the NOMINATE parametric model developed by Rosenthal and Poole (1997), followed by the Optimal Classification method.

I showed how not only the right/left, but also the government/opposition dimension did not seem to have the explanatory power usually attributed to them by the literature. Instead, the most relevant variable seemed to move around the establishment/anti-establishment dichotomy.

Right after graduating with first class honors, I continued my studies with a MA in International Relations and I soon took the opportunity to study abroad. During my academic year at University of California, Santa Barbara, I studied International Political Economy (IPE) with Professor Cohen. Working under his supervision, I came to appreciate the connection between economics and politics with regard to political developments.

Under Professor Cohen’s guide, I wrote a research paper driven, once again, by real-world events. In parallel with the euro crisis, my paper focused on the underlying political reasons that hindered the creation of a complete monetary union.

Following the OEP approach, I built on the theory of currency policy preferences developed by Frieden (2003, 2015) in order to infer which socio-economic domestic actors would theoretically support or oppose a closer monetary union. I then investigated empirically how expectations matched with reality. Through qualitative analysis, facilitated by my good understanding of Spanish and French, I demonstrated how the distributional effects of adopting the euro currency have prevented states from acting as unitary actors and following a coherent strategy of commitment towards European integration.

Once back in Italy, I finished my exams and wrote my Master’s thesis on “The Governance of the Trade Regime”, under Professor Andreatta’s supervision.

Inspired by David Lake’s books (1999, 2009), I problematized the notion of anarchy, by conceptualizing the international system as a complex web of hierarchical relationships. In this perspective, authority and hierarchy play a role in producing political order. Specifically, I focused on one particular issue related to political order, namely international rules in trade. As such, I interpreted the evolution of the trade regime through the punctuated-equilibrium model (Krasner, 1984), thus underlying “critical junctures” which sparked brief periods of innovation followed by longer periods of stasis. In doing so, I demonstrated how the evolution of the trade regime followed an interesting pattern. On the one side, the United States strengthened previously developed rules during periods of perceived high or increasing domestic power (e.g. late 40s, early 90s). On the other side, Washington actively innovated those rules during periods of perceived low or decreasing power (e.g. 30s, 70s, early 80s).

By the end of my experience at Santa Barbara, I was already committed to pursuing a PhD. In preparation, I enrolled in the IPE MSc at the London School of Economics and decided to pursue the “research track” in order to strengthen my knowledge of methodologies. In particular, I am enrolled in the following courses: “Research Design”, “Qualitative Research Methods” and “Applied Regression Analysis”. Regarding my current project, I am working on a paper on local parallel currencies and their relationship with the euro crisis, with a case study on “Sardex”, a parallel currency founded in Italy in 2009.

I strongly believe that all these experiences have shaped my deep commitment in understanding politics, both domestic and international ones, notwithstanding its intrinsic complexity and the rigorous training and methodology required to study it. Such commitment was not shaken by the roadblocks which happened to be in my academic journey. For example, I did not feel discouraged because of my lower-than-expected grade in the undergraduate statistic course. All the contrary, for my Honors thesis I decided to focus on a research question which required a statistical methodology even more advanced than the one taught in the ordinary course. While many friends mocked me for this choice (should not have been “smarter” to focus on a more familiar and easier topic, they wondered), I found it deeply gratifying. Once again, I looked to turn a challenge into an opportunity for my educational and cultural enrichment. By the end of the semester, statistics had ceased to be an obscure subject with no link to my interests and started to become one of many valuable tools to do actual research. I think that this trifle episode well elucidates my commitment towards graduate school, as well my academic and cultural curiosity and my open and outward looking mindset.

Looking forward, I would like to expand my thesis on the trade regime by adding a new dimension, namely security. While the domestic environment – what I referred to as perceptions of decreasing or increasing power – may give incentives to strengthen or innovate the “rules of the game”, security concerns are likely to play a bigger role once multilateralism is stalled. Indeed, current economic relations mainly take place at bilateral or plurilateral levels. In doing so, I would benefit from working with Professor David Lake to understand how and where trade policies are most shaped by security concerns.

As a complementary research strategy I would also focus on American attempts to set new standards in international trade and the degree of (non-) compliance from other countries in the Pacific. Since international standards need to be enforced at the national level, signed agreements might still conceal an observational equivalence between legitimacy and fear. A higher level of non-compliance may send meaningful signals to Chinese policy-makers willing to produce a new political order based on different principles rather than accepting the US to write the “rule of the game” in Asia.

In addition, I would like to further expound upon my previous research on regional integration in a two-fold way.

First, I would like to investigate how political institutions – such as electoral systems, bureaucratic institutions – aggregate and mediate interests towards or against the common currency. My research outlines how at least one economic actor, namely trade unions representing public employees, does not act consistently with what economic theory would predict. I that “issue-linkages” in domestic negotiations over the common currency may have led to sub-optimal outcomes by creating incentives to accept the euro without being fully committed to its success.

Understanding how most left-leaning trade unions have come to accept free market projects, such as the common currency, may shed light on how similar mechanisms may work in other context, such as East Asian regionalism. I would surely benefit from working with Professor Megumi Naoi to explore the link between political institutions and interest groups.

Second, another interesting line of research points at the broader international context. Under Professor Lawrence Broz’s supervision, I would like to study the relationship between the existence of the European common currency and international cooperation. For example, China’s backing up of the common currency through active buying of trouble governments’ debts in 2011 has then led these European countries to support China on issues within the EU such as the lifting of the arms embargo. Was this an exceptional case or can it be generalized to show the possibility for “issue linkages” between monetary cooperation and other issues?

In conclusion, I hope to study International Relations, with particular emphasis on IPE, and Comparative Politics and to focus on the topics I become passionate about, namely the politics of European integration and the effects of hierarchical relations on the international system. I am sure that the faculties at your department would provide me with the best methodological tools to address these research questions while broadening my theoretical knowledge on a broader range of issues. I believe that the excellence of your program, along with my research skills and curiosity, will help me to reach my future goals.

In conclusion, I hope to study International Relations, with a particular emphasis on IPE, and Comparative Politics as a PhD student in order to focus on the topics I have become passionate about, namely the political economy of trade and money. Ten years from now, I see myself doing research in the United States with the same passion and curiosity that has motivated my academic pursuits thus far. In the long run, I would like to foster the study of IPE in Italy, where the discipline can make significant progress. I am confident that the rigorous training offered by your Joint PhD Program would provide me with the best tools to address those research questions as well as many others. At the same time, the vibrant intellectual life at the University San Diego and the School of Global Policy and Strategy, coupled with its faculty-led research centers, would broaden my theoretical knowledge on a wide range of issues.

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