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Course Description

The capstone course is taken by political science majors in their senior year. In this course, students “cap off” their education in political science by completing a research paper that, as far as possible, approaches the standards of professional, peer-reviewed political science journals. The course has two major purposes: 1) practicing standard political science research methods, in a manner that 2) helps students to learn how to do good applied research in political science.

All political science majors are required to take at least one course in research methodology. The capstone course provides an opportunity for majors to solidify their understanding of these research methods in an applied manner. It is hoped that the methods will thereby become more intuitive and “automatic” for students thinking about how to answer political science research questions.

Students do not ordinarily have adequate time and guidance to undertake well-designed and detailed research projects. This course sets aside significant time for this purpose. In addition, repeated, in-depth feedback on the research project is provided, not only through written assignments, but also through interaction with the instructor and fellow students. To maximize the benefits of this interaction, it is recommended that students write their papers on one of a number of suggested “classic topics” in international politics. However, with the instructor’s approval, students may choose to write on topics in other areas of political science. This process will make it easier for students to see that answers to political science research questions may be gradually improved and refined, but are typically not ever final and complete. It will help students to think constructively about how to make incremental improvements to answers on all topics of interest to them.

We begin with a brief review of political science research methods, and then move on to discuss some classic and more recent examples of research in the politics of international economic relations. The remainder of the course will be devoted to work on student research papers.
Assignments and Grades

Final grades are based on five assignments. On February 13, there will be a short quiz on political science research methods (worth 20% of the grade). On February 27, a 3-5 page methodological critique paper (20% of the grade) will be due. On March 12, a 3-5 page research paper proposal, in outline form, is due. The research paper proposal will not be graded, but students will receive written comments and suggestions at the time of their oral presentations. Between April 9 and May 7, each student will make two oral presentations (each one worth 5% of the grade). One will be a presentation of their own research paper or research proposal, and another will be as a constructive reader and critic of another student’s research paper or research proposal. Each paper or proposal will be discussed in under 20 minutes: 5-10 minutes for the presenter, 5 minutes for the reader, and the remainder of the time for discussion. The final research paper (50% of the grade) is due on May 14.

Assignments due on days when there is no class meeting should be dropped off in my mailbox in Northwest Quadrant B 5545 (political science mail room). Graded assignments can be picked up, one week after they are due, during the TA’s regular office hours.

Required Readings on Electronic Reserve in the Library

Readings can be downloaded from the Library’s E-Reserve web page: https://millib.wisconsin.edu/vwebv/enterCourseReserve.do. Look under my name and Political Science 500.


Course Schedule

There will be no general class meetings after February 13, so that students can work on their research projects. Students are encouraged to discuss their research projects with the instructor at any time. In addition to office hours, which are always open for walk-in discussions, students are encouraged to talk with the instructor by phone or by appointment.

   Reading: Ethridge, chapters 1, 12, and 13.

   Reading (in order): Fish; Horowitz 2004; Gourevitch; Rogowski; Horowitz 2003.

Week 6 (February 27): Short methodological critique paper due in my mailbox at the Political Science Department office, Northwest Quadrant B, 5th Floor, by 5:00 pm.

Week 8 (March 12): Research paper proposal, in outline form (3-5 pages), due in my mailbox by 5:00 pm. The outline should follow the structure of the research paper given below.

“Spring” break: March 19-23.

Week 9 (March 26): Annotated bibliography (2-3 pages) due in my mailbox by 5:00 pm.

Weeks 11-15 (April 9-May 7): Participation once as presenter and once as reader in workshops on draft research proposals or papers. It is preferable to present drafts of completed papers, to get more extensive feedback. However, the early scheduling of some presentations will make this difficult. So students may also present research proposals. Draft research proposals or papers must be turned in to my mailbox and emailed to me (to be forwarded to the reader) at least five days prior to the workshop session at which your paper is presented. (A schedule for presenters and readers will be distributed separately.)

May 14: Final research paper due in my mailbox at 10 am. Papers may not be emailed.

Characteristics and Structure of Research Papers

Length: 15-20 typed, doubled-spaced pages, including footnotes and bibliography. Any standard system of citing sources is acceptable. There must be at least five references to published political science journal articles or books—in addition to any web or journalistic sources used. Research papers must include the following elements:

1) Introduction: What research question or questions are you trying to answer? What political behavior or outcomes are you trying to explain?

2) Literature review section: Give a brief summary of related publications, designed to motivate the particular approach you take in the remainder of the paper. Use your annotated bibliography, but slant your discussion so that it leads into your own discussions of theory and evidence. It is most natural to write this section—or at least to rewrite it—after the rest of the paper is completed.

3) Theory and hypotheses section: What are the different possible answers to the research question? In other words, what are the different factors that may account
for the behavior and outcomes to be explained? How would each of these factors be expected, logically speaking, to affect the outcomes? Set out explicit hypotheses, which you will in some way test by examining evidence.

4) Research design section: Hypothetically, what kinds of evidence are available to determine whether or not each hypothesis is supported? What kinds of evidence have you gathered? What are the strengths and limitations of the evidence? Here you are discussing how the outcomes and the various explanatory factors are going to be measured; the set of cases for which you are gathering this evidence; and how the evidence will be used to evaluate the hypotheses.

5) Results section: Present and discuss the actual evidence gathered. Explain how and why the evidence does or does not support the hypotheses. Explain what the evidence shows about the relative persuasiveness and importance of the different explanatory factors.

6) Conclusion: Conclude by summarizing the question, possible answers, and results; by discussing how future research might go beyond or improve upon what you have done; and by mentioning any significant practical or policy implications of the research.

Related assignments:
Methodological critique papers should examine how one political science journal article related to your research topic carries out each of these six steps. The critique should discuss strengths as well as weaknesses.
Research paper proposals should summarize, in an outline format, the first four sections of the research paper (introduction, literature review, theory and hypotheses, and research design). (Results and conclusions sections can be left out, because they could only be outlined once the research is complete.)
Annotated bibliographies should do the same thing as methodological critique papers—but more briefly—for the other main sources and references to be used in your research paper.

Useful Research Resources

See the Library’s Resources A-Z webpage, http://xerxes.library.wisconsin.edu/uwm/?base=databases&action=alphabetical. The following are particularly useful search engines for political science journal articles:

- JSTOR
- Social Sciences Full Text
- Worldwide Political Science Abstracts (ProQuest)

Suggested Classic Topics in International and Comparative Politics

1. International War Onset or Non-Onset
Examples of case studies:


Example of a statistical article:


2. Internal War Onset or Non-Onset (Civil War or Internal Ethnic War)

Examples of case studies:


Skocpol, Theda. (1979) *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Example of a statistical article:


3. International Military Intervention or Non-Intervention in Internal War

Examples of case studies:


Example of a statistical article:

4. Political Explanations of Economic Development Policies
Examples of case studies:

Example of a statistical article:

5. Political Explanations of International Trade Policies
Examples of case studies:

Example of a statistical article: