1 Course Description

This course is intended for students in the Department of Political Science Research Honors Track. PS 299Q focuses on making empirical arguments. Topics include data collection and management, measurement, estimation strategies, bias and confounding effects, and visualization.

At the successful completion of this course, students will have a complete draft of the empirical section of their thesis project.

2 Requirements and Grading

Weekly assignments 45%
Except for the first day of class, assignments are due on the Monday of each week, at 5pm, and will be graded as “Complete/Not complete” (5% per assignment).

Poster session 10%
To be held on 3 December, 2:15-4:05pm.

Final paper 25%
Due 13 December 2013, at 5pm.
_N.B. Successful papers will build on weekly assignments, and will incorporate comments and feedback._

Seminar attendance, preparation, and participation 20%
3 Students with Documented Disabilities

Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oae).

4 Books and Required Reading

This course will draw on a variety of books and materials, including:


*N.B. Assigned readings are intended to be helpful in the preparation of each week’s assignments. Students will also be expected to regularly read and prepare comments on each other’s assignments.*

5 Course Outline

23 Sept  Course Introduction

*Assignment 1*
Please prepare a short presentation – a maximum of 5 slides, and 5 minutes – that introduces (a) your research question, (b) your intuition about the answer, (c) your research strategy, and (d) your progress.

30 Sept  Components of an Empirical Argument

- Miller, Chapters 1-3.

*Assignment 2*
Develop an annotated outline of the empirical section of your thesis. Succinctly identify the contribution to be made by each table and figure, and the goal of each subsection.
7 Oct  Writing about Data Collection and Measurement

- Miller, Chapters 4 & 13.

Assignment 3
Prepare a brief discussion (2-3 pages) of the measurement of your key dependent and independent variables. Your memo should address the following questions: How do your measures relate to the concepts you’re most interested in? How do your measurement strategies compare to those who have worked on related questions? Is there anything about your data collection process that might undermine your ability to evaluate the relationship in which you are most interested?

14 Oct  The Importance of Descriptive Analysis

- Miller, Chapters 5, 6 & 14.

Assignment 4
Generate figures that describe the key dependent and independent variables. Write a brief memo to accompany these figures that summarizes each distribution, and draws attention to features of the variation in each variable that you think might have implications for how we should evaluate key bivariate relationships. For example, high leverage outliers may exaggerate or undermine the relationship between two variables. In your discussion, anticipate ways in which your analysis can overcome challenging features of less-than-well-behaved data.

21 Oct  Examining Causal Relationships

- Miller, Chapter 8.

Assignment 5
Prepare (a maximum of) three slides (tables or figures) that illustrate the empirical relationship that is central to your project. Be prepared to present this analysis, and to evaluate the identification of this relationship (i.e., proper attribution of cause and effect).

28 Oct  Demonstrating Robustness

- Miller, Chapter 9, 10, 11 & 14.
Assignment 6
Identify the factor that most threatens your ability to evaluate the bivariate relationship between your dependent and independent variables. How might you respond to the concerns that were raised in class? Specifically, which additional tests are needed to establish the robustness of the key relationship? Write up a brief description of your strategy, and conduct (what you can of) this analysis. Present the results in a brief memo.

4 Nov Choosing Illustrative Examples

• Miller, Chapter 7.

Assignment 7
Revisit the analytic narrative you developed for POLISCI 293. (If your project has changed, also provide a brief discussion of an important case for your project. Be sure to provide a complete treatment of the mechanism at work.) Consider what you know about the general empirical relationship between your dependent and independent variables. Is your case a good illustration of the mechanism at work, given the values it takes on the dependent and independent variables? Why or why not? Are there other cases that could provide good tests? Prepare a brief discussion that addresses these questions.

11 Nov Style in the Social Sciences

Assignment 8
Partner up with another student in the class, and schedule a meeting outside of class. Before your meeting, read the proposal that your partner prepared for POLISCI 293. Identify five general ways in which your partner can improve their writing (rather than focusing on the revision of specific sentences). They may, for example, have some of the bad habits listed in McCloskey (1999), or frequently break one of George Orwell’s six elementary rules (see The Economist Style Guide). Then, prepare a brief memo in response, in which you present examples from your own work that were identified by your partner, with the appropriate revisions.

18 Nov The State of the Art: Writing Literature Reviews

Assignment 9
Identify (a maximum of) five previously published books or articles that provide at least partial answers to your motivating research question. Write a short paragraph that establishes the relevance of each piece, and note the ways in which your project builds on or departs from this earlier work.

3 Dec Research Honors Track Poster Session

• Miller, Chapter 19, 20 & Appendix E.