Seminar: Comparative Political Analysis

I. COURSE SUMMARY

This seminar has two purposes. First, it introduces graduate students in comparative politics to current methodological standards. Second, it requires students to develop their own research designs that meet those standards.

II. REQUIREMENTS

A research prospectus (one in the mode of a 15-page description of research that is standard for NSF proposals) that sums up the work done throughout the quarter on your research question will be due at the end of exam week. The prospectus will be graded on the quality of thinking that went into the project rather than the formal properties of the proposed theory or the significance of the statistical results. Before handing in your final assignment, you will have an opportunity to present your prospectus, and defend it, before a group of advanced graduate students.

Details of assignments are included below. Your memos, slides, etc., should be posted on the class discussion website by 5pm on the Friday before each meeting to give everyone time to read your work and prepare comments and questions.

The success of the seminar will depend on your preparedness to discuss the assigned readings and to offer comments and feedback on each other’s work, as well as the amount of effort you invest in advancing your own research agenda. The reading load is intentionally light so that: (1) you take the time to look back at readings from 440A and 440B to identify material that can illuminate methodological issues through references to research papers already published in the comparative field; and (2) you can commit to advancing your own work and supporting the work of others with thoughtful comments and criticisms.
III. BOOKS TO PURCHASE

Shepsle, Ken and Mark Bonchek (1997). Analyzing Politics: Rationality, Behavior, and Institutions. New York: Norton. [This text is recommended for those without previous training in formal analysis.]

IV. STUDENTS WITH DOCUMENTED DISABILITIES

Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Student Disability Resource Center (SDRC) located within the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). SDRC 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 being made. Students should contact the SDRC as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, 723-1067 TTY).

V. WEEKLY MEETINGS AND ASSIGNMENTS

Week 1 Introduction to the Course: Lines and Circles in the Study of Comparative Politics

Geddes. Chapter 1 and pp. 27-35.
Kuhn. Chapters IV, VI, and IX.
Recommended:
[NB. This reading is intended to be helpful in the preparation of your final assignment.]

Week 2 The Comparative Method at Work: Testing for Observable Implications of Theories


Week 3 Political Theory and Comparative Politics

Assignment 1:
Choose a research question from a theory that (a) you read for PS 440A/B or another political science course; (b) you think is important; (c) you think is inadequate in explaining variance; (d) you have an intuition that can be formalized on how to improve it; and (e) you believe there are (or it is possible to create) quantitative data in which to explore the theory and your intuition for its improvement. Prepare a brief in-class presentation of this research question and circulate a memo addressing (a)-(e) above.

Week 4 Narrative


Assignment 2:
Read about a particular case (or a small set of cases) that is (or are) an instantiation (or are instantiations) of your motivating intuition. Drawing on books, articles, archives, newspapers, biographies, etc., write a five-page narrative (conscious of the narrative style in Weingast’s chapter) in a way that reveals your conjecture about the mechanism at work and demonstrates to the reader the inadequacy of previous theorizing about the phenomenon that you have highlighted. In class, your narrative will be presented by a partner, who will emphasize the following features of your narrative: Who are the key actors? What are their goals? Which strategies are available to them? What are their beliefs about the statement of the world? Especially, what mechanism structures their interactions?

Week 5   Formalization

N.B. It is assumed that most students will not yet have taken a course in game theory; the value added at this stage in your project development lies in identifying ways in which formalization may prove useful in developing a theoretical argument.

[N.B. This assignment is only for those students without a basic background in game theory. It will not be discussed in class.]

Assignment 3:
Specify an extensive form game that captures the essential logic of how you consider outcomes to be reached in your own theoretical argument. With pay-offs justified by assumption, solve through backward induction the equilibrium (or equilibria) of your game. Prepare a one-slide presentation of the basic model and payoffs, showing how outcomes identified in the research are reached.
Weeks 6  Statistics: Measurement


Assignment 4:
Class to be broken down into groups based upon common data interests. Each group should download a publicly available dataset. From it, the group should evaluate the specification of the key LHS and RHS variables and their coding criteria based on principles raised in the required reading, and what students have learned in the PS350 sequence. Each group should prepare a short presentation, teaching the class the data architecture and how key variables are measured and specified, with emphasis on reliability and validity.

Week 7  Statistical Tests of Student Ideas

Assignment 5:
Build a data set that would produce some statistical test of the theory or an observable implication of your own theory. Do some descriptive statistics that show the plausibility of your amendment to the reigning theory. Your analysis should focus on statistical and graphical descriptions of the dependent, and principal independent variables; and on analysis of basic correlations. Presentation of regression results is optional, and will only be allowed only after these basic descriptive statistics have been fully explored. Prepare a 10-minute presentation describing your statistical exploits to present in seminar.

Week 8  Statistics: Demonstrating Causality


Assignment 6:
Draft a memo in which you consider the challenges of establishing a causal relationship in your research. Present an identification strategy based on a plausible field or natural experiment. Your memo does not need to report details of specific cases (i.e., the proper nouns), but should outline a plausible scenario in which you could evaluate the implications of your motivating intuition.

Week 9 Choosing Cases


Assignment 7:
Prepare a short discussion in which you consider the following questions: Does your intuition support a general argument, or is it limited in applicability to particular contexts? What are the scope conditions that define these contexts? Are there contexts in which the relationship you imagine might take a quite different form? Use your answers to these questions to identify “out-of-sample” cases in which you could evaluate your motivating intuition.

Week 10 Final Presentations to Outside Panel

Each student should prepare a 20-minute presentation of his/her research question, preliminary findings, and research strategy for the future to present to a panel of advanced graduate students qua “outside evaluators” (as if a talk at a professional meeting). Students should then be prepared to answer questions for 25 minutes. Outside evaluators will provide written feedback on the student presentations to accompany instructors’ comments on the final research prospectus.