Seminar: Comparative Political Analysis

I. COURSE SUMMARY

This seminar has two purposes. First, it introduces graduate students in comparative politics to current standards in research design. Second, it requires students to develop their own (or a collaborative) research design that meets those standards.

II. REQUIREMENTS

A research prospectus (one in the mode of a 15-page description of research that is standard for NSF proposals) which sums up the work done throughout the quarter on your research question (or the research question of your group) will be due at the end of exam week. The prospectus will be evaluated on the basis of the appropriateness of the research design and tools for answering your research question, and the quality of the rationale you provide for each component and the inferences that could be drawn from their use. You (or your group) will not be evaluated on the implementation or on substantive or statistical significance of your results.

Before handing in your final assignment, individual students or research groups (of up to three students working collaboratively) will have an opportunity to present their prospectus, and defend it, before a group of advanced graduate students. Details of assignments are included below. Memos, slides, etc., should be posted on the Coursework website by 6PM on the Monday before each meeting to give everyone time to read all student work and to prepare comments and questions. The success of the seminar will depend on each student’s preparedness to discuss the assigned readings and to offer comments and feedback on each other’s work, as well as the amount of effort each student invests in advancing his/her own research agenda or that of his/her group. The reading load is intentionally light so that: (1) students can 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) students can commit to advancing their own work and supporting the work of others with thoughtful comments and criticisms.

III. BOOKS TO PURCHASE

ISBN-10: 0472068350

ISBN 978-0-393-93507-3
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

Preparation During Spring Break

A. Readings

The first reading introduces the themes of Week 1:


The second reading is for those students with no or limited background in formal theory:

Shepsle. Chapters 5, 8-10.

B. Thinking

Students should be doing preliminary thinking about the assignment due in Week 3 which is the foundation for the entire course, as soon as possible, and surely before the course begins. As an innovation to this course for spring 2014, students are encouraged to think of joint projects with fellow students taking the course to create a collaborative project.

Week 1: Question Selection and Research Design

The purpose of the readings for this week will be to develop criteria for a good research question and a roadmap on a strategy for answering it.

A. In pursuit of a Research Question

Geddes. Chapter 1 and pp. 27-35.

B. A Roadmap for Answering It


C. Research Proposal Guidelines for PS440C (mini-lecture and handout from Karen Jusko)

D. Discussion of possible collaborative projects suggested by instructors

Week 2: Tutorial with Instructors on Developing Student Research Questions

Students (individually or in groups) will sign up for half-hour consultations in which both instructors will be present to help develop student research questions. You should come to the meeting with one or more proposed research question(s) that you think could satisfy Assignment 1 (see below).

There will be no formal class meeting in Week 2. In preparation for that meeting, students should consult the following for thinking about the end product (a credible research design):


Laitin, David (2008) “Muslim Integration into EU Societies: Comparative Perspectives” [NSF proposal submitted and funded].

Week 3: Political Theory and Comparative Politics

Assignment 1:
Based on the discussions from the week 2 tutorial, 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 for outcomes you care about;
c) you think is inadequate in explaining variance;
d) you have an intuition on how to improve it;
e) you can imagine a theoretical logic linking the factors you see as consequential to the outcomes of interest; and
f) you can provide some basic empirical support. That is, using the best available data, provide some evidence that some of the variation in the outcome you care about can be attributed to the factor you think is most important. This analysis should be bivariate, and will provide the empirical justification for your project. (If you find no evidence of a relationship, briefly speculate about how you might identify a more complex relationship).

Prepare a brief in-class presentation of this research question and circulate a memo addressing (a)-(f) above.

**Week 4: Narrative**

Read the narratives below, and then write a preliminary narrative illustrating your perspective on the research question as described in Assignment 2.


**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 and Ferejohn’s essay and the way the narratives are connected with a strategic logic) 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:

a) Who are the key actors?
b) What are their goals?
c) Which strategies are available to them?
d) What are their beliefs about the state of the world?
e) Especially, what mechanism structures their interactions?
N.B. This assignment should be prepared with Assignment 3 in mind.

**Week 5: Deductive Reasoning (Modes of Theoretical Argument, both Formal and Informal)**

N.B. It is assumed that most students will not yet have taken a course in game theory, one of the prominent modes of deductive reasoning in our field; we therefore emphasize it in our readings, but students should be aware that there are other forms of formal reasoning (e.g. principal/agent theory and bargaining theory) as well as informal forms of presenting theory that are alternatives, where appropriate, for your projects.

We provide in this week a set of stylized games with political implications; you should read them with an eye for the kind of formal representation that captures the nub of the political transactions that drive outcomes in your narrative. But for whatever forms of deductive reasoning you employ, the goal is to capture the nub of the political transaction (what Max Weber called, using a railroad metaphor, the “switchpoint” in political history) that you seek to explain. We will divide the class into five groups, each to provide a summary and analysis of the formal logic from the readings in sections B-E. Students are required to read (or re-read) section A and the reading(s) in their assigned section. They will learn about the other readings from fellow students in their class presentations.

*A. A Primer in Game Theory*

Shepsle. Chapters 5, 8-10.

*B. Reputation Games (Kreps and Wilson) and Their Limits (Bates)*


*C. PD and other non-cooperative games*

Fearon and Laitin (1996) “Explaining Ethnic Cooperation” *APSR*

*D. Coordination Games*


E. Capturing the Nub of a Political Transaction (different games for different structures)


Week 6: Student Presentations of their Deductive Reasoning

Assignment 3:
Pick one of the styles of formalization from week 5, or an alternative form of deductive reasoning (discussed with one of the instructors) and apply it to your research project/puzzle. Your model should reflect the actors, goals, strategies, and mechanisms that were most important in the narrative you developed for Assignment 2. Your discussion should also identify why the style of formalization that you’ve chosen is appropriate to your case. If game theory is applied, students should specify that game, with pay-offs justified by assumption. Equilibrium solutions need not be worked out, as the core of the assignment is to highlight the actors, the political/strategic structure, and the sequence of moves. All students (or groups) will prepare a one-slide presentation of their basic model showing theoretically how outcomes identified in the research are reached.

Week 7: Mapping Theory to Data: Measurement and Identification

All students should read the assigned reading in section “A” below. The seminar will be divided into four groups. Each group will be responsible for reading all the materials in one of the subsequent sections, and preparing a briefing to the entire seminar. The presentation should clearly identify the objective of the empirical work in terms of descriptive or causal inference and then discuss challenges and opportunities for making valid descriptive or causal inferences for each type of research design.

A. Measurement and Theory


B. Experimental design and methods


C. Observational data and methods


D. Natural Experiments


**Week 8: Operationalizing an empirical project**

The course instructors will identify a well-known and well-used comparative politics data-set. Review the documentation for this data-set and the distributions of key variables, and come to class prepared to discuss:

- a) the overall architecture of the dataset;
- b) how key variables are measured and specified, with emphasis on reliability and validity; and
- c) why data are missing (if any) and how are missing data are treated.

Identify an exemplary paper using this dataset and be prepared to discuss the role of the dataset in advancing knowledge.

**Assignment 4:**
Write a memo on how you (or your group) will operationalize your empirical project, explaining:

- a) scope conditions (i.e. cases for which your theory is relevant);
- b) measurement strategy (translating concepts into variables);
- c) data sources (whether downloaded from publicly available datasets; use of proxies; reliance on surveys or experiments, etc.), and
- d) identification. Whether the set-up of your project permits making a causal inference; and if not, what future project might permit it; here you should consider the challenges of inferring a causal relationship in your research.

This memo should be uploaded and all memos should be read, but there will be no formal presentations of it by the students. The two instructors will lead the discussion on the highlights of these memos.

**Week 9: Statistical Examination of Student Hypotheses**

**Assignment 5:**
Build a data set that would produce descriptive statistics of your independent and dependent variables and/or variables that serve as an observable implication of your own theory. Address for this data issues listed in Assignment 4. Revisit the analysis you prepared for Assignment 1: What were its main limitations? How can you improve your analysis? Focus on statistical and graphical descriptions of the dependent, and principal independent variables; and on analysis of basic correlations. Presentation of complex models (with controls, or with attempts to provide a causal analysis) is optional, and will only be allowed after these basic descriptive statistics have been fully explored. Prepare a 15-minute presentation describing your (or your group’s) statistical exploits to present in seminar.

**Week 10: Final Presentations to Outside Panel**

Each student (or group) 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 presentations to accompany instructors’ comments on the final research prospectus.

Version: February 12, 2014