PSC 208W: Undergraduate Research Seminar

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General Information

This course is about how to write a social science research paper. Our goal will be to prepare you to write a small-scale individual or joint research project. In so doing we will discuss how to develop an open-ended question and how to answer that question using systematic evidence. We will cover such topics as framing an original research question, finding data, undertaking rigorous analysis, writing in a social science style, and using the appropriate reference style.

The best way to learn how to write a social science paper is to write one. While you develop that project, we will read and analyze good examples of research from political science and other social sciences. We will see different methods and different data for answering political questions and learn the advantages and disadvantages of each. We will hone in on the intuition behind these approaches, leaving the more technical aspects aside. The goal will be to give you an understanding of how and when methods are appropriate and when they are inappropriate for a given research question and set of data. Our readings do not constitute a political science “canon” nor are they
Who should and should not take this class?

This class requires you to complete an original research project on a topic of your choosing. Thus, you should be interested in doing research in political science, broadly defined. The final research project is a significant undertaking and will require a good deal of your attention, especially in the second half of term. Thus, if you choose to take the class, you make sure that this fits with your schedule. One of the prerequisites for this course is a course in quantitative analysis—statistics, data analysis, or the like. It’s important to have some knowledge of these topics because both your research and the research we will study will often rely quantitative arguments.

Readings

The readings will all be on the course website, except as explicitly noted in class.

Grading

- 30% Short review papers - These will be a series of short (2-3 page) papers written in response to the reading in advance of class meetings. These will mainly occur in the first half of term.

- 20% Class participation - You participation grade will depend on your attendance, your substantive contributions to the discussion, and your presentations. Note that speaking in class doesn’t necessarily mean you have contributed to the discussion.

- 50% Final Paper - Your overall goal for the course and the bulk of the work in the second half of the term. This will be a roughly 15 page social science paper that identifies an empirical or theoretical puzzle in the literature, lays out a research design to solve this puzzle, and brings data analysis to bear on the question. You will be graded on how your work draws on but also extends previous research, the originality of your hypotheses, the appropriateness of the data you collect (or use), the skill with which you analyze the data, and all aspects of the writing.

Late Policy

If you turn in an assignment late, you will receive a 10% deduction in the grade on that assignment for every 24 hour period late. For example, if an assignment is due at
2pm on Tuesday and you submit your assignment at 5pm on Tuesday, we will deduct 10 percentage points off your grade. If you submit at 3pm on Wednesday, that will be considered two days late and you will receive 20 percentage points off your grade. If you submit the homework more than 72 hours (3 days) after the due date, you will receive no credit. Exceptions to this policy must be made in advance and will be subject to the restrictions below.

**Paper submission**

All papers you submit, whether the short reviews or the final paper should be PDFs. They should not be Word documents, plain text files, Open-Office documents, Google Drive documents, rich text files, Lotus files, WordPerfect files, HTML files, or plain text emails. They should be PDFs. Work in whatever word processing or typesetting program you like, but there's no need to expose that workflow to the consumer of your written word. When you go to submit, export or print your file to PDF and submit that file.

**Collaboration**

You may work on the final papers either individually or as a joint endeavor. No matter what, you will be expected to complete all aspects of the project. Joint projects will assign the same grade to all members of the group equally. Unless otherwise indicated, all other assignments will be individual assignments.

**Excused absences and assignments**

All assignments and attendance is mandatory. Exceptions will only be granted under the following circumstances: (1) death in the family, (2) participation in a University-sponsored academic or sporting event, (3) unforeseen medical emergency. In the case of (1) and (2), you must inform me within 24 hours of the assignment or class that you will miss it. In some cases, I may require supporting documentation out of fairness to other students.
Schedule

January 16 - Journalism versus Science

Topics  How does (social) scientific research differ from journalism? Theories, hypotheses, and empirical implications.

Readings


January 23 - The Quality of Evidence

Assignment  Write a 2 to 3 page reaction paper that critically evaluates the debate in these three papers over the quality of the empirical evidence that each side brings to bear. State the hypothesis under investigation and summarize the methods and data used to test the hypothesis. In addition, write one source of additional data or an additional empirical implication of the theory that might adjudicate between the viewpoints. Additional issues that you might think about are: how does missing data play a role in the debate? How does endogeneity pose a threat to inference in this case? Which (if either) argument do you find persuasive about mitigating this endogeneity?

Readings


January 30 - Experiments and Thinking about Causality

Assignment  Write roughly 1 page on each of the following papers that critically evaluates its research question, hypotheses, and/or data analysis. Possible topics include whether you think the question is an important one, whether the (quasi-)experimental
nature of the study was important to its persuasiveness, or whether there is an important distinction between experiments and so-called “natural” experiments.

Readings


February 6 - Panel versus Cross-Sectional Data

Assignment Write roughly 1 page on each of the following papers that critically evaluates its research question, hypotheses, and/or data analysis. For each paper, summarize the hypothesis, data collected, methods used, and results obtained. Possible additional topics include whether you think the question is an important one, whether the additional over-time variation in the data was crucial for inference, or additional hypotheses the authors might have tested with their data.

Readings


February 13 - Project discussion

Assignment Write a short description of at least two possible projects that you (alone or as a group) might undertake. Circulate early to the entire class (as per instructions). Read others' proposals as instructed. After class, hand in the project descriptions.
**February 20 - Formal theory**

**Assignment** Write a 2 to 3 page paper in response to one of the three assigned pieces. What are the model's key assumptions? In particular, what features of reality does it include, and how does it relate those features to one another? What features of reality does it exclude? Why might that be so? If you choose to write about a paper with empirical tests (Schultz and Canes-Wrone et al), are you compelled by the mapping between theory and data? If you choose to write about Fearon, would you be more persuaded by the theory if it had some empirical test associated with it? Why or why not?

**Readings**


**February 27 - Historical, textual, and other sources of data**

**Topics** Getting started on a project.

**Assignment** Read the following papers and be ready to discuss them.

**Readings**


**March 6 - Summarize research**

**Topics** On-going discussion of your projects.
**Assignment**  Hand in a brief (3/4 to 1 page) statement about the tenative plans for your “long” research project. Insofar as possible, this should identify: a) the topic of your research; b) the specific data you intend to work with; c) how you will begin the analysis. With respect to (c), be as specific as possible; saying “I will look for patterns in the data” or “I’ll look for relevant literature” isn’t satisfactory.

**March 20 - Genetics and Politics**

**Assignment**  Read the following article and be prepared to discussed it in class.


**March 27 - Literature review**

**Topics**  On-going discussion of your projects; preparing an outline.

**Assignment**  Hand in a literature review of your work related to your topic. This should be 2-3 pages plus a list of references.

**April 3 - Outline**

**Assignment**  Hand in an outline of the your final paper.

**April 10 - Partial Draft**

**Topics**  Editing; rewriting.

**Assignment**  Hand in a first draft of your final paper. This should be no more than 1-2 pages.

**April 17 - Tables/figures**

**Topics**  Tables and figures.

**Assignment**  Prepare one substantive (that is, not a review of the text or literature) figure or table from your paper to go over in class. We will critique both content and style.

**April 24 - Second partial draft**

**Topics**  Final copies and presentations.
Assignment  Prepare one substantive (that is, not a review of the text or literature) figure or table from your paper to go over in class. We will critique both content and style.

May 1 - Presentation

Assignment  Class presentations; hand in your final paper. Note that this is a day after classes end and is in lieu of a final exam.