

University of Rochester Political Science

Psc 577
Theories of Conflict

Prof. Mark Fey
Spring 2026

Syllabus & Reading List

This course examines the formal literature on conflict that has developed in the last two decades. It is meant to expose students to the techniques and models used in this line of research. The course will help graduate students identify the broad direction of international conflict studies and will also permit graduate students to pursue topics or ideas of their own interest. To that end, we set aside two classes for “model building sessions” where students can explore approaches to formalize some of the ideas in the substantive literature, or explore extensions of the current formal literature. The course covers both complete and incomplete information models and thus students must have completed PSC584 (or its equivalent) prior to taking this course.

There are three main obligations for students taking the course. Reading the required articles and participating in class is the first and most important of the obligations. The second obligation is taking a turn presenting one of the topics from the reading list. Assignments of topics will be worked out at the first class meeting. The last requirement for the course is a final paper. The two model building sessions during the semester will be focused on helping students develop their ideas for final papers.

Readings: The course is centered on reading and understanding journal articles that use formal theory to study international conflict. This readings are listed below. In addition, two books that may be of interest are

- Andrew Kydd, *International Relations Theory: The Game Theoretic Approach*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- William Spaniel, *Formal Models of Crisis Bargaining*, Cambridge University Press, 2023.

Schedule: Starting on the next page is the list of topics and the scheduled readings for the course. Naturally, this schedule may change as the semester unfolds.

Week 1 Introductory Thoughts and Review of Bargaining

Week 2 Rationalist Explanations for War

- Fearon, James D. 1995. "Rationalist Explanations for War." *International Organization* 49:379–414.
- Powell, Robert. 2006. "War as a Commitment Problem." *International Organization* 60:169–203.
- Thomas Chadeaux. 2011 "Bargaining over power: when do shifts in power lead to war?" *International Theory*.3(2):228-253

Week 3 Signaling and Audience Costs (Huseyin)

- Fearon, James D. 1994. "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes." *American Political Science Review* 88:577-592
- Kenneth A. Schultz, 1999. "Do Democratic Institutions Constrain or Inform? Contrasting Two Institutional Perspectives on Democracy and War," *International Organization*, Vol. 53, No. 2 pp. 233–266
- Jackson, Matthew and Massimo Morelli. 2007. "Political Bias and War." *American Economic Review*, 97(4): 1353-1373.

Week 4 Signaling Strength and Weakness (Yuxi)

- Powell and Dal Bo. 2009. "A model of spoils politics." *American Journal of Political Science*
- Noam Reich, 2022. "Signaling strength with handicaps", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 66:1481–1513.
- Slantchev, Branislav. 2010. "Feigning weakness" *International Organization*, 64(3), 357-388.

Week 5 Bargaining and Fighting (Michael)

- Powell, Robert. 2004. "Bargaining and Learning While Fighting." *American Journal of Political Science* 48.2:344-361.
- Slantchev, Branislav. 2003. "The Principle of Convergence in Wartime Negotiations." *American Political Science Review*,47:621–632.
- Fey, Mark. 2019. "Learning to Fight: Information, Uncertainty, and the Risk of War." Working paper

Week 6 General Results on Crisis Bargaining (Mark)

- Banks, Jeffrey S. 1990. "Equilibrium Behavior in Crisis Bargaining Games." *American Journal of Political Science* 34.3:499–614.
- Fey, Mark and Kristopher W. Ramsay. 2012. "Uncertainty and Incentives in Crisis Bargaining." *American Journal of Political Science* 55.1:149–169.
- Fey, Mark and Brenton Kenkel. 2021. "Is an Ultimatum the Last Word on Crisis Bargaining?," *Journal of Politics*, 83:87-102

Week 7 Model Building Session

Week 8 Private Information and Mutual Optimism (Phuong)

- Fey, Mark, and Kristopher W. Ramsay. 2007. "Mutual Optimism and War." *American Journal of Political Science* 51:738–754.
- Adam Meirowitz and Anne Sartori. 2008. "Strategic uncertainty as a cause of war." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*
- Fey, Mark, and Kristopher W. Ramsay. "Mutual Optimism and Choosing to Fight"

Week 9 Contest Models (Yuliya)

- Hirshleifer, Jack. 1991. "The Paradox of Power." *Economics and Politics* 3:177-200.
- Michelle R. Garfinkel and Stergios Skaperdas. 2000. "Conflict without Misperceptions or Incomplete Information: How the Future Matters", *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 44:793–807
- Luis C. Corchón and Anil Yildizparlak. 2013. "Give peace a chance: The effect of ownership and asymmetric information on peace", *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 92:116-126

Week 10 Communication and Diplomacy (skip)

- Ramsay, Kristopher W. 2011. "Cheap Talk Diplomacy, Voluntary Negotiations, and Variable Bargaining Power." *International Studies Quarterly* 55.4:1003–1023.
- Trager, Robert F. 2010. "Diplomatic Calculus in Anarchy: How Communication Matters." *American Political Science Review* 104.2:347–368.

Week 11 Mediation (Kevin)

- Andrew Kydd. 2003. "Which Side Are You On? Bias, Credibility, and Mediation." *American Journal of Political Science* 47:597?-611.
- Fey, Mark, and Kristopher W. Ramsay. 2010. "When is Shuttle Diplomacy Worth the Commute? Information Sharing through Mediation." *World Politics* 62:529-560.
- Hennigs, Raphaela, 2021, "Conflict prevention by Bayesian persuasion", *Journal of Public Economic Theory*, 23:4, 710-731

Week 12 Dynamic Models and Commitment (Liwen)

- Fearon, James D. 1996. "Bargaining over Objects that Influence Future Bargaining Power"
- Thomas Chadeaux. 2011 "Bargaining over power: when do shifts in power lead to war?" *International Theory*. 3(2):228-253
- Mark Fey, Adam Meirowitz, Kris Ramsay. 2013. "Credibility and commitment in crisis bargaining." *Political Science Research and Methods*
- Jean Tirole. 2016 "From bottom of the barrel to cream of the crop: Sequential screening with positive selection" *Econometrica*

Week 13 Alliances and Coalitions (Bruno)

- Smith, Alastair. 1995. "Alliance Formation and War." *International Studies Quarterly* 39.4:405-426.
- Brad Smith and Peter Bils, "The Logic of Secret Alliances," *American Journal of Political Science*.
- Benson, Brett V., Adam Meirowitz, and Kristopher W. Ramsay. "Inducing Deterrence through Moral Hazard in Alliance Contracts." *Journal of Conflict Resolution*

Week 14 War Aims and Bargaining Over Policy (Xintian)

- Peter Bils, William Spaniel. 2017. "Policy Bargaining and Militarized Conflict", *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 29:647-678.
- Ken Schultz and Hein Goemans 2019. "Aims, claims, and the bargaining model of war." *International Theory* 11: 344-374.

Week 15 Reputation (skip)

- Sartori, Anne E. 2002. "The Might of the Pen: A Reputational Theory of Communication in International Disputes." *International Organization* 56:121–149.
- Daniel Treisman. 2004. "Rational Appeasement", *International Organization* 58:345–373
- Sechser, Todd S. 2010. "Goliath's Curse: Coercive Threats and Asymmetric Power." *International Organization* 64(4):627-?60.

Week 16 Model Building Session