

Political Science Research Design

POLSCI 381 | FALL 2010

MONDAYS AND WEDNESDAYS, 1–2:30 PM | 1427 MASON HALL

Mika LaVaque-Manty
mmanty@umich.edu
734-615-9142
7640 Haven Hall

Alexander Von Hagen-Jamar
avhj@umich.edu
6756 Haven Hall

Office hours:

2-3 Tuesdays
3-4 Wednesdays

3-5 Thursdays

DESCRIPTION

This course has two related aims. One is to expose students to various approaches to conducting research in political science. In this sense, it is a course in **learning to read political science as a scholar**. The other is to provide students with a framework for identifying a problem to tackle in a research project, **placing the problem within the discipline, designing a methodology for investigating the problem**, and **proposing a tentative outline for an argument**. The course's goal is to give participants an experience of what it means to think and work like a political scientist.

What this means is that the course requires teamwork and independent effort. It requires collaboration across space, with various technologies. It requires exploring other scholars' work, trying to make sense and learn from it. It requires developing your own ideas and sharing them with others.

This course is also a required gateway into the Political Science Honors Program. Your grade in this course as well as the research project you help create will figure in your application to the program. You don't have to commit to applying during this semester, but if you are interested, we urge you to talk to us about it during the semester. (Also see the section on the Honors Program below.)

FORMAT

At the beginning of the semester, you will be assigned to **research teams**. You will have to stick with your team throughout the term, and you will have to do work together. We will do our best to make sure your collaboration goes smoothly, but there are inevitably going to be complications. Welcome to the real world! Part of your challenge is to negotiate the complications.

You will have lots of different kinds of readings. The total amount will be relatively light; the challenge you face is to make sense of the various kinds of readings. Whatever they are, you will need to read them carefully, complete the related assignments when we have them, and come to class prepared to engage them collectively.

We just said "come to class." In fact, in this course, you don't physically have to come to class. You may participate from home, from a coffee shop in Ann Arbor or Paris, or a mountaintop in Peru, as long as you have broadband internet access. Our twice-weekly classes are broadcast live, you need to watch them and use LectureTools to participate if you can't be in class. Participation, not physical presence, is what matters.

There are many assignments throughout the term. Some are directly related to your team's final project, a major research proposal. Some assignments are not related to it, but will help you develop ideas, approaches and methods for the proposal. There will be lots of various kinds of writing along the way; the writing will emulate the kind of work a professional political scientist would engage in.

ASSIGNMENTS

The following table outlines the basics of the assignments in this course:

| Assignment | Individual | Group | Included in grade? | Due? |
|---|------------|-------|--------------------|------------------------------|
| Beginning survey An online survey will help us determine your interests, background, and preparation. It is the basis for the research team creation. | ✓ | | | Sep. 13 |
| Homework Each <i>research team</i> is responsible for submitting a <i>weekly</i> homework assignment; each <i>individual</i> student is responsible for being an author on <i>at least three</i> homework assignments. | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | Weekly |
| Team status reports Research teams report on their division of labor, plans of action, and future directions a couple of times during the term. The reports are not included in anyone's grade, but <i>they will affect how we evaluate individual team members</i> . | | ✓ | | Three, according to schedule |
| Short writing assignments Each individual student submits a 500-750-word paper based on a pre-assigned prompt. <i>Two students' papers can be included in the research team's final course portfolio for team grade. The paper needs to have been commented on and revised by at least two other members of the team.</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | Two, according to schedule |
| Bibliography Each research team submits a bibliography covering the main contributions to its research area. The second submission requires an <i>annotated</i> bibliography. | | ✓ | ✓ | Oct. 11 Nov. 8 |
| Visual evidence assignment Each team submits a poster (or an equivalent) representing its research plan and preliminary results. | | ✓ | ✓ | Nov. 1 |
| Literature review Each team submits a literature review, based on the preliminary bibliography and annotated by the team. | | ✓ | ✓ | Nov. 15 |
| Research proposal Each team submits a final research proposal, first as a draft and, based on the comments received, as a final submission. | | ✓ | ✓ | Dec. 8 Dec. 20 |

All assignments are required. You will receive detailed instructions for each.

POLITICAL SCIENCE HONORS PROGRAM

This course is a required gateway into the Political Science Honors Program. At no point during the course must you commit to it. But if you are interested, it may help keep in mind what is required.

- You will apply into the PoliSci Honors at the end of your junior year.
- You will need an A range course grade from 381.
- You will need to submit a research proposal. If you develop an interest in a plan during the term, it may help you to make sure there is something in your team's research proposal you can use and legitimately call your own project, both in terms of intellectual contribution and feasibility.
- You will also need to secure an advisor by the time you apply.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Engaging in academic work is a tricky business. On the one hand, it is important that individuals do the work that is assigned to them, even if it means reinventing the wheel. On the other hand, all scholars stand on the shoulders of others — in other words, all meaningful academic work is collaborative in one way or another — so it is sometimes hard to draw the line.

There is another reason why citations are so prevalent in academic writing. For all their bloviating, academics are a modest bunch, and when they “Joe Schmoe says this,” they think it’s possible they’ve gotten Joe’s idea all wrong. So they want to give their readers a chance to get it out for themselves.

Putting this simply, the idea of citations in academic work is to

- (1) **give credit where credit is due**, and
- (2) **allow the reader to check things out and pursue things further**.

That’s why us academics take the practices of proper citation extremely seriously. If you engage in any form of academic misconduct, you will **automatically fail this course**. And that is only the first part. As the LSA Academic Judiciary Manual of Procedures specifies, a student may be expelled from the university for academic misconduct. So that we’re clear on this, for the purposes of this class, plagiarism will mean

submitting a piece of work which in part or in whole is not entirely the student's own work without attributing those same portions to their correct source.

We’ll talk more about all of this during the course, so there is no need to freak out at this point.

SPECIAL NEEDS, ACCOMMODATIONS, AND THE LIKE

Lives are complicated and stressful. If your other activities and concerns — health-related, religious, athletic, familial, whatever — create conflicts for you, please see us to arrange accommodations. We follow the university’s policies on all accommodations, which means we’ll be reasonable (we do our best, but you need to give us advance notice or documentation) but we won’t play favorites (you still need to do the work for the course). A simple rule of thumb we recommend is that you **get in touch with us as soon as you know of a potential conflict**.

SCHEDULE

The course meets twice a week, but the following schedule is divided into weeks. This means there will be flexibility in the way we handle the readings, discussions and other issues. In fact, **after the first three weeks, the readings will rarely be common for the whole class**. Instead, we will assign different readings to different research teams, based on their interests. Occasionally, there will be common readings for the whole course.

We'll announce these plans always in the previous classes, which means attending regularly (whether physically or virtually) is important.

Some important basics

Week 1 (Sept 8): Introduction and Orientation: *Why conduct social science research? What is a topic? What is a question? Where do research questions come from? What constitutes evidence?*

- Formulating questions so that the outcome is interesting, regardless of the answer
- Writing and the research process — the interaction of questions, results, and interpretation
- Course mechanics

Week 2 (Sept. 13 and 15): What is inquiry? What is political science inquiry?

- Explanation: what is it?
- What is social-scientific inquiry?
- What is political science?
- How are they different from journalism?
- Why even smart people are prone to mistakes, and why we need systematic research approaches.

Common readings

- Malcolm Gladwell, "Dangerous Minds," *New Yorker*, December 12, 2007 .
- Jack Hexter, "The Cases of the Muddy Pants, the Dead Mr. Sweet, and the Convergence of Particles, or Explanation Why and Prediction in History," in *History Primer*, pp. 21-42 (CT — available on CTools).
- Arthur Lupia, "Shortcuts versus Encyclopaedias." *American Political Science Review* 88:1 (Mar., 1994), pp. 63-76 .

Week 3 (Sept. 20 and 22): What makes people do things?

- The leading social-scientific game in town: Rational choice explanations and collective action theory.
- Critiques of rational-choice models.

Common readings

- Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action* (Cambridge MA:Harvard University Press, 1965). Selections from Ch. 1, pp. 5-22 & 33-52.
- Samuel L. Popkin, "The Rational Peasant," in *The Rational Peasant* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1979) .
- Amartya Sen, "Rational Fools," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6:4 (1977), pp. 317-344 .

Week 4 (Sept. 27 and 29): Entering the conversation, or what it means to be a scholar

- Learning to think about research projects.
- Why we care about bibliographies and citation.
- Disciplinary conversations and research questions.

Common reading

- Mark Gaipa, “Breaking into the Conversation.” *Pedagogy* 4:3, 2004, pp. 419-437.

The subfields of political science

Week 5 (Oct. 4 and 7): Methods? Why is “methods” a subfield of political science?

- Why the question of methods matters.
- What kinds of different methods are there?
- How do I choose my methods?
- How do I learn my methods?

Week 6 (Oct. 11 and 13): American politics

- Is it possible, or meaningful, to call “American politics” a subfield?
- What questions does the subfield address?
- What can everyone learn from American politics?

Week 7 (Oct. 20): An Interlude: Showing Instead of Telling: Visual Explanations and Rhetoric

- Visual presentation of arguments and evidence.

Common readings

- Edward Tufte, “Visual and Statistical Thinking,” in *Visual Explanations* (Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press, 1997), pp. 27–53.
- Edward Tufte, “The Fundamental Principles of Analytical Design” and “Corrupt Techniques in Evidence Presentations,” in *Beautiful Evidence* (Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press, 2006), pp. 122–155.
- Gar Reynolds, *Presentation Zen* (excerpts)

Week 8 (Oct. 25 and 27): Comparative politics

- What do we compare?
- How do we compare?
- What can everyone learn from comparative politics?

Week 9 (Nov. 1 and 3): International relations

- Wait, didn’t we do this last week? (What is the difference between comparative politics and international relations?)
- The methods of international relations.
- What can everyone learn from international relations?

Week 10 (Nov. 8 and 10): Back to America, sort of: Public law

- I wanna go to law school. This is for me, right?
- Law and society. Public law. Legal studies. Seriously, what is this subfield *really* called?
- Exciting new controversies in public law!
- What can everyone learn from public law?
- There's no law outside America?

Week 11 (Nov. 15 and 17): Seriously, folks, does this really belong here? Political theory

- OK, this seems really different. What's the deal?
- What do research questions look like in political theory?
- Prescription writing versus conceptual interpretation.
- What can everyone learn from political theory?

Getting creative about research projects**Week 12 (Nov. 22): What can you expect students to produce? (A lot!)**

- A discussion of the differences between honors theses and Ph.D. dissertations.

Week 13 (Nov. 29 and Dec. 1): New directions in political science research 1

- Examples of work you probably hadn't thought were legitimate **questions** in political science.

Week 14 (Dec. 6 and 8): New directions in political science research 2

- Examples of work you probably hadn't thought were legitimate **methods** in political science.

Summing up**Week 15 (Dec. 13): What I did this semester**

- Research teams report in.