

GVPT 770

Seminar in American Government: American Institutions

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x54151

This is the core institutions seminar in American politics, designed to provide a survey of the most important literature in the field.

Course grades will be based upon: (1) class participation (20 percent); (2) the short paper analyzing the hypotheses in the readings (20 percent); (3) the initial 3-page research design due in Week 3, October 6 (5 percent); (4) the more complete research design due on Week 6 (October 27) (3) a research paper on some topic in American politics of not less than 25 pages (45 percent).

Each week one or two seminar members will lead the discussion by examining what they believe is the major (or a major) hypothesis in the week's readings. Each student will offer a hypothesis derived from the reading. Ideally, this hypothesis would examine a conflict between two (or more) of the readings. Then suggest a novel way of testing this hypothesis (not one in the readings) and indicate whether you know of data that could be used to test the hypothesis—or suggest what types of data should be gathered to test the hypothesis. Each student will present arguments to the class and also summarize them in a short (5-10 page) paper.

The research paper asks you to state your own hypothesis, ground it theoretically in a literature, present a way of testing your hypothesis, and then to test the hypothesis.. The hypothesis should be based upon quantitative data, though exceptions will be made if you have no background using statistical methods (if you have taken GVPT 622 or its equivalent, that counts as sufficient background). No matter what methodology you use, you must derive your hypothesis from an important question and that you justify it theoretically. Pick a question that interests you. This should make it easier for you to interest others (including me). You will have to convince others--and soon. You must have a preliminary hypothesis by October 6. Beginning in Week 3, three seminar members per class will present their hypotheses to the class for critical examination. **AT WEEK 3 (OCTOBER 6), YOU MUST HAND IN A VERY SHORT (ABOUT THREE PAGES) PAPER STATING YOUR HYPOTHESIS AND JUSTIFYING IT. AT WEEK 6 (OCTOBER 27), YOU MUST HAND IN A MORE DETAILED (5-10 PAGES) RESEARCH DESIGN LAYING OUT THE THEORY AND METHODS BRIEFLY (SEE THE SECTION ON WRITING A RESEARCH DESIGN AFTER THE READING LIST).**

The final paper will be due on December 16 at noon in my office.

READINGS

9/15 Introductory Meeting

9/22 Theoretical Traditions in American Politics

*Schattschneider, Semisovereign People, entire.

*Dahl, Who Governs?

9/29 The New Institutionalism in the Study of American Politics

March and Olsen, "The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Politics," APSR, 78 (September 1984), 734-749.

Riker, "Implications from the Disequilibrium of Majority Rule for the Study of Institutions," APSR, 74 (June 1980), with comments by Ordeshook and Rae and reply by Riker, 432-458.

Shepsle, "Institutional Equilibrium and Equilibrium Institutions," 51-81 in Herbert Weisberg, ed., Political Science: The Science of Politics.

Smith, "If Politics Matters: Implications for the New Institutionalism," in Orren and Skowronek, eds., Studies in American Political Development, 6 (Spring 1992), 1-36.

Hall and Taylor, "Political Science and the New Institutionalism," in K. Soltan et al., eds., Institutions and Social Order, pp. 15-44.

Steinmo, "American Exceptionalism Reconsidered: Culture or Institutions?" in Lawrence C. Dodd and Calvin Jillson, eds., The Dynamics of American Politics (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1994), pp. 106-131.

10/6 Congress I: Historical Institutionalism

*Wilson, Congressional Government

*Mayhew, Divided We Govern

Short statement of seminar research paper due at the seminar meeting.

10/13 Congress II: How Assumptions Matter

*Mayhew, Congress: The Electoral Connection

*Fenno, Congressmen in Committees

10/20 Congress: The New Institutionalism

*Kingdon, Congressmen's Voting Decisions

Shepsle and Weingast, "Positive Theories of Congressional Institutions," LSQ, 19 (May 1994): 149-180.

10/27 Political Parties: Institutionals or Foils?

*Aldrich, Why Parties?

Krehbiel, "Where's the Party?", British Journal of Political Science, 23 (1993): 235-266.

Cox and McCubbins, "Bonding, Structure, and the Stability of Political Parties," LSQ, 19 (May 1994): 215-232..

Short (5-10 page) research design due.

11/3 The Presidency: Old and New Institutionalisms

*Kernell, Going Public

Skowronek, "Notes on the Presidency in the Political Order," pp. 286-302 in Orren and Skowronek, Studies in American Political Development, v. 1.

11/10 Interest Groups: Top Down or Bottom Up?

*Walker, Mobilizing Interest Groups in America

Goldfield, "Worker Insurgency, Radical Organization, and New Deal Labor Legislation," APSR, 83 (December 1989), 1257-1282.

Skocpol, Finegold, and Goldfield, "Explaining New Deal Labor Policy," APSR, 84 (December 1990), 1297-1316.

11/17 Who Gets Represented in American Politics and Why?

*Mansbridge, Why We Lost the ERA

*Dawson, Behind the Mule

11/24 Subnational Politics (John)

*Erikson, Wright, and McIver, Statehouse Democracy

12/1 The Judiciary

*Rosenberg, The Hollow Hope, entire

Graber, "The Nonmajoritarian Difficulty: Legislative Deference to the Judiciary," in Orren and Skowronek, Studies in American Political Development, v. 7, 35-73.

Schlozman et al., "Political Voice Through Amicus Briefs: Who Signs? Who Allies with Whom? Who Wins?"

12/8 Presentations of Research Designs during class

WRITING A RESEARCH DESIGN

First, THINK SMALL. Think of a research question you would like to answer. Or think of an explanation that you find unsatisfactory. Thinking small means you should be specific in posing a hypothesis.

A hypothesis is a statement of the form:

The more X, the more Y.

Or:

The more X, the less Y.

Y is your dependent variable, what you want to explain. X is your independent variable--the factor that "explains" your dependent variable. Don't take this too far, but you might think about them in terms of cause (independent variable) and effect (dependent variable). Once you have taken GVPT 622 and especially GVPT 700, you will understand why cause-and-effect statements are not appropriate for the data we have, but for now the analogy will do.

Thinking small means you must be specific. A hypothesis is NOT an explanation of how the world works. Don't start off by writing that you want to understand the bases of Presidential power or why Congress is corrupt.

Instead, consider the following narrower hypotheses that lend themselves to testing:

1. The greater the rate of inflation, the more seats the President's party will lose in midterm Congressional elections.
2. The higher a President's popularity, the more likely the President will be to enact his/her program in Congress.
3. States with individualistic political culture will be more likely to have high levels of welfare spending than states with moralistic or traditional cultures.
4. Voters with the highest level of political efficacy are most likely to vote for incumbent members of Congress.

These four hypotheses may be true or false. That doesn't matter. What is key is that you can formulate your hypothesis clearly and justify it. Justification is key. Are all four hypotheses equally plausible?

To get an idea of plausibility, you need to consider two fundamental issues. First, what do the components of the hypothesis mean? Second, what is the logic behind your hypothesis?

Consider hypothesis 1. It is the most straightforward since the dependent and

independent variables are clear. Your Y, the dependent variable, is how many seats a President's party will lose in midterm Congressional elections. It is straightforward to measure this. Your X, the independent variable, is the rate of inflation, which has a standard measure available for a variety of years from The Economic Report of the President.

Hypotheses 2, 3, and 4 are more complex. How do you measure (hypothesis 2) the level of Presidential support in Congress? A variety of measures are available and you will have to choose among them. What are individualistic, traditionalistic, and moralistic political cultures and why should they affect policy-making in the American states (hypothesis 3)? How might we measure "political culture" anyway? Is culture important or is it a surrogate for something else? What is political efficacy and how might we measure it (hypothesis 4)?

Figuring out how to measure your variables is essential, but it is secondary to justifying your hypothesis. You MUST have a hypothesis that makes sense. Your hypothesis should first and foremost be interesting to people beyond yourself. Pick a topic that has the potential to grab others' attention. If the topic is exciting to begin with, so much the better. If it is not, it is your task to convince others why your topic matters. Some topics are simply too boring to test: Liberals prefer more social welfare spending than conservatives. Others are silly: Tall people are more likely to be highly educated than short people. Pick a topic that is interesting because testing it would resolve an intellectual puzzle.

Once you make the case that your topic is worthwhile, you need to justify it. Consider the following fascinating hypothesis (which is in fact true):

The larger the number of storks in counties in Finland, the higher the county's birthrate.

It would be remarkable if storks did bring babies, but do you believe it?

Where do you get your hypothesis? Think of topics that interest you. If you're not fascinated by your topic, nobody else will be. Think of a question you want to answer--a puzzle that grabs YOU. Where do you get ideas? From your own thinking, news stories that fascinate you, or from your own reading. Is there an intellectual puzzle that you find exciting or a result that you have read that you find unsatisfactory? If the latter, why are you not convinced by someone else's argument? Is there a better way to think about the problem?

After you have come up with your hypothesis, you need to shift gears. Now, you must **THINK BIG**. You must link your hypothesis with a larger body of literature. Many articles and books call this a "literature review." I don't like literature reviews. They tend to be too discursive, covering every piece of research that touches on your hypothesis, whether directly relevant or not. Instead of a literature review, you should look for literature that bears directly on your hypothesis. Instead of a "literature review," you should write a "theoretical perspectives" section in which you examine literature specifically relating to your hypothesis. To get there, you must begin as if you were doing a literature review.

If you want to examine the impact of inflation on midterm voting on Congressional elections, you should consult the literatures on voting behavior more generally, on economics and politics, and on Congressional elections. These are vast literatures and will tell you much more than you need to know to test your specific hypothesis. Cull through these literatures to determine which studies specifically deal with the impact of economic factors on Congressional elections. What factors lead people to vote the way they do in Congressional elections? How are midterms different from Presidential year contests? Do people hold the President responsible for economic outcomes? (The answer to this may be less straightforward than you think.) Is inflation the economic factor most likely to have an impact on elections (what other factors might be relevant)? Does the President's party generally lose seats in midterm contests? Might factors other than the economy lead to seat losses when they occur?

At the end of your theoretical section, you should come up with either: (1) a general framework justifying your hypothesis; or (2) two (no more than two) alternative frameworks, one that supports your thesis and another that denies it. Under either scenario, you should meld the diverse literatures into a coherent argument supporting your thesis. You might also consider an alternative argument rejecting your hypothesis, if there are clear lines of division in the literature you are reviewing. WHAT YOU SHOULD AVOID IS CITING A LOT OF LITERATURE JUST TO BE INCLUSIVE. CITE WHAT YOU NEED FOR YOUR THESIS; DON'T ADD A LOT OF FLUFF SO THAT YOU CAN HAVE A LONG CITATION LIST.

To this point, you have selected a topic, indicated why it is (or should be) interesting to others), and justified it by drawing on existing literature in one or more fields. The next step is to figure out your methodology.

Methodology includes determining your data base and the appropriate technique for analyzing your data. You need not feel restricted to quantitative techniques. If you employ case studies you must show why the cases you select are appropriate and how broad your conclusions can be. Dahl's Who Governs? is designed to show that pluralist politics reigns in American cities. Is New Haven typical? Might other cities--or a different method--show that a small "power elite" actually controls decision making?

Let's go back to the inflation-Congressional elections example. You decide to collect data on seat losses for the President's party and on the inflation rate. So far, so good. But for how many years? If you only use 10 years, your statistical results will be rather weak (10 is a rather small number of cases, particularly if you can gather data for a larger time period). So suppose you decide to collect data for the entire 19th and 20th centuries. You will find that economic data for much of the 19th century are either unavailable or unreliable. So you decide to limit your analysis to the 20th century. You still must ask yourself: Did the basis of voting behavior change at all during this time? The 1930s witnessed a massive political realignment. The 1970s began a period of dealignment in which voters became less attached to political parties and more likely to support incumbents. As a result, they were less likely to punish a President's party for the economic results that a President "produced." You need to be aware of these changes and to incorporate them into your analysis.

Once you have determined your data base, you need to select your method of analysis. For hypothesis 1, you select regression analysis (which you will learn about in GVPT 622). Regression is a statistical technique allowing you to test the hypothesis: The more X, the more Y. Regression analysis takes a form that should be familiar to you from high school algebra (assuming your memory is good):

$$Y = a + bX,$$

which is the formula for a straight line. Y is your dependent variable, X your independent variable. a is the intercept on the Y axis that indicates the value of Y when X = 0. Here, it would tell you how many seats the President's party would lose if the inflation rate were zero. b is the "slope," telling you the impact of X on Y. If b=1 and you measure inflation and seat losses for the President as percentages, you would conclude that:

for each one percent rise in the inflation rate, the President's party will lose one percent of its seats in the next midterm election.

If the regression equation were:

$$Y = .2 + 1.2X,$$

you would conclude that for each 1% change in the inflation rate, a President's party would lose 1.2% of its seats in the next election plus .2% of its seats that it would lose because of other factors (the value of the intercept equals the seat loss when the inflation level is zero, so you must attribute the additional seat loss to other factors).

Again, so far, so good. But you still need to go further. Is the inflation rate the only factor that affects seat loss? Might the result be spurious? What is a spurious result? Think of the example of the birth rate in Finnish counties. It is well supported statistically, but it makes no sense. To test for a spurious relationship, we need to employ control variables. A reasonable control variable for our Finnish example is how rural each county is. So we wonder whether rural counties have both large stork populations (you would be no more likely to see a stork on the streets of Helsinki than you would be to see one in the District) and higher birth rates. So you reformulate your regression equation:

$$\text{Birth rate} = a + b_1 * (\text{Stork Population}) + b_2 * (\text{Rural Percent})$$

When you test this hypothesis, you find that the impact of the stork population vanishes once you control for how rural a county is.

For hypothesis 1, you might control for the following factors: (1) Presidential popularity (when data are available); (2) how many seats the President's party controls in Congress; and (3) the party of the President. Why would you want to control for these variables? Are there other variables you might suggest?

You now have specified your data base--and where you can get your data (published sources, your own survey, your investigation of specific cases)--and your methodology. Now you should tell us what you would conclude if your hypothesis were true. Are there implications for the theoretical perspectives you considered? Are there any public policy implications? If you found support for hypothesis 1, does this imply that politics ultimately depends upon economics? If so, what does this tell us about theories of voting behavior? Is this good or bad? Should we all apply to the economics department and give up political science--or should economists all join us? What are the limitations of your analysis? The data you have gathered are all "aggregate" data (the total seat loss for each year). They tell us nothing about how individual voters behave. How might we go beyond your study to examine voters' reactions to inflation and other factors?

If your hypothesis does not work out, why do you think it did not receive support? Might you suggest some alternative ideas as to what "causes" your dependent variable? If your hypothesis didn't work out, what would the implications be for the theoretical perspectives you considered when you justified your hypothesis?

In your research design, you should consider the implications for your theoretical perspective(s) under both scenarios: Your hypothesis works out or it doesn't.