P0601: the Craft of Political Science

Fall 2016

Instructor: Loren King, PhD
Lecture: Th 2:30-5:20pm
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Overview

- **Subject Areas**: theoretical frameworks widely used in political science research, along with the theoretical underpinnings of commonly used analytic and research methods.

- **Background Assumed**: advanced undergraduate studies in the social or behavioural sciences.

- **Learning Objectives**: learn and apply core concepts and associated theoretical frameworks used in contemporary political science research; grasp the relevance of these debates to formulating and pursuing research questions and deploying and, where necessary, developing appropriate research methods.

- **Class Structure**: graduate seminar format, one meeting per week.

- **Assignment Structure**: three short comparative writing assignments; seminar participation and presentations; two short analytic essays.
Course Description

This seminar explores how we think about politics. Think about the kinds of questions we so often ask in studying politics. Do voters typically act in their interests? When, if ever, is overseas military intervention justified? Are environmental regulations trade barriers? Do politicians inevitably pander? Does foreign aid work? How best to balance economic growth with considerations of fairness and ecological sustainability? Can the words of diplomats ever be taken at face value? Do opinion polls tell us anything useful?

How best to answer these kinds of questions? Is there a deep, unifying intellectual foundation that would give us ways to approach such disparate puzzles? Are there a few such foundations? Should we even look for such foundations, or simply hope to assemble plausible standards for satisfactory answers on a case by case basis?

In applied settings, we often put aside these deeper philosophical questions, and furthermore we take some quite specific answers for granted. That is, we assume a great deal as given about our political world, and about the standards we (ought to) apply for judging knowledge claims about that world. When, for instance, a government minister asks about the consequences of a proposed law, or the best position in trade negotiations, we know who the relevant actors are, and we make judgements about their likely interests.

Why should we be confident in these ‘givens’? What actually motivates political actors? Indeed, who are the relevant actors? How do their identities matter in shaping their thoughts and actions? How do a range of factors – from climate and geography to norms and institutions – shape identities and interests? What, for that matter, is an interest? Supposing we have plausible answers to these questions, how do we know what counts as a convincing explanation? What counts as valid knowledge about the political world?

Before we can deal intelligently with the practice of politics, then, we need some grasp of the theories and methods on offer for understanding politics, and explaining political processes and outcomes. Gaining a sound grasp of these conceptual fundamentals is the aim of this seminar.
We will be using the 3rd edition of Marsh & Stoker, eds. *Theory and Methods in Political Science* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) as a core text to orient our discussions, but the really important readings are from journal articles and online materials.

**Assignments**

- Three short comparative reports (10% each, due at the end of weeks 4, 8, and 10).
- Seminar participation and presentations (20% of course grade).
- Two short analytic essays (due at the end of weeks 6 and 12; 25% each).

For many of the weeks the readings are probably too onerous for everyone to get through in a reasonable amount of time and with sufficient care to the nuances of the studies and arguments. What I would like to do, then, is ask that everyone at least read the chapters assigned from the Marsh and Stoker text each week, and then each week one or two of you will focus on a specific article or chapter and prepare a short analytic summary of that reading to lead discussion in seminar on that topic. These presentations, along with seminar participation more generally, will amount for 20% of your course grade, with somewhat more weight assigned to your presentations than informal participation during discussions, but with sufficient flexibility to allow me to accommodate differences in how (and how much) different students participate in seminar settings.

**Topics and Readings**

**Part I: Explanation and Understanding in the Human Sciences**

**Week 1 (September 15): Political Science?**

Political science? Really? What is the primary contribution that political scientists make? Is it predicting political events? Explaining them? Offering ‘expert’ advice to practitioners? Does what we do have any effect at all? If not, why not? At the end of the day, what can we really know about politics beyond simply reporting on the vagaries of political history?


Rogers M. Smith, “Should We Make Political Science more of a Science or more about Politics?” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 35, 2 (June 2002): 199-201.

Week 2 (September 22): Science?

What are the defining elements of scientific reasoning? Are they the same across all domains of inquiry? Is prediction an essential part of science, or can we have scientific understanding that isn't ultimately predictive? What makes a scientific explanation compelling? What is the role of uncertainty in science? Can we ever really have a science of politics? Should we aspire to such a thing? What counts as a 'fact' in the study of politics? Are there brute facts in the way that there are facts about the natural, inanimate world? Are there such things as ‘social facts’? Are all claims of ‘fact’ suspect, and infused with philosophical biases or ideological commitments? What is a ‘model’? What is a ‘theory’? What is the relationship between models and theories? Specifically, how do we decide what parts of the world are important when we build our models?


Part II: Theoretical Foundations of Research Methods

Week 3 (September 29): Causal Inference and Explanation

What is a ‘cause’? Does the complexity of cause-effect relations in the social and historical sciences make our discipline less scientific? What exactly do ‘cause’ and ‘effect’ mean in the social sciences? What is a causal mechanism? Are there clear causal mechanisms at work in political life, or is there something unique about politics that makes a mechanistic approach to causality poorly suited to understanding the political world? Is there any alternative to studying causality in the social sciences?

Marsh and Stoker, ch. 11 and 15


Week 4 (October 6): Interpretation and Understanding

When we claim to understand some process or outcome, what do we mean? Is there something distinctive about political phenomena that makes understanding them more like reading a book than, say, grasping the outcome of an experiment? If so, are there distinctive rules that govern interpretation in the social sciences, and political science in particular? Are some actions and outcomes more appropriate to an interpretive approach than others, or must we interpret everything? Could we ever have an interpretation-free understanding of politics? If so, what would that mean? What, for that matter, is meaning? Does meaning make our field of study distinctive?

Marsh and Stoker, chs. 4 and 12

Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description" in Thick Description (Basic, 1973)


Week 5 (October 10-14): Fall Reading Break

Part III: Conceptual Frameworks for the Human Sciences

Week 6 (October 20): Agency, Interests, Strategies

What motivates us to act in certain ways rather than others? What are interests? Preferences? What determines our preferences? Do our statements or actions reveal our values and preferences? How could we know? Are we always motivated to satisfy our desires as fully and efficiently as possible, or do we sometimes act against our interests? Human behaviour, especially in the realms of politics and the market, is often strategic: how does this affect the way we study political phenomena? Are we sometimes satisfied with less than full satisfaction of our
preferences? Do altruistic acts make any sense? How do cooperative solutions arise in problems of conflict and coordination?

Marsh and Stoker, chs. 1 and 2


**Week 7 (October 24, 26): Norms and Institutions**

How should political scientists understand the ways that values, norms, and ideas shape our understandings of what is valuable, and how we ought to act? What is a norm? What is an institution? How do these things arise? Why do they persist? Are they simply the codification of cooperative solutions in games by strategic agents, or are they something more, perhaps the consequence of deep material and historical structures?

Marsh and Stoker, chs. 3, 5 and 10


**Week 8 (November 3): Reductionist Explanation - Behavioural Genetics in Political Science**

We are self-aware, reflexive beings suspended in webs of meaning, as Weber (via Clifford Geertz) has so memorably phrased this deep and pervasive fact or the human experience. Our actions are often *intentional* and imbued with *meaning*, two features of our lives that seem not to be easily reducible to underlying natural phenomena (supposing for a moment, in defiance of all philosophical sensibility, that we could agree on what ‘natural’ means). Still, we are nonetheless biological creatures, subject to our environments and our genetic legacies: it would be utterly surprising if at least some elements of our identities and behaviours were not shaped by genetic
factors. How much explanatory purchase does that likelihood get us when studying political behaviour?


Week 9 (November 10): Biology, Culture, Politics - Feminist Analysis and Critique

The personal is political: a long-standing slogan of the feminist movement in pushing for social and political change, but also a deep observation about our concepts and methods. Historically, sex and gender were typically taken to flow together in ways that were supposed to be ‘natural’: sex referred to biological traits, and gender to the associated linguistic and cultural conventions that flow from those traits. But even supposing that distinction holds (and the biology of sexual identity turns out to be not nearly so straightforward as many once supposed), it is increasingly clear that the linguistic and cultural conventions built around biological traits are not obviously natural (again, supposing we could agree on what that means). Indeed, in virtually every society, gender norms work to sustain systems power that privilege men over women. That finding suggests clear difficulties in sustaining any stable and unproblematic distinction between (supposedly neutral) explanation and critique: how can we pretend to be doing value-free explanation if our very concepts and categories are part of how power is used to sustain male privilege?

Marsh and Stoker, ch. 6.

Pinker and Spelke, “debate: Gender and Science,” Edge (edge.org)


Week 10 (November 17): Material Structures - Marxism as Explanation and Critique

Feminist analysis shows us that the fact-value distinction in social science is both philosophically and morally suspect, or at the very least controversial: it’s justification isn’t nearly so straightforward as was once supposed, not least because it invites us to ignore how our own assumptions and attempts to avoid value judgements are themselves deeply implicated in relations of power and privilege. Marxist analyses typically share that stance, often blurring (deliberately) any clear distinction between explanation and critique. But if feminism has shown us that one apparently natural structure - the biological division of the sexes - is in fact not what explains dominant gender relations in society, Marxism was historically rooted in roughly the opposite claim: that material structures of production determine our culture and politics. Thus marxist and feminist analyses have always existed in some tension: feminists took on some of the conceptual tools of marxism, especially the idea of false consciousness, but were always uneasy with the deterministic elements of traditional Marxism. Later marxists tried to distance themselves from material determinism, with mixed results.

Marsh and Stoker, ch. 7.


Hartmann, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism,” Capital & Class (1979)


Week 11 (November 24): Contesting Value-Free Political Science by embracing Normativity?

If we think the fact-value distinction in political (and any social) science is contestable, and perhaps unsustainable, then should we embrace those of us who have always been unabashedly willing to talk about values: normative political theorists and philosophers? In that tradition, varieties of liberalism have become very popular indeed, spawning arguments about how to guide political institutions and practices in interpreting and balancing competing values (freedom, equality, security, stability, legitimacy). But perhaps this too is ultimately a problematic turn. What if even reasonably-argued prescriptions are themselves merely discourses of power? What if the problem is that there is no viable distinction between knowledge and power?
Marsh and Stoker, ch. 8

Taylor, “Neutrality in Political Science” (1967), *Philosophical Papers II: Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, ch. 2

Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (1979), excerpts


**Week 12 (December 1): Political Science?**

So where does all this leave us? Is there a science of politics? Can there be? Should there be? What are its distinctive features, and which features does it share with other sciences?
Writing Clearly and Avoiding Plagiarism

Our writing assignments require precise summary, concise exposition, and constructive analysis and argument. Here are some specific suggestions for crafting your own work:

• **state the thesis** (yours or the one you are examining) clearly in the opening sentences of your paper.

• think through the **logic of the argument**: what is being claimed? What assumptions are being made? What must be true of the world for these assumptions to be plausible? compelling? How does the thesis depend on the assumptions made? Do assertions build upon one another in a consistent manner? What evidence is relevant to assessing the accuracy of any causal claims being made?

• **avoid vague and sweeping claims** (an example: “For thousands of years, humans have fought oppression and yearned for justice...”).

• **avoid truisms**, i.e. statements so obviously true that they require no mention. If you find yourself making an assertion that seems obvious, think carefully about whether it really needs to be said, and whether it adds anything of substance to your argument or analysis.

• **be clear and succinct**: occasional tangents and clever phrasings have their place in a well-written essay, but brevity and clarity are worthy aims for any writing exercise.

• you will often need to **describe and explain**, very briefly, another person's claims in your own words. Limit these summaries to material that is directly relevant to your purposes.

• and perhaps most importantly, **avoid plagiarism**: provide adequate citation when you use words and ideas that are not your own (this is far more important in your essays than in your response paper, but even there try to be as clear as possible about when you are discussing someone else's ideas and when you are offering your own thoughts). Even when the source of our ideas and quotations is obvious, accurate citation is a habit worth acquiring. Citation in essays is similar to reporting our methods in experimental sciences: careful citation allows other researchers to examine our sources themselves, confirming or challenging our claims. Another analogy: careful citation is like civility in conversation. We acknowledge the contributions of others in conversation: the same is true of scholarly writing. Seriously: don’t plagiarize!!
Grading Criteria for Written Assignments

Here are the criteria I use when grading written work:

- **The A paper.** The A paper makes a powerful argument in support of an interesting thesis. The argument has few if any ambiguities, and it is obvious that the author has a sound grasp of the ideas and evidence being examined. The A paper is clearly, sometimes beautifully written. There are no significant grammatical flaws in an A paper: the author says what she wants to say, and does so with clarity and precision; sometimes with style, grace, and originality; and always with careful attention to logic and evidence.

- **The B paper.** The B paper is a well-argued essay: the argument may suffer from some minor ambiguities, a few unsupported interpretations, minor errors of fact, and occasionally confusing grammatical formulations; but in general the author of the B paper accomplishes what she sets out to do. Although the B paper may not always be clear or precisely argued, it is, in general, grammatically sound and the argument is coherent. The reader of a B paper gets the clear sense that the author has a solid grasp of the arguments and evidence under examination.

- **The C paper.** This paper meets the minimal requirements of the exercise, but no more. The C paper suggests some grasp of the concepts and arguments at hand, but advances no clear and plausible thesis. If a thesis is evident, it is often vague and insufficiently supported by argument and evidence. There are typically minor but significant logical errors in C papers, and they often read as if the author has based the essay mainly on lecture notes and casual impressions, rather than a careful evaluation of relevant concepts, arguments and evidence. Although the C paper often has serious grammatical flaws, even a grammatically sound essay is a C paper if it lacks a clear thesis, coherent argument, or informed analysis.

- **The D paper.** The author of the D paper demonstrates little if any familiarity with the concepts and problems in question. The D paper advances no thesis, and contains serious errors of substance and presentation, often advancing inconsistent claims. In general, the D paper shows an utter lack of effort. A D paper is unacceptable and, although technically a D is a passing grade, I personally view such papers as substantive failures, and I may return them to the authors for revision.
On behalf of WLUSU (wlusu.com)

Foot Patrol Walk Home Service:

1.519.886.FOOT x3668

Foot Patrol is a volunteer operated walk-home service, available daily during evening hours. Male-female, radio-dispatched teams trained in Emergency First Aid are available on request to escort students to and from campus as well as to off-campus destinations, either by foot or by van.

Counselling Services and Peer Help Line:

1.886.281.PEER x7337

Counselling Services are available to help students deal with emotional, psychological and social challenges of university. Counselling, consultation or referrals are available at the Student Wellness Centre. Peer Help Line, a confidential listening, referral, information and support line, is available during evening hours to provide support.

Student Food bank

All Laurier students are eligible to use the Student Food Bank. Anonymous requests can be made online at wlusu.com under the Services tab. All dietary restrictions are accommodated, and food hampers typically last up to a week.