

TO: GOVT 470 Students
FR: Larry Evans
RE: Seminar paper
DT: January, 2020

As mentioned on the syllabus, the course requirements for GOVT 470 include a research proposal/paper, which should be approximately 20-25 pages in length (double-spaced, one-inch margins, 12 font, English language). It is not required that you fully conduct the research you suggest (e.g. collect all the necessary data, complete sophisticated statistical tests). The assignment is to write a proposal, and the to only complete as much of the proposed analysis as is feasible given the nature of your project and the time limitations of the semester. Details about the scope of your paper should be discussed with the instructor as early as possible during the semester.

The paper will be due on the last day of class for the seminar – Tuesday, April 28. There will be no class on Tuesday, April 21 to facilitate the preparation of these papers. I will instead be meeting individually with all students enrolled in this course in my office throughout the week. You should organize your seminar paper in a manner that is appropriate for your topic. But the best approach probably would be to divide the paper into five main sections.

1. The first section should present a research “question” relevant to the salient themes and concepts found in the academic literatures about the Congress, presidency, and legislative-executive relations. You should state your question clearly and explain why it is of interest. What normative issues are raised by the question? What positive theoretical issues are raised? Why should we care?
2. The second section of the paper should review the relevant academic literature. How much do scholars know about your question? What data sources typically are used to address the matter? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the existing literature in this area? What is left to be learned about your topic? Be sure to include full citations for all relevant works.
3. Section 3 should present the theory and hypotheses at the heart of your research proposal. As we will discuss, a theory is a deductive structure that is based on clear assumptions about human motivations, behavior, strategies, and institutions. Most of the studies we will read in this class are oriented around rational choice theory – reflecting the current focus of scholarship pertaining to American political institutions. An hypothesis is an expectation, prediction, or other declarative statement about the real world of American politics. The hypothesis you develop should be testable in some way. Examples of hypotheses in the literature include: Incumbents tend to get reelected because of the constituency services activities of the typical congressional office; Party leaders exert a significant and independent impact on legislation relevant to the party agenda; the president largely sets the broader legislative agenda; and so on.

4. In Section 4, you should summarize the evidence that could be collected to test the hypotheses you present in Section 3. Why would these data be appropriate? Where would you find this information? Have these data already been examined in some way in the existing literature? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these data for evaluating your hypotheses?

5. Section 5 should be a brief summary of any initial findings, as well as the results you would expect more generally if you fully conducted the empirical analysis that you have proposed. It should serve as the conclusion for your research proposal.

As well as fulfilling the seminar requirement for government and public policy concentrators, GOVT 470 is also a COLL 400 capstone experience, and as a result requires that you communicate course materials to a diversity of audiences. We will promote this core goal of addressing disparate audiences in several ways.

First, throughout the class I will ask that you read a series of blog posts by academics and practitioners published in the [Monkey Cage](#) blog associated with *The Washington Post*. The aim of the *Monkey Cage* is to present political science scholarship in an accessible fashion to a broad audience, and thereby promote civic discussion and education. Work by most of the authors on the syllabus – and material from dozens of the disparate studies upon which the course books are based – has taken the form of *Monkey Cage* posts over the years. I will provide links to the relevant posts as the semester progresses. Throughout, we will discuss the different strategies that such authors have used to communicate their work non-specialist audiences and enhance civic discourse about politics.

Second, as part of the preparation of your research proposals/papers for this class, I expect that you will submit to me a 1,200 word blog post on your developing research project written as a “mock” submission to the *Monkey Cage*, and where you present the gist of your work to general readers. These draft blog posts will be considered as part of the overall grade for the research paper and are due when we meet in my office during the week of April 21.

Third, and also as part of the preparation of your research proposals/papers, I ask that you circulate your drafts to at least two other students not enrolled in this class, and ideally to students who focus their own academic activities in other departments and/or topic areas. The purpose is to get concrete feedback from non-specialist, general-interest readers as you develop your work.