

Political Science G9620: Theories, Tests & Debates

Fall 2005

Course Information

Instructor: David Epstein, de11@columbia.edu

Course Web Page: <http://paradocs.pols.columbia.edu/PESeminar.htm>

Office Hours: Monday 10-12, or by appointment, in 706 IAB.

Prerequisite: Two semesters of statistics and some previous exposure to formal theory, or by consent of instructor.

Class meetings: Monday 2:10-4:00 in 717 IAB.

This class has a number of objectives. First and foremost, we will explore the testing of theories in political science. The theories themselves can be generated either formally, through the use of game theory, or informally; we will see examples of both during the semester. What's important is to understand what constitutes a proper test of a theory (and an improper test!), and the kinds of data and statistical procedures that are appropriate to a given problem at hand. There is, unfortunately, no cookbook one-right-way solution to empirically examine any given theory. But students should develop a toolkit of ideas relating theories and tests, and this course should start the process of filling your toolbox.

Second, we will examine a number of debates within the political science literature. This is really an extension to the previous topic, but an important one. Political science, like any other discipline, develops as a series of conversations on important topics, and to make a contribution is to insert yourself into such a conversation with something original to say. Sometimes these conversations become heated, centering on a single interaction, relation, or hypothesis — this is what we will call a debate, and we will explore different ways of resolving (winning?) debates.

Third, the course is meant to be a practicum in applied econometrics, by which I mean that we will actually work with the data associated with the papers we study. Students will get a chance to examine the data sets, manipulate them, run alternative models, add or subtract variables from the analysis, and so on. If all goes well, this should be both an empowering experience, as that students see that they too can do the kind of analysis that gets published in top journals, and a humbling one, as students understand the difficulties of putting such analysis together. We will use a variety of statistical packages for our work; more details at the first class session.

Fourth, students will have a chance to get a variety of viewpoints on how theories and tests are put together, as we will have a number of guest speakers present their work throughout

the semester. As indicated above, testing theories is more art than science, and as such students will be exposed to the ways that a number of top researchers do about the business.

Last, but far from least, students should come out of the course with concrete ideas of work they would like to do in this area. For those of you who are still pre-dissertation, this is a chance to start thinking in a structured way about the topics that interest you. For those who have already started dissertating, it's a chance to get feedback on your particular theories, tests, and data.

The mechanics of the course will be as follows. At the first introductory class, we will review some background philosophy on theories, hypotheses, data, evidence, and tests. Nothing too heavy, but enough to set the stage for the rest of the semester. After that, we will take on a new topic or debate each week. The person assigned to present for a given session is responsible for supplying to me, for posting on the course web site, the following items:

1. All readings, in electronic format (PDF preferred);
2. The relevant data set(s), ready to be loaded in a common statistical program (Stata or R preferred); and
3. A command file (or files) to be run on the data, reproducing and/or extending the previous results.

Item 1 is due Wednesday the week before the coming class session, item 2 is due on Friday, and item 3 is due on Monday (the day before class). Optionally, if the class leader wants to prepare presentation slides, these can be put online as well at any time.

Each student will make one presentation during the semester. To start things out, I will take the first three classes, discussing theories and tests of delegation, a debate over the policy impact of racial redistricting, and a debate on economic growth and democratization. When choosing your own topic, try to pick something that interests you substantively, but also take some time to make sure you can get or put together the relevant data set, as that could be the hardest part of the assignment. A quick list of possible topics might include:

1. Is Social Capital Eroding in America and, If So, What Can Be Done About It?
2. How Has Television Influenced American Politics?
3. PACs and Interest Groups: Whom Do They Influence and How?
4. Why Are Congressional Committees So Powerful?
5. How Important Is Party in the House of Representatives?
6. Presidential Principal and Bureaucratic Agents: Can the President Control the Executive Branch Bureaucracy?
7. Law or Politics: What Is the Basis for Supreme Court Decisions?

8. When Does Strong Leadership Emerge in Congress?
9. Does Divided Government Influence the Amount of Important Legislation Produced?
10. Is There Really a Democratic Peace?
11. How Important Are Social Conditions as Predictors of Civil War?

And so on. Students should pick a topic as quickly as possible, and check with me if they are in doubt as to the relevant data sources.

Apart from their own presentation, and of course the ever-present class participation, students will write a term paper either testing a particular theory, challenging a previous test of a theory, or entering a substantive debate. For pre-dissertation students, this will be a regular paper of 20-30 pages; for those already at the dissertation stage, it can be a chapter of their dissertation. All papers will be due by 5:00 PM Tuesday, December 14.