

Guidelines for Honors Seminar Proposals (Application Stage)

- 1. Start with a question, not with an answer.** Your question should be a true puzzle, one that you (and, ideally, others) do not know the answer to. The most common problem that students face when developing research topics is the inclination to frame their proposals in terms of a theory, or hunch, rather than as a specific puzzle. For example, a student might propose to write a thesis arguing that “religion affects voting behavior,” or that “rational choice theory is wrong.” Both these topics are far too open-ended for a thesis. A more effective method of setting up a research project is to focus on an empirical puzzle. This strategy limits the scope of the project, increases the probability that the researcher will remain interested in the project, and makes for a much stronger thesis.
- 2. Your question should be of the “why,” rather than “how” variety.** “How” questions (e.g, “how does religion affect politics”) tend to assume the answer, and most frequently are the result of students turning their research projects into an episode of *Jeopardy* – in other words, they will rephrase their answer (see point 1, above) in the form of a question. Think about your project in terms of explaining variation. For example, why did New York, but not New Jersey, adopt policy X?
- 3. Honors theses in political science are distinct from policy briefs.** This honors seminar is meant to produce social science research, rather than policy prescriptions per se. This is not to say that policy-relevant research should not be one of your goals – indeed, one of the issues every thesis must address is why the question considered in the work is important. At the same time, your thesis should be governed by the principle of objective, rather than normative, research;¹ policy recommendations most often appear in the concluding chapter of a thesis. A thesis asking why the US intervened in the Balkans but not Rwanda will almost always be more successful than a thesis whose main argument is that the US should have intervened in Rwanda.
- 4. Be careful about focusing primarily on current or very recent events.** There is a high likelihood that you will be conducting case study research for your thesis. Typically, successful case studies require in-depth analysis of primary and secondary sources. For very current or recent events, primary governmental sources may not be publicly available; similarly, a strong secondary literature will not have developed around the issue until several years following its emergence and/or resolution.
- 5. Start to think about alternative explanations and case selection.** Once you have developed a research question, think about possible answers to that question. A strong honors thesis will consider a number of different explanations for a given puzzle. You will also be asked to come up with a strategy for testing the various hypotheses you are considering. Think about which cases will offer the greatest leverage in terms of testing hypotheses against each other. Your proposal should focus primarily on your research question and why it is important, but it is worthwhile to think about how you might execute the research as well. Note that we will be discussing case selection in greater depth this fall.

¹ This guideline may vary somewhat for students in political theory.