

POLISCI 688.10: Dissertation Development in Comparative Politics

Prof. Noah Nathan

Winter 2021 // Mondays 11:30am–1:30pm

Contact Info

Email: nlnathan@umich.edu

Office Hours: Via Zoom, Fridays 10:30am–12:30pm, or by appointment

Course Description

This course provides a structured forum for mid-stage graduate students in Comparative Politics to develop dissertation ideas. The goal by the end of the semester is to produce an early draft prospectus and/or major grant proposal. We will workshop your project ideas together in class and read literature that may help guide your choice of topics and research designs. We also will have several guest sessions with scholars who have successfully converted their dissertation projects into top publications to provide role models of the paths one could take in developing a dissertation idea.

Zoom information

Each class is held virtually via Zoom. Details on the Zoom link are on the Canvas webpage.

Grading

The purpose of this class is for you to make progress on your dissertation ideas. Grades are irrelevant. I believe I am still required to give you grades because this is a for-credit course, but there will not be any graded assignments. As long as you do the assignments and participate, you will receive an A. You can also audit the course if you'd like. If you have an extenuating circumstance and need an extension for one of the assignments, just email me and we'll work out an alternative arrangement.

Assignments

To provide structure for developing your ideas, there are a series of ungraded assignments. These deadlines may seem like they come quickly, one after the other. I prefer you turn in something rough and on time than miss a deadline. The purpose is to create a commitment device to force you to keep working, even when you feel stuck. We're going to try to plow through your writer's block together as a group. The quality of the writing in these assignments isn't important – just try to get your ideas down on paper. In a spirit of collaboration, all of your written work will be shared with each other on Canvas, where we can provide **friendly and constructive** comments we can all learn from.

- **“Pitch memo,” round 1:** a ~2-4 page memo (double-spaced) outlining a possible topic. Identify a puzzle and/or research question that *could* motivate your dissertation. Sketch out how will you frame this puzzle relative to existing literature. *Briefly* note the cases/context in which you hope to evaluate it, the possible argument(s) about the puzzle you may try to advance (it's ok if you don't have this yet), and list a few short ideas for possible data sources and/or methodological approaches. If you are unsettled between ideas, outline two separate puzzles/questions in this memo.

This is not a commitment. View this as a snapshot of your thinking as you start the semester. Half-baked and early ideas are very encouraged! The memo should be posted to Canvas by **Thursday, January 28**. We will discuss them in class on Monday, February 1.

- **“Lit and theory memo”**: a ~3-5 page memo (double-spaced) summarizing the main claims made by existing literature related to your puzzle and then *briefly* previewing a possible argument (or set of possible arguments).

Rather than attempting to provide a comprehensive overview of a given field, focus the review *narrowly* around your puzzle. Group the studies into the different overarching categories of answers they collectively suggest. Then tell us what these different groups of answers still leave unexplained or under-explored (what’s the gap you can come fill?). Pivot to a short argument/theory section in which you attempt to fill in those missing or under-explored parts of the puzzle. It’s ok if this argument is very early and underdeveloped.

If you’ve switched your topic from the first “Pitch memo” (this is fine!), please note it at the beginning. The memo should be posted to Canvas by **Thursday, February 25**. We will discuss them in class on Monday, March 1.

- **“Pitch memo,” round 2**: building on the feedback received on the first two assignments, take a second crack at the “Pitch memo”. Stick to just one idea, and aim again for ~2-4 pages (double-spaced). Feel free to revise your ideas as much as you want from what you proposed in the first version. This should be posted to Canvas by **Thursday, March 12**.

- **Get comments from other faculty**: after uploading it to Canvas, send “Pitch memo, round 2” to *at least two* faculty members in the department (I don’t count). Ask them for feedback and meet with them to discuss their reaction to your proposed dissertation idea. If they don’t reply to your email or are hard to reach, contact me and I’ll lean on them. Be prepared to report back to the class (via Canvas) on their thoughts about your idea by **Monday, March 29**.

- **“Data and design memo”**: a ~3-5 page (double-spaced) memo that thinks through a potential research design, methodological approach, and data collection strategy that you could use to evaluate that puzzle/question.

Start with a thought experiment: if I had infinite resources and willing cooperation from any potential research partner I’d like, what research design and data collection strategy would I choose and why? After a page or so, pivot and scale down your ambitions to what is actually feasible: what realistic strategy could I actually pull off that most closely approximates the ideal approach? Feel free to propose multiple candidate designs or data collection ideas.

If you’ve switched your puzzle/topic again, please note it briefly at the beginning. The memo should be posted to Canvas by **Thursday, March 25**. We will discuss them together in class on Monday, March 29.

- **“Proposal draft”**: building on the feedback you’ve received on the previous assignments, your final assignment is to write either: (a) an initial prospectus draft (min. 10 pages); or (b) a draft proposal for an NSF DDIG grant, formatted per the NSF rules (we’ll cover this in class). Choose the option that is most useful at your current stage. For those choosing the NSF DDIG option, my hope is that you then work with a faculty adviser to actually submit this proposal to NSF by the June deadline.

Post a rough initial working draft of this final document to Canvas by **Thursday, April 15**. We will discuss them together in class on Monday, April 19. These can be very rough and even incomplete. Just try to get something down on paper that we can discuss in class.

Submit a revised, at least somewhat more polished version to me by email by **Thursday, April 29**. I will provide written comments in May or June. I am happy for you to take a temporary “incomplete” until the fall if you want to take the summer to work on it before for turning in this last revised version (though note you’d miss the NSF deadline).

Course schedule

1. Introduction (January 25)

Required readings:

1. None

Assignments:

1. Work on your first “Pitch memo” Upload it to Canvas by **Thursday, January 28**.

2. Early ideas workshop (February 1)

Required readings:

1. Read and provide comments on Canvas to your colleagues’ “Pitch memos” before class *for everyone in your assigned pod*. Come to class ready to discuss your feedback for each other.

Assignments:

1. Prepare to briefly describe your “Pitch memo” to the class.

2. Guest speaker #1: Sarah Brierley (LSE, UCLA PhD) (February 8)

Required readings:

1. Sarah Brierley, 2020, “Unprincipled Principals: Co-opted Bureaucrats and Corruption in Ghana,” *American Journal of Political Science*.
2. Sarah Brierley, Job Market Paper
3. Sarah Brierley, Dissertation Prospectus

Assignments:

1. In the background, start working on your “Lit and theory memo.”

3. Thinking about scope, style, and research goals (February 15)

Required readings:

1. Thomas Pepinsky, 2019, “The Return of the Single-Country Study,” *Annual Review of Political Science*

2. Dan Slater and Daniel Ziblatt, 2013, “The Enduring Indispensability of the Controlled Comparison,” *Comparative Political Studies*.
3. Thad Dunning, 2016, “Transparency, Replication, and Cumulative Learning: What Experiments Alone Cannot Achieve,” *Annual Review of Political Science*
4. Sean Yom, 2015, “From Methodology to Practice: Inductive Iteration in Comparative Research,” *Comparative Political Studies*

Assignments:

1. Keep working on your “Lit and theory memo.”

4. Guest speaker #2: Jennifer Pan (Stanford, Harvard PhD) (February 22)

Required readings:

1. Jennifer Pan, 2020, *Welfare for Autocrats: How Social Assistance in China Cares for its Rulers*, Oxford University Press.
2. Jennifer Pan, Dissertation
3. Jennifer Pan, Dissertation Prospectus

Assignments:

1. Finish your “Lit and theory memo.” Upload it to Canvas by **Thursday, February 25**.

5. Making a theoretical contribution (March 1)

Required readings:

1. Read and provide written comments on Canvas to *at least four* of your colleagues’ “Lit and theory memos” before class. Come to class ready to discuss your feedback for each other.

Assignments:

1. Start working on your second “Pitch memo.”

6. Guest speaker #3: Volha Charnysh (MIT, Harvard PhD) (March 8)

Required readings:

1. Volha Charnysh, 2019, “Diversity, Institutions, and Economic Outcomes: Post-WWII Displacement in Poland,” *American Political Science Review*
2. Volha Charnysh, Job Market Paper
3. Volha Charnysh, Dissertation Prospectus

Assignments:

1. Finish your second “Pitch memo.” Upload it to Canvas by **Thursday, March 11**.
2. Email it to two other faculty members by Friday, March 12. Schedule office hours meetings with them in next two weeks to discuss your ideas!

7. Guest speaker #4: Adam Auerbach (American University, Wisconsin PhD) (March 15)

Required readings:

1. Adam Auerbach, 2019, *Demanding Development: The Politics of Public Goods Provision in India’s Urban Slums*, Cambridge University Press.
2. Adam Auerbach, Dissertation
3. Adam Auerbach, NSF DDIG Grant Proposal

Assignments:

1. Start working on your “data and design memo.”

8. Writing break #1 – NO CLASS (March 22)

Required readings:

1. None

Assignments:

1. Finish your “data and design memo.” Upload it to Canvas by **Thursday, March 25**.

9. Workshopping research designs (March 29)

Required readings:

1. Read and provide written comments on Canvas to your pod's "data and design memos" before class. Come to class ready to discuss your feedback for each other.

Assignments:

1. Add a comment to your second "Pitch memo" on Canvas by **Monday, March 29** that notes the main feedback you received from the two faculty members you met with to discuss the memo. The idea is to explain and ask for feedback from the class on any major revisions to your topic, argument, or research design that you're now considering based on the faculty feedback you've now received.
2. Start writing your main Proposal draft.

10. Writing grant proposals (April 5)

Required readings:

1. Noah Nathan, NSF DDIG Proposal (2013)
2. Mai Hassan, NSF DDIG Proposal (2012)
3. "Dear Colleagues Letter: A Broader Impacts Framework for Proposals Submitted to NSF's Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences Directorate", March 2021
4. Read <https://www.apsanet.org/PROGRAMS/Doctoral-Dissertation-Research-Improvement/Application-Materials-and-Format>

Assignments:

1. Keep writing your main Proposal draft.

11. Writing break #2 – NO CLASS (April 12)

Required readings:

1. None

Assignments:

1. Keep writing your main Proposal draft. Upload a rough, first cut version to Canvas by **Thursday, April 15**. It is ok if this is still incomplete in places.

12. Five minute fiesta (April 19)

Required readings:

1. Read and provide written comments on Canvas to *at least two* of your colleagues' Proposal drafts before class. Come to class ready to discuss your feedback for each other.

Assignments:

1. Prepare a brief 4-5 minute talk (slides optional) that summarizes your Proposal draft and the current status of your project idea.