

Final Paper

PSCI 2221: Causes of War
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Description

Your task is to write a research paper that establishes and evaluates an argument about the causes of war.

There are three relevant deadlines:

1. *Proposal* due at the beginning of class on Monday, October 31.
2. *Presentations* given in class on November 28, November 30, or December 2. We will arrange the presentation schedule shortly before Thanksgiving Break. If you cannot be present in class on any of these days, you need to inform me *as soon as possible*.
3. *Paper* due in my hands by 5:00 p.m. on Friday, December 16. **I will not accept late assignments.** You can turn in a hard copy to my mailbox in the political science office or to me in my office (Commons 324). If you choose to email your paper to me, be sure to do so early enough that I can open the email and verify that the attachment works before the 5:00 p.m. deadline.

Research Design

Argument and Theory

Your paper should be grounded in a valid theory of the causes of war. By now, you know that a valid theory is one whose conclusions follow logically from its premises. If this does not sound familiar, refresh yourself on the first chapter of *War and the State*.

I expect the theory section of your paper to look somewhat like this:

- You state your main argument. You want to do this early in the paper, so that the reader knows what to expect.

Example: In democracies, term-limited leaders are less likely to start wars than those who have the option of running for re-election.

- You describe and defend the premises that underlie your argument. Remember, your argument isn't just a hunch—it's based in a particular set of assumptions about how the world works.

Example:

1. The decision to start a war rests in the hands of a state's leader.
2. State leaders care mainly about retaining power personally.
3. In a democracy, a leader can only retain power by winning elections.
4. Starting a war increases feelings of patriotism in the population.
5. Citizens are more likely to support the incumbent when they feel patriotic.

In a paper, of course, these would be laid out carefully, with explanations of the key terms and some justification of their inclusion, not just stated in a bulleted list.

- You explain how the conclusion follows from the premises. In other words, you demonstrate that the argument is valid, and in so doing explain the logic that underlies the argument.

The main argument may draw in whole or in part from theories we have discussed in this course, or that you may have seen in other classes. Just make sure to cite any sources you draw from when making the argument.

Empirical Evaluation

You may choose one of two ways to empirically evaluate your main argument:

1. *In-depth case study.* Identify one or two historical examples relevant to your argument, and carefully trace how they unfolded and whether the outcomes—and the reasons for those outcomes—are in line with your main argument.

Example: To evaluate the argument that term-limited leaders are less likely to start wars, I will compare the decision of George H.W. Bush to intervene in Kuwait in 1990 to the decision of Barack Obama not to intervene in Crimea in 2014.

If you use a case study, you may not use any of the following wars as a main focus: World War I, World War II, or the 2003 Iraq War. Be more original. I especially appreciate examples from before the 20th century or from outside the U.S. and Western Europe, though be sure not to pick a case so obscure that it's hard to find historical source material.

If you're looking for a guide to reading historical material and using it to evaluate social-scientific theories, I recommend Marc Trachtenberg's book *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method*, which is available to Vanderbilt students online for free [through Ebrary](#).

2. *Large-scale data analysis*. Derive hypotheses from your main argument, operationalize the key variables, collect relevant data, and perform statistical tests.

Example: To evaluate the argument that term-limited leaders are less likely to start wars, I will use data on world leaders over time, whether they faced term limits, and how many (if any) conflicts they initiated.

You may only choose the data analysis option if you have taken or are currently taking a course in statistics or data analysis. If you select this option, I will help you identify relevant data sources.

In either case, your task is *not* to spin the evidence so as to fit the main argument. If your investigation of the evidence leads you to the conclusion that the main argument has some problems, or even that the main argument is totally untenable, just say so. I want to see that you can lay out a valid argument and then evaluate how well it serves as an explanation of real-world phenomena. If the answer is "not very well," that's fine.

Expectations

Proposal

The proposal should be no more than two pages long.¹ It should contain these two elements:

1. Your main argument. Briefly state the argument and the logic behind it, as well as the sources (if any) from which they are drawn.
2. The body of evidence you intend to consult for the empirical component. To demonstrate the feasibility of the project, the proposal should also identify specific sources you plan to draw from.

The proposal itself is not graded, but 5% of your course grade depends on turning it (and any requested revisions) in on time. It is possible that you will need to revise your initial proposal in order to receive approval. This requirement is for your own benefit: I want to ensure that your research design is feasible and has the potential to result in a satisfactory final paper. I will provide detailed feedback on your proposal, including suggested sources to consult.

Presentation

The presentation is a 5–7 minute talk about the essential components of your paper, followed by 3–5 minutes of Q&A. The content of your presentation is up to you. To some extent, it will depend on how far your research has progressed by the time of the presentation. At a minimum, your presentation should tell us:

1. What is the central argument?
2. What is the logic of the argument?
3. What is the evidence you have chosen to focus on, and why is it relevant to your argument? What do you expect to find, and how will these findings affect your conclusions?

¹As always, page counts are based on a paper that is double-spaced, with one-inch margins and 12-point font.

The presentation counts for 10% of your course grade. You will be graded on the clarity of the presentation and your facility at answering questions from the class.

We will determine the order of presentations shortly before Thanksgiving Break. If you decide to use slides, you must email the file to me by 5:00 p.m. the day before your presentation. It is usually safest to convert PowerPoint or Keynote slides to PDF format, since sometimes raw slide files show up differently on different computers.

Paper

The paper is a 15–20 page research paper. Twenty pages is a hard upper limit. I reserve the right not to read any content past 20 pages and to reduce your grade for exceeding the limit.

You must cite every source that your paper draws upon. These include sources of ideas (e.g., course readings from which your theory is taken) and sources of facts (e.g., a historical account that your case study uses). There is no downside to citing your sources. On the other hand, failure to cite sources is plagiarism—and thus an Honor Code violation—and will result in a failing grade. You may use any citation style you like (APA, Chicago, MLA, etc.), as long as you pick one and stick to it.

The paper itself counts for 35% of your final grade. I will ask a number of questions in determining your grade. These include:

- Is the central argument relevant to the study of the causes of war? Does the paper make a convincing case for its relevance?
- Does the paper demonstrate that the central argument is valid and walk through its logic?
- Is the empirical body of evidence relevant to the main argument? Does the paper make a convincing case for its relevance?
- How well does the paper operationalize the key variables? For a case study, this means connecting the components of the theory to particular features of the case. For a data analysis, this means selecting particular quantitative measures.
- How complete is the assessment of the case evidence? Does the paper

neglect any important facts, or spin the truth in order to support a particular point of view?

- Does the paper identify potential competing explanations and assess them in light of the evidence?
- How clearly written is the paper?² Is it easy to identify the central argument? Is the evidence presented logically and coherently?

Notice that you will *not* be graded on to what extent the evidence supports your theory. I do not care if you are clairvoyant. I do care about intellectual honesty. If the evidence does not align with your theory, say so, and explain why you think that might be the case and what the implications are for the study of war. From a scientific standpoint, a “failed” experiment is just as interesting as a successful one.

²A research paper does not have to be pompous or stuffy. It is possible to be scholarly and serious without using flowery language or convoluted sentence structures. I recommend reading George Orwell’s “Politics and the English Language” (<http://tinyurl.com/orwell46>) before you write your paper.