

## HANDBOOK FOR SENIOR PROJECTS IN POLITICAL STUDIES

If you are reading this document chances are that you are either contemplating writing a political studies senior project or already immersed in the process of writing one. In either case, this short document is intended to guide you through the process of writing your senior project. In what follows, you will find information about how to structure your project, the composition of the senior project board, the purpose of the midway review, and a list of important deadlines to ensure a smooth and successful senior project experience.

### PART I: FORM, STRUCTURE AND LENGTH

It is the hope of the politics faculty that your senior project will approximate research that is characteristic of the discipline of political science with respect to its overall structure, analytical orientations, and length. This generally means a piece of writing that is driven not by a general interest in any subject but rather by a compelling question or puzzle and work that is analytical rather than descriptive in nature. This section of the handbook will outline these expectations.

**Form of the Project.** All Politics senior projects should have the following in common. First, it should be motivated by a *puzzle* or *problem*. A puzzle is something that doesn't make sense upon first glance or begs for further explanation. For example:

- Why did Argentina, a country blessed with plenty of national resources and high levels of social and political modernization, find it so difficult to erect a stable democracy?
- Has the global expansion of democracy in recent decades led to a more peaceful and orderly world as expected by “Democratic Peace Theory”?
- Why did France and Germany, having fought total wars in the preceding 30 years, choose to integrate their economies after WW2?
- What can political theory tell us about the meaning of freedom, the sources of political authority and the obligations of citizens to the state or society?
- How can we explain the absence of democratic breakdowns, so common in Western Europe and Latin America, in American political development?
- Why are African states so prone to civil war and ethnic conflict?

Second, your senior project must have a clearly stated research question. Your research question should be analytical in nature, not descriptive (in other words, reasonable people should be able to disagree about what the answer to your question is). Finally, all senior projects must have a clearly articulated methodology. Your methodology is your plan for how you're going to answer your question and what sorts of evidence you plan to gather to support your claims.

**Structure of the Project.** Research projects in politics usually follow a similar structure, and therefore, all senior projects should include the following elements. Deviations from this structure should be made in consultation with your advisor.

- *Abstract:* an abstract is a short summary of your completed research. An abstract should be no more than 300 words and should succinctly summarize the basic argument and findings of your paper.
- *Introduction:* the introduction to your senior project should describe the puzzle or problem that is basis of your paper, pose a clear research question, briefly summarize the argument

of the paper, and describe the methodology that you will use to answer your question. The introduction should conclude with a short (one-paragraph) road map that lays out the major sections of the paper.

- *Chapters*: the chapters of the senior projects are the main substantive sections of the paper that together constitute your argument. The contents of the body of the paper and the type of argument you make will vary depending on what subfield of political science your research lies in, what type of senior project you chose to write and the methodology.
- *Conclusion*: the conclusion of the paper should summarize the general findings of your project, articulate their significance (e.g. how the work you did contributes to scholarly or policy debates) and gesture toward further research or articulate additional questions that your analysis has raised.
- *Bibliography*: a bibliography is a list of all the material you consulted while preparing your senior project, regardless of whether or not a particular source is directly cited. Bibliographies should be arranged alphabetically, by the author's last name.

**Length and Formatting:** Part of the skills you will develop in writing a senior project relate to formatting and citation and being able to succinctly execute a piece of research. Thus, all senior projects should conform to the following length and formatting standards.

- *Length*: in general, you should aim for a senior project that is 12,-20,000 words in length. In exceptional circumstances, and in close consultation with your advisor, projects may exceed these guidelines. You should commit at the beginning of the project, to a target length within the above range.
- *Spacing, Margins and Font*: your senior project should be double-spaced, with one-inch margins, and written in a normal 12-point font.
- *Footnotes and Citation Style*: all references should be footnoted and the citation style consistent throughout the paper. The program does not require a particular kind of citation style and the decision on what to use should be made in consultation with your advisor. We recommend using either MLA (see the MLA Handbook) or Chicago (see the Chicago Manual of Style); handbooks for both are available at the Library:
- *Page Numbers*: please include page numbers on your project.

## PART II: PRIMARY ADVISOR AND BOARD MEMBERS

You should start developing your senior project ideas in your junior year. It is a good idea to pick classes in your junior year (especially 300-level classes) that will give you the chance to explore your ideas, and to practice organizing, investigating, and writing—and revising!—a 20+ page research paper. The more comfortable you are with writing, the easier the senior project process will be for you. In your courses listen for and think about puzzles and problems that you encounter in the class material, which could be the basis for your senior project.

Start talking about your senior project ideas in your junior year as well, with a number of your professors. The sooner you get started on thinking about your senior project, the more advice you will get as to where to find useful sources, and possibly even resources for you to conduct research over the summer before your senior year.

**Primary Advisor.** As you discuss your ideas, think about who it makes the most sense for you to work with as your primary advisor. Your primary advisor is the main person you will be working

with on the senior project. He/she will have expertise in the particular subject you've chosen and will be able to guide your research.

As you begin to narrow your senior project topic, think about which faculty member would be an ideal primary advisor, and before going into your senior year, confirm their willingness and availability to serve as your advisor. In most cases, your primary advisor will be a member of the Politics faculty. Exceptions to this rule are rare, and require the consent of the program chair. You will be asked near the end of spring semester of your junior year to provide the program with a short description of your proposed senior project topic and a list of potential advisors.

Different faculty members have different advising styles. It is important that you meet with your advisor early on in the process and make sure his/her expectations are clear.

**Board Members.** Your senior project board will consist of three faculty members, at least two of who should be faculty in the Political Studies program.

When choosing board members, think about who will be able to give you the most useful advice on your project based on their regional, disciplinary, or methodological expertise. Your board members may not be available to give you feedback on every draft of your senior project, but you should check in with each of them periodically to get feedback on how your research and thinking is progressing during both semesters.

### PART III: THE MIDWAY BOARD AND ORAL DEFENSE

**Midway board.** Your midway review should be scheduled before the end of classes in the first semester of your senior year (typically during moderation week), with each board member receiving written materials at least ONE week before the meeting. The purpose of the midway review is for you to receive as much feedback as possible on your progress and how you might edit/revise your work. The feedback you receive during the midway board will guide the revision and work you do on your senior project over winter break and spring semester.

Note: at the midterm you will not receive a letter grade, but a 'satisfactory' or 'unsatisfactory' evaluation of your senior project progress.

**Oral defense.** The final senior project board takes place between the deadline for senior project submissions and the end of the semester, usually during moderation week. In most cases, the same faculty members who served on your midway board will also serve on the final senior project board. You may opt to receive either a letter grade or a pass/fail grade for the project. If you choose the pass/fail option, you must declare so at the beginning of the final senior project board.

You will learn immediately after the oral defense if your senior project has passed, however, a final grade will not be determined until after the faculty consult as a group.

The grade you receive on the project will be filed with the registrar shortly after the oral defense and filled in on your transcript under PS 401 and PS 402.