PLSC 472: American Judicial Behavior

Research Module Summary

A bit less than half of the grade in this course is based upon *research modules*. These are short, focused reports of original research, organized around one of the weekly (or so) "themes" in the course. These themes are:

- Personal Attributes (September 29 - October 8)

- Political Ideology (October 13 - 22)

- Legal Influences (October 29 - November 10)

- Public Opinion (November 17 - 19)

- Separation of Powers (December 1 - 3)

Each student is required to complete three such modules before the end of the semester. Each research module will address a topic or question empirically, using data on the Court and the tools learned in class to offer an empirical answer to it. Some example topics (purely for illustration) include:

- Are female Supreme Court justices more likely to vote in support of sex discrimination claimants than their male counterparts?

- Are there regional differences in Supreme Court justices' votes in environmental cases?

- Are liberal justices more likely than conservatives to support the exercise of eminent domain in Takings Clause cases?

- Are justices who have served longer terms more likely to refuse to strike down existing precedent than justices who have been on the Court for less time?

- Do the Court's aggregate decisions tend to follow the "public mood" (liberalism or conservatism) of the population?

- Are Supreme Court justices more likely to rule in a liberal direction in cases involving the U.S. government when the president is a Democrat than when s/he is a Republican?

While there are no strict minimums or maximums, research modules will generally be 3-4 pages long, and will include 2-3 graphs and between 500 and 1000 words of text. They will be written in sections, with the first setting out the question to be investigated, the second describing the data and the empirical approach, and the third setting forth the findings. Modules on any topic can be completed at any time, though you will likely find it useful to have covered the material in class prior to completing the research module.

On October 6 and 8, we will "walk through" an example research module related to personal attribute theory; this will give you a clearer idea of what such an assignment might look like, how it will be organized, etc.