Trinity 410
Researching Critical Cases in International Relations
Fall 2025

Instructor: Dr. Mark Nieman

Time and Location: Wednesday 11am–1pm, Location available via Acorn

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Student Hours: M 11:45–1:45, Sidney Smith 3018

Overview and Objectives

Students apply the techniques and skills they have learned during their undergraduate career to develop and evaluate a causal theory of international relations on a topic aligning with their own research interests. The course introduces several theoretical and methodological tools that are used to understand and analyze a variety of major developments affecting contemporary international relations. Students examine the strengths and weaknesses of each research method and apply those that are most appropriate to their own original study. Students complete their research project in stages (research question, literature review and theory, research design) and receive feedback for each component. This feedback is then incorporated into the final paper. The goal is to complete a final paper that can be submitted to an undergraduate research journal or used as a writing sample for graduate study.

Learning Outcomes

At the end of this course, students should be able to:

- Describe analytical approaches to studying international relations.
- Critically read and evaluate scholarly work.
- Develop and evaluate analytical theories.
- Choose and apply an appropriate research design, identify or develop applicable measures, and select relevant cases to empirically evaluate theoretical implications.
- Conduct and present an independent research project.

Required Texts

There are no required textbooks for this class. All materials are available on Quercus.

Grading

Grades are based on in-class and take-home assignments, course engagement, and a research project. All required readings should be completed prior to class. Late assignments without an approved excuse are deducted 2.5 percentage points of their value per day; submissions are not accepted after 7 days (including weekends). Final marks follow the university grading scale and are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Marking Scheme

Assessment	Percentage
Course Engagement	15
In-class Assignments	
Research Question Group Discussion	5
Theory/Hypothesis Group Discussion	5
Research Design Group Discussion	5
Take-home Assignments	
Revised Research Question and Theory/Hypotheses	20
Final Research paper	50
Total	100

Course Engagement: This is a 400-level class and is treated as a seminar, with an expectation that everyone make thoughtful contributions to class discussion. Students are required to have read the week's assigned readings prior to class, are expected to describe the readings' theory and findings, and are able to critically discuss all readings (and complete in-class assignments) as to demonstrate a mastery of the material.

In-class Assignments: There are two in-class assignments. For each, students both present their assignment to a small peer group and give constructive feedback to their peers. Grades are based on having completed the materials and participating in the in-class discussion, as well as the quality of feedback provided to peers.

Research Question Group Discussion: Students upload a one-page research question to Quercus that they then present and discuss in small peer groups to revise and improve. The assignment must (1) clearly identify the broad topic and general research question that the student intends to answer and (2) describe how answering this question advances our knowledge within IR (i.e. what is the contribution). The research question must be analytical (i.e. not normative), relate to a process (i.e. ask *how* or *why*, not yes/no), and be able to be evaluated empirically (i.e. using cases and/or available data, not prospective). Students should *NOT* provide an answer to their question, nor describe cases, at this stage.

Theory and Hypothesis Group Discussion: Students upload a three- to five-page theory, with testable implications/hypotheses, to Quercus that they then present and discuss in small peer groups to revise and improve. The theory should clearly identify the dependent variable (topic to be explained) and the independent variable (factor that explains),

the causal mechanism (i.e. the *process* in which the variation in the independent variables causes variation in the dependent variable), and at least one testable hypothesis or implication (i.e. a one-sentence summary of what effect a change in the independent variable has on the dependent variable). That is, students should know what their conceptual variables are, why they expect to find a relationship, and describe the expected relationship. Students should also describe how their theory builds on existing research, i.e., incorporate a literature review describing at least 2 common existing explanations prior to detailing their own theory.

Research Design Group Discussion: Students upload a one- to three-page research to Quercus that they then present and discuss in small peer groups to revise and improve. The goal of the research design is to explain how they intend to evaluate and test their theory and hypotheses, and to do so in such a way that others can replicate their procedures and results. Students should describe their selected research method (e.g., regression, comparative case study, process tracing, etc) and sample (e.g., what are the cases, how are they aggregated in space and time), stating why these are appropriate for evaluating their theory. Students should also detail how they conceptualize and measure the dependent and independent variables, including data sources.

Take-home Assignments: The primary course output is an empirical research paper. The paper is completed in two steps: the first is a draft of the research question and theory that a student intends to study; the second is the completed project. Each assignment (including the final research paper) should be in narrative form (not a list) that is double-spaced, with 1-inch margins, in Times New Roman size 12 font, using in-text citations following the scientific, or "author-date", style (e.g., Smith 2024). Please consult the *Journal of Politics* (JOP) style guide for other formatting questions and issues.

Revised Research Question and Theory/Hypotheses: Students should take the peer feedback from the in-class assignment and submit a combined research question and theory/hypotheses (roughly four- to ten-pages) to the instructor. Students should specify a clear research question and describe how it relates to a topic within international relations. Next, they should briefly describe at least two common explanations from the existing literature and describe how their theory builds on or differs from them. Then, they should develop and discuss a generalizable theory that answers their research question. The theory should clearly link the independent variable to the dependent variable with a well-specified causal mechanism, and outline the testable implications (hypotheses).

Final Research Paper: Students are expected to carry out the empirical analysis described in their research design and combine it with the previous sections to create a complete research paper. The final paper should incorporate all feedback from the class, both from peers and the instructor. The completed manuscript should read as a journal article, with introduction (including the research question), literature review, theory, research design, results, and conclusion sections. There is no set length, but most research papers are 20–30 pages (maximum of 35 pages, including references). The goal is for the paper to be publishable in an undergraduate social science journal.

Schedule

September 2: Introduction and Research Question

Lave, Charles and James G. March. 1975. *An Introduction to Models in the Social Sciences.* New York: Harper and Row. Chapter 1, pp. 2–7.

King, Gary, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba. 1994. *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research.* Princeton University Press. Ch 1, pp. 14–19.

Diamond, Jared. 1999. *Guns, Germs, and Steel.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company. Epilogue, pp. 420–425.

September 9: Research Question and Project Organization

Research Question due.

In-class Assignment: Research Question Group Discussion.

Minkoff, Scott L. 2016. *A Guide to Developing and Writing Research Papers in Political Science.* pp. 3–19.

Loewenberg, Gerhard. 2010. Ten Questions to Ask Yourself to Edit Your Own Writing. p. 1.

Bashevkin, Sylvia. 2018. *Women as Foreign Policy Leaders: National Security and Gender Politics in Superpower America.* Oxford University Press. Chapter 1, pp. 1–30.

September 16: Theory Construction

Lave, Charles and James G. March. 1975. *An Introduction to Models in the Social Sciences.* New York: Harper and Row. Chapter 2–3, pp. 10–79.

Weeks, Jessica L. 2012. Strongmen and Straw Men: Authoritarian Regimes and the Initiation of International Conflict. *International Organization* 106(2): 326–347.

September 23: Theory Evaluation

Clarke, Kevin A. and David M. Primo. 2007. Modernizing Political Science: A Model-based Approach. *Perspectives on Politics* 5(4): 741–753.

Vasquez, John A. 1997. The Realist Paradigm and Degenerative versus Progressive Research Programs: An Appraisal of Neotraditional Research on Waltz's Balancing Proposition. *American Political Science Review* 91(4): 899–912.

Nieman, Mark David and Maxwell B. Allamong. 2023. Schools of Thought: Leader Education and Policy Outcomes. *Journal of Politics* 85(4): 1529–1547.

September 30: Case Selection

Theory and Hypotheses due.

In-class Assignment: Theory and Hypotheses Group Discussion.

Geddes, Barbara. 1990. How the Cases You Choose Affect the Answers You Get: Selection Bias in Comparative Politics. *Political Analysis* 2(1): 131–150.

Seawright, Jason and John Gerring. 2008. Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research *Political Research Quarterly* 61(2): 294–308.

October 7: Operationalizing Concepts

Revised Theory and Hypotheses due.

McMann, Kelly, Daniel Pemstein, Brigitte Seim, Jan Teorell, and Staffan Lindberg. 2022. Assessing Data Quality: An Approach and An Application. *Political Analysis* 30(3): 426–449.

De Bruin, Erica, Kristen A. Harkness, and Jun Koga Sudduth. 2024. Building Historically Oriented Datasets: A Practical Guide. *Qualitative & Multi-Method Research* 22(2): 69–78.

Leeds, Brett Ashely, Andrew G. Long, and Sara McLaughlin Mitchell. 2000. Reevaluating Alliance Reliability: Specific Threats, Specific Promises. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 44(5): 686–699.

October 14: Qualitative Methods

Gerring, John. 2004. What is a Case Study and What Is It Good For? *American Political Science Review* 98(2): 341–354.

Garcia-Montoya, Laura and James Mahoney. 2023. Critical Event Analysis in Case Study Research. *Sociological Methods & Research* 52(1): 480–524.

Ragin, Charles C. 1987. The Comparative Method. Berkeley, CA: University of CA Press. Ch 6, pp. 85–102.

October 21: Case Study Analysis

In-class Assignment: Research Design Group Discussion.

Ricks, Jacob I. and Amy H. Liu. 2018. Process-Tracing Research Designs: A Practical Guide. *PS: Political Science & Politics* 51(4): 842–846.

Carson, Austin and Keren Yarhi-Milo. 2017. Covert Communication: The Intelligibility and Credibility of Signaling in Secret. *Security Studies* 26(1): 124–156.

Milner, Helen V. and David B. Yoffie. 1989. Between Free Trade and Protectionism: Strategic Trade Policy and a Theory of Corporate Trade Demands. *International Organization* 43(2): 239–272.

October 28: No Class–Reading Week

November 4: Historical Analysis

Thies, Cameron G. 2002. A Pragmatic Guide to Qualitative Historical Analysis in the Study of International Relations. *International Studies Perspectives* 3(4): 351–372.

Subotić, Jelena. 2021. Ethics of Archival Research on Political Violence. *Journal of Peace Research* 58(3): 342–354.

Byman, Daniel. 2021. White Supremacy, Terrorism, and the Failure of Reconstruction in the United States. *International Security* 46(1): 53–103.

November 11: Experimental Design

Hyde, Susan D. 2015. Experiments in International Relations: Lab, Survey, and Field. *Annual Review of Political Science* 18: 403–424.

Mattes, Michaela and Jessica L. Weeks. 2019. Hawks, Doves, and Peace: An Experimental Approach. *American Journal of Political Science* 63(1): 53–66.

Henrich, Joseph. 2000. Does Culture Matter in Economic Behavior? Ultimatum Game Bargaining among the Machiguenga of the Peruvian Amazon. *American Economic Review* 90(4): 973–979.

November 18: Statistical Analysis

King, Gary, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts. 2013. How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression. *American Political Science Review* 107(2): 326–343.

Chyzh, Olga V. 2024. How to Stop Contagion: Applying Network Science to Evaluate the Effectiveness of Covid-19 Vaccine Distribution Plans. *Journal of Politics* 86(1): 18–35.

Martinez Machain, Carla. 2015. Air Campaign Duration and the Interaction of Air and Ground Forces. *International Interactions* 41(3): 539–564.

November 25: Mixed Methods

Final Paper due December 1.

Mir, Asfandyar and Dylan Moore. 2019. Drones, Surveillance, and Violence: Theory and Evidence from a US Drone Program. *International Studies Quarterly* 63(4): 846–862.

González, Yanilda and Lindsay Mayka. 2023. Policing, Democratic Participation, and the Reproduction of Asymmetric Citizenship. *American Political Science Review* 117(1): 263–279.

Signorino, Curtis S. and Ahmer Tarar. 2006. A Unified Theory and Test of Extended Immediate Deterrence. *American Journal of Political Science* 50(3): 586–605.

Course Policies

Student Responsibilities in the Learning Process: Students are expected to complete all required readings on a topic prior to completing that topic's assessment and complete all assessments on time. This means accessing the materials with sufficient time to complete assessments prior to deadlines. In the event that a student has questions concerning the material, they should formulate specific questions to ask the professor via office hours or email with sufficient time for a response prior to assessment deadlines (i.e. emailed questions should be sent at least 24 hours prior to a deadline, excluding weekends).

Classroom Conduct: Students are expected to participate in class in a thoughtful and respectful manner while in the pursuit of knowledge accumulation. Generally, this means engaging with one another's ideas and treating others as you would like to be treated as well as *not* treating others how you would *not* like to be treated. Please see university policies on freedom of speech and discrimination and harassment.

Accommodations: Please discuss any special needs with the instructor at the start of the semester, for example to request reasonable accommodations if an academic requirement conflicts with your religious practices and/or observances. Those seeking accommodations based on disabilities should complete the appropriate documentation with Student Life Programs and Services.

Academic Misconduct: All suspected cases of academic dishonesty will be investigated following procedures outlined in the Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters. For questions or concerns about what constitutes appropriate academic behaviour or appropriate research and citation methods, please reach out to the instructor. Additional information on academic integrity is available from other institutional resources such as the College Writing Centres, the Academic Success Centre, or the U of T Writing Website.

A special note on plagiarism, which is the act of representing directly or indirectly other's work as your own. It can involve presenting someone's speech, wholly or partially, as your own; quoting without acknowledging the true source of the material; copying and handing in another person's work with your name on it; submitting materials generated or composed by artificial intelligence; or similar infractions. Even indirect quotations, paraphrasing, etc., can be plagiarism unless sources are properly cited.

Copyright: Course materials, including recorded lectures and slides, are the instructor's intellectual property covered by the Copyright Act, RSC 1985, c C-42. Course materials posted on Quercus are for registered students only and may not be posted to other websites or media without the express permission of the instructor. Unauthorized reproduction, copying, or use of online recordings constitute copyright infringement.

The instructor reserves the right to modify the syllabus to reflect the pace of the course.