PSC542 International Conflict

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Office: 3039 Houser Hall Class Hours: 1:00-3:30pm, Tuesdays
Office Hours: by appointment Classroom: 306 Lloyd Hall

Course Description

This seminar is designed to familiarize the student with the theoretical and empirical literature on the onset, expansion, and consequences of war as well as the conditions for peace. Among the theories reviewed will be the balance of power, power transition, formal theories on war, the territorial explanation of war, and the democratic peace. Emphasized will be the role of alliances, arms races, and crisis escalation in generating conflict processes, and the impact of norms, regimes, and institutions on building peace. The goal of this seminar is the development of critical thinking, analysis, and application.

Course Objectives

After successfully completing this course, each student should be able to:

- Discuss and analyze various theories of the causes of international conflict
- Craft a political science research design to test the theory, including the derivation of hypotheses, conceptualization and measurement, sampling, various types of data collection, and statistical inference
- Identify weaknesses in existing published studies
- Suggest ways of correcting errors in previous research

In addition to learning the course material on international conflict, after successful completion of the activities in this course, students should also be able to

- Critically discriminate between reliable and less reliable information in their decision-making
- Understand the scientific method and critically evaluate scientific information
• Develop effective written communication skills.
• And develop skills in working together in team activities.

Required Readings

• see weekly schedule below

Course Requirements

The requirements of the course are as follows with relative weight noted:

• 20% Attendance and Discussion
• 20% Biweekly presentations
• 30% Replications (two–15% each)
• 30% Research design

I require attendance. The class meets only once per week, so please make arrangements to be in class and prepared for every single meeting. If you must miss more than one class meeting, then please drop the course immediately. Missing two or more classes without an approved excuse may be grounds for a failing grade in the course.

The main task each week will be a discussion of the readings. We will begin with a brief overview of the subject area followed by student-led discussions of specified topics. Critical analyses of the readings are expected; discussions should outline both the flaws and relative merits of the readings as well as possible extensions and connections to other areas of the field.

Each student will be responsible for presenting a required reading on a rotating basis, most likely once every other week. These presentations can use PowerPoint or Beamer for support but do not need to do so. Each presentation should address the (1) main points of the article, (2) the research design, (3) the results, and (4) the importance of the article as it relates to the field.

The first week of readings includes a paper that addresses suggested changes in the Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID) project [Gibler et al., 2015]. Students are to pick TWO empirical papers from the literature on international conflict and apply the new dataset to the papers. The replication should be two or three pages discussing the procedures used for replication and an analysis of the findings, including statistical output. One replication should be completed by the end of February. Both replications are due by the first week of April.

A fourth requirement of the course is the development of a research design on a topic related to the course and of quality comparable to the start of a conference paper. The papers should explore an original topic and outline the appropriate testing of a hypothesis developed from the literature on conflict as covered in the class. These papers are due during finals week.

Email Policy

Email is a convenient way to continue contact between professor and student outside of class. Students should take advantage of this opportunity but should also do so in a professional manner. I will not reply to emails that do not include a salutation (“Dear Prof...” or “Hello
Dr...”). I will not reply to emails that are hastily written and filled with grammatical errors and misspellings. I will also not respond to emails that ask for answers to questions that can easily be found on the syllabus or the class blog. Last, if you have a question regarding lectures or assigned material that you just cannot seem to master, then ask a question in class, come to me during office hours, or post a question on the blog for other students to answer. Email is best for 1-2 sentence responses, and conceptual questions do not lend themselves well to email.

Cell Phones

Cell phones are a distraction to both the professor and to fellow students, even if the phone is only used for texting. You should TURN YOUR CELL PHONES OFF! before entering the classroom.

Academic Dishonesty Policy

I take academic integrity very seriously and will not tolerate plagiarism or cheating. There are very serious penalties for cheating at UA that could have consequences far beyond your college career. Cheating of any form is a really stupid thing to do so don’t try, and, if you have any doubts about what cheating is, ask me or examine the UA policies (see below).

The Code of Academic Conduct in the University of Alabama Undergraduate Catalog defines plagiarism and other acts of academic dishonesty as follows:

- Plagiarism: representing the words, data, works, ideas, computer programs or output, or anything not generated in an authorized fashion, as one’s own
- Cheating: using or attempting to use unauthorized materials, information, study aids, or computer-related information
- Fabrication: presenting as genuine any invented or falsified citation or material
- Misrepresentation: falsifying, altering, or misstating the contents of documents or other materials related to academic matters, including schedules, prerequisites, and transcripts.

Disabilities Policy

Federal law mandates the provision of services at the university-level to qualified students with disabilities. Please inform the instructor immediately if special circumstances need to be discussed.
Class Schedule

01/19 (Tuesday): Conceptualizing Conflict

01/26 (Tuesday): Territorial Issues

02/02 (Tuesday): Alliances

02/09 (Tuesday): Arms Races

02/16 (Tuesday): Deterrence and Crisis Escalation
02/23 (Tuesday): Rivalries


03/01 (Tuesday): Bargaining and Conflict

- D. M. Gibler. State development, parity, and international conflict. Working Paper

03/08 (Tuesday): War Expansion


03/15 (Tuesday): No class—Spring Break

03/22 (Tuesday): Democratic Peace


03/29 (Tuesday): Criticisms of the Democratic Peace

04/05 (Tuesday): Mechanisms of the Democratic Peace


04/12 (Tuesday): Audience Costs


04/19 (Tuesday): Alternatives to the Democratic Peace

- Michael Mousseau. Coming to terms with the capitalist peace. *International Interactions*, 2010

04/26 (Tuesday): Territorial Peace


05/03 (Tuesday): Review