Students who enroll in Government 4949 have created an impressive record of achievement during their first three years of study at Cornell. Your reward for having talent and working hard, then further completing a major project that wins honors is that you will forever carry special distinction from this department. Your obligation to us is to do your very best work, and to follow the rules: in particular, the honor code and strictures against plagiarism.

**Govt 4949 is a seminar; attendance and class participation are required.** We will meet collectively to discuss research techniques and problems, and for you to constructively critique each other’s proposals. Much of your work, of course will be with your faculty mentor.

**By the end of the course, you will have completed a research design and literature review.** These are the major requirements for the class during fall semester, and the work on which your fall grade will be based. The more you can do this semester, the better. If you can complete the introduction, definition of key terms, a focused review of the relevant literature, description of methods to be used, selection of cases, and preliminary investigation of data availability, you will be in good shape for the intense research and writing of the spring semester. Much of what you write this semester can be folded into the thesis (typically it becomes chapter one).

**Our central task in this seminar** is to help you formulate an appropriate question for an honors thesis, one that marries your intellectual passions to a workable research project. This is no easy task, but one this class and faculty mentors can help with. The trick is not biting off too much, but on the other hand not undertaking too little. An overly ambitious project will frustrate students in what should be a crowning activity of their college career. Too little challenge will be equally disappointing. You will be living with this thesis for the next eight months or so. If you become bored with it, your research will be extremely tedious. Some degree of passion always goes into the selection of a research topic, even though in the actual writing you must restrain your passion in deference to the standards of scholarship in the social sciences.

**It is critical that each student find a faculty member who has both the expertise and opportunity to be your thesis mentor.**

You will consult often with your advisor, during both fall and spring semesters. But you should also pick the brains of any other relevant faculty member in or outside the department for advice and bibliographical recommendations. The more such consultations, the better. The few students who fail to complete a thesis or to receive honors almost always spend too little time talking with their advisors, and listening to their advice. Government faculty are listed at
http://government.arts.cornell.edu/faculty/subfield/ but there are also other Cornell faculty in related areas of study who are members of “the field of government,” and there may also be faculty in other parts of the university who can provide useful information (though a government department faculty member must be the major thesis adviser). Again, the more faculty you consult on the thesis, the better.

**Your thesis question must meet several conditions:**

First, it must be original in the sense that no one has asked precisely this question, with this degree of specificity, or applied it to this particular case or circumstance. This requires a lot of background reading on the general topic. You must investigate through books, scholarly journal articles, and, of course, conversations with faculty advisers, whether someone else has had the same idea and already researched your question in an exhaustive way. In the process, you may find problems or limitations with the existing work that allow you to make a valuable contribution to knowledge, or you may discover a different question that interests you. There is a messy, serendipitous quality to almost all research and you should not shy away from exploiting more attractive opportunities if you run across them.

Second, your interest in the topic must grow out of prior knowledge gained through courses, reading, conversation with knowledgeable people, and perhaps other experience (you should not, for example, undertake a topic related to the U.S. Congress unless you have had a course on Congress or will be taking one this semester).

Third, the topic must be conceived in such a way that you can convince others that the question is both **interesting and important**. At the same time it must be sufficiently limited in scope that you can do the research and write the thesis in two semesters.

After you arrive at your central question, the **next (fourth) step involves methodology.** You must make decisions about how you are going to state and answer your question or test your hypothesis. You must of course begin by defining the key terms in your question (a very important early step). The definition of a term may have two components: a concept, and an operationalization. For example, a question about the conditions for gender equality in nation-states might define gender equality (the concept) as “roughly equal access to education, employment, and political representation between males and females,” and then operationalize gender equality as a ratio close to one (unity) in comparisons of male and female educational attainment, income, and voting participation (and/or office holding) in the population over 18.

There are a wide variety of methodological approaches from which you may choose, depending, in part, on the nature of your question. The usual, but by no means the only, practice is to pay attention to the methods that have been utilized by scholars whose work comes closest to your topic. For example, if your question asks something about how people make their voting decisions in a presidential election, and most of the literature on that topic uses survey data, then you should probably use that kind of evidence as well. (But you are not limited to that kind of evidence; in fact, scholarly practice in the social sciences today prefers to use a variety of methods and evidence, often mixing “qualitative” with “quantitative” evidence, or combining large-n analysis with case studies.)
One of the most important phases of methodology choice is the **selection of cases**. You must decide whether you will use a “**population**” (say, all 50 states of the U.S., all members of the European Union, or all countries in the world), or a **sample** of an entire population (as in survey research, or your own sampling from a defined population). OR, you may decide to focus on one **particular case**, or on a **set of carefully chosen cases** in which you will test one or more hypotheses about causation (for example, the hypothesis, “presidential democracies are more likely to engage in interstate wars more than parliamentary democracies, ceteris paribus” might begin with a large-n analysis of wars fought by both groups of countries, but then focus more closely on countries in the two groups that are most, or least, warlike).

The choice of a few cases to compare is especially fraught with methodological issues. Obviously, the more cases examined, the more generalizable the findings. At the same time, general knowledge is built on analysis of particular cases, and it may be that much more in-depth exploration can be done in one or a few cases than in a large data set during two semesters. The government department has had many excellent theses based on an in-depth analysis of one case (for example, the Russo-Japanese conflict over the Kurile Islands, or the role of Paul Nitze in the creation of U.S. nuclear weapons policy); a comparison of a small number of cases (for example, methods and outcomes of several post-conflict truth- and- justice tribunals, or regulation of the internet in Russia and China); as well as theses based on a large-n population-based study (say, of all Supreme Court cases since 1945 in which the Solicitor General filed an amicus curiae brief). Some of the best theses (and books) have included large-n analyses of many cases, supplemented with case studies that illustrate the relationships at work, and make the theory come alive.

**The fifth step is to start collecting the evidence** you will need. Unfortunately, the evidence we would like to find is sometimes simply not available or, if available, is flawed in ways that make its relevance doubtful or inconclusive. Not a few research projects have been abandoned at this stage. Many more have been reworked so that the question, appropriately reformulated, can be addressed by the available evidence. The earlier that you can reach this stage, the more confidence you will have that the thesis is, in fact, viable.

**The final step**, mostly in the second semester, is **the actual writing of the thesis**. At this stage, you will reduce everything you have discovered in your research to a written text of c. 50-80 pages.

Although formats vary, **most theses will include**: (1) a clear statement, in the first few pages, of the research question and the reason(s) why the question is important both to scholars and a general audience; (2) definition of key concepts and their operationalizations; (3) a concise review of the existing literature in which you identify both the major works in your area of research and those, perhaps more narrowly conceived, which are closest to the specific topic you have chosen; (4) a description of the evidence/data you will analyze to answer the question (and the sources to be consulted in gathering that evidence), as well as the methods you will use in analyzing what you have found; (5) presentation of the results of your research, including summary and interpretation of the evidence (acknowledging alternative meanings and possibilities); and
(6) A conclusion in which you briefly summarize findings and go on to place your research in a broader framework, suggesting, for example, what might be the implications of your findings for broader political questions, and/or what might be useful directions that others might pursue.

The thesis proposal you turn in this semester will lay out points 1-4. If well executed, this proposal will become the first chapter, or two, of your thesis. Typically, these are 15-17 pp long. On Blackboard you will find several examples of proposals turned in by honors students last year, as well as chapters and a few entire theses that will give a good idea of what a good thesis should look like.

You should by all means look over theses from the recent past, or theses on topics similar to yours, to get an idea of standard thesis organization in our department. There will, of course, be some flexibility in the way they are organized and executed.

In some theses, the argument will be structured through analytical narrative exposition; in others, tabular presentation and analysis of aggregated data will be the focus of attention. If your question leads you to count things, the counts may be portrayed in simple contingency tables, graphs or histograms, or in a table of statistical results (or all three). If mainly a narrative exposition, you still may find a table (of words only) a good way to clearly summarize your findings. The Kate Turabian guide to presentation of data and argument is useful here.

Final papers (expanded proposals) are due by December 10. Your adviser and I will issue a consensus grade on this semester’s work. Looking at the introductory chapters of previous theses may serve as a model for your end of semester proposal. This course carries four credits, and the work completed this semester should be at least equivalent to that of a 4000-level class.

Evaluation of the Thesis by the Department of Government (theses will be due mid-April):

In determining whether or not your thesis will be awarded honors, and if so at what level, the Undergraduate Committee weights both your scholastic record (as evidenced by your transcript) and reports from the faculty assigned to read your thesis. The latter are more heavily weighted than grade point average in the major.

Summary Appendix: Standards of Evaluation for Government Honors Theses

The political science discipline embraces a wide variety of quantitative, qualitative, normative and conceptual forms of research. Your thesis should feature the type of research approach/methodology/design that is appropriate to your field and your research problem. You should consult with your Advisor to ensure that you are working within the conventions established by the relevant academic literature. Although there are many differences between the
various types of political science theses, we can nevertheless identify the features that they should have in common.

1. **Purpose.** In the honors thesis, students build on the knowledge and skills they have acquired over the course of their college years, demonstrate their mastery of a specialized body of academic literature, meet deadlines, utilize relevant research methods in an appropriate manner, produce original results or conclusions, analyze data/texts, and generally to advance arguments that are supported by evidence.

2. **Length and Format.**  c. 50-80 pages. References should follow the *Chicago Manual of Style*, as presented in the Kate Turabian manual (ordered at Buffalo St. Books). The table of contents, text, tables, graphs, bibliography and other matter should also conform to *Chicago* style. Within that style, citations can be in-text (in parentheses) or at the bottom of the page. Both are described, with examples, in the Turabian manual. Bottom of page citations are more user-friendly, but either can be used so long as they follow the prescribed form in that reference book. It should be redundant to say this by now, but you must not make up your own citation style. Citations must follow prescribed forms in Turabian.

3. **Presentation.** The thesis must be well-organized and meticulously edited for spelling, grammar, punctuation, coherence, and style. One cannot say this too often.

4. **Originality.** An honors student will probably not be able to explore completely new intellectual territory, given the time constraints. However, a thesis must have an original dimension. It could, for example, ask a new question within a defined set of problems, develop a fresh perspective on an established puzzle, take a research question that has been already identified in the literature and address it in a creative manner, add new features to existing studies, or provide a detailed and theoretically-informed analysis of a little-known but important case. The student must, in short, demonstrate a capacity for innovative thinking and critical analysis, clearly establish an individual approach to the research problem, and systematically build support for a proposition. The thesis may sometimes build on the student’s previous work, but must differ substantially from that earlier work.

5. **Rigor.** The thesis argument must be developed out of a sustained dialogue with the appropriate academic literature. All sources must be fully noted. The thesis research should be conducted systematically according to the research protocols of the field in which it is situated. The conclusions must build logically on the evidence or textual interpretations presented in the main body of the text. Alternative explanations must be acknowledged.

6. **Breadth and quality of research.** The honors thesis represents an effort equivalent to two courses taken over two semesters. It is therefore distinct from a research paper written as a course requirement, since it must demonstrate mastery of a comprehensive body of relevant literature, deal with more complex ideas or problems, ask more probing questions, present more detailed evidence or textual interpretation, and generate more insightful conclusions.
Reading for This Semester (aside from Blackboard items and past theses that interest you, on reserve in Kroch Library/Olin)

Writing Manuals:

In addition to the Writing Pointers and the other writing documents on Blackboard, you should buy


*b) William Strunk, Jr., and E.B. White, _The Elements of Style_ (Illustrated by Maira Kalman, Penguin, 2007). Section five is particularly useful. The examples are amusing, and the Maira Kalman illustrations are very fine. If not this edition, get the most recent.

d) Cuba, Lee. _A Short Guide to Writing About Social Science_. 4rd ed. New York: Longman, 2001 may also be helpful, but is not required.

The first two, and the Gerring book below, are ordered at Buffalo Street Books (in the Dewitt Building). You can call them and pay in advance, in which case your copies will be delivered to you during our first class. Alternatively, you can go down and pick them up as soon as you arrive in Ithaca.

Methods and ways of thinking:

*John Gerring, _Social Science Methodology: A Unified Framework_, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Chapters in Gerring will be required reading. Other books that might be helpful are:


On reserve for you on Blackboard are several useful articles about concept development, case selection, and ways to display data. Please read the Brady “Art of Political Science” article on diagramming data before the week session on data analysis.