

PLSC / SOC 497
Baumgartner and McCarthy
Fall 2002-Spring 2003

Outline for term paper projects

I. Think seriously about your title.

It should encapsulate not only the topic but also hint at the results. That is, it should refer to the dependent variable and also to the most important dependent variable(s), if possible. Ex: “The Effect of Cycles of Protest on Government Attention to Topic X.” Note that the dependent variable here is government attention to Topic X, but we also note the most important explanatory variable: cycles of protest. A subtitle is optional and may refer to the most important data sources, for example.

II. State the problem clearly in an introductory section.

Give a concise statement of the puzzle you will attempt to solve. What causes X? Various rival hypotheses, or theories from the literature, may be mentioned here. Then be sure to state clearly your own theory of what causes X. (Note that at the beginning of your writing you should clearly have the problem in mind, but you will not yet know your most powerful theoretical findings. You may revise this towards the end when you have your firm conclusions. Sometimes the first section of the paper is what you write last, chronologically.)

III. Research design / strategy.

Explain in detail your research strategy here. This should include discussions of how you measure each concept called for in the theory. An appendix going over details is ok, but the body of the paper should address questions such as how you measure each variable, where the data come from, and any evidence you can gather about how reliable and valid these measures are of the underlying conceptual variable they are designed to capture. If your project includes sampling, discuss sampling procedures here. If it includes secondary data sources, explain those. If it involves systematic coding of variables from these sources, explain the procedures (maybe also referring to an appendix with the coding rules made explicit). In short, this section lays out the intellectual strategy you are going to follow in the next sections, and explains these procedures in detail. Maybe you use a data source taken from the literature. Explain. In short,

this section should allow the reader to understand exactly what you did to present the evidence you are going to present in the next sections.

IV. Review the essentials of the literature.

For the purposes of this paper, you should not be focusing on an extensive literature review, but you **MUST** identify the essential works in the area. Especially helpful are a few high quality studies that present chronologies of public policy or histories of the issue-area or organizational domain. Note that articles in the main political science and sociology journals and books published with university presses are likely to be much more useful than other sources, though there are exceptions to this rule. Work with the instructors to identify a small number (6-10) of bibliographical resources. Note that sociological abstracts, social science citation index, and jstor.org can be especially helpful in finding references. Do not get swamped with an all-encompassing literature review. By the same token, do not fail to identify some key sources.

V. Evidence and Findings

Having laid out your problem, your theoretical approach, and your research design, now present your findings. Typically, you must first explain how the theory will be tested or illustrated, specifically. So perhaps you will look at the chronology of the dependent variable (say, congressional attention to your topic), and compare that with the relevant independent variables (organizational growth, other factors you may find relevant, or that other authors have argued in the literature). Show the data. Illustrate the findings with graphs and figures. Present tables showing the results. We will pay a lot of attention in class, with examples from class and from others supplied by the instructors, of clear and unclear charts, figures, tables, and data presentations. Some complicated ones may be put off to an appendix, for example if you want to have a chronology of major legislation in the area, presenting a lot of textual material in a long table organized chronologically. Present your findings as clearly as possible.

VI. Interpretation

What do these results show? What do they demonstrate? Do they confirm your theory? Disconfirm it completely? Slightly bother you? Discuss the findings and their implications for the answer to your question. Did your research design allow you to nail down the question completely, or are there perhaps rival hypotheses or explanations that you cannot exclude? Discuss how strong your findings are, what they show, and what they do not show.

VII. Conclusion

Having done this study, what more do we know now about the dependent variable? More broadly, what does this case tell us about American politics and society? Be sure in the

conclusion to discuss not only your own findings, but what implications they have more broadly. Conclusions should address both methodological issues (what we can or cannot know from this type of research design, for example) and substantive issues (how responsive is Congress to social movements, for example).

VIII. Bibliography

Author. Date. Title. Place: Publisher.

Use the right formats for APSA or ASA styles.

Don't skip anything. Don't mess up the citation styles: it looks unprofessional.

IX. Appendices

If appropriate, include your data coding rules, sampling procedures, other detailed lists of things here. You may have several appendices, numbered A, B, C....

X. Abstract (this will eventually go at the beginning of your paper)

Summary of all of the above, 200 words max. Focus on clear statement of the problem; summary of the approach (quickly, only the essentials); statement of relevant literature; findings; implications. Note the word limit. No exceptions.