Contemporary Puzzles in Politics and Economics

Instructor - Ben Ansell  (Tuesdays 11:30 – 1)

This course intends to provide students with both a broad overview of recent literature in political economy and the skills to apply academic reasoning to real-world puzzles. Each week we examine either three to four articles or excerpts from a book, in either political science or economics, and discuss in class the substantive question the authors are examining, the methods they use to obtain answers, and the validity of the conclusions they draw. As the class learns how to identify interesting and manageable puzzles, each student will draw up a research plan that outlines a substantive question in political economy and provides a blueprint for how to undertake this research. The class then meets to discuss each student’s research plans and to offer criticism and advice. Each student should produce a 5000 word term research project for the class, analyzing a theoretical or empirical puzzle in political economy.

The classes are split into two sections: comparative political economy and international affairs. Within each of these sections, each week will focus on a specific puzzle and examine how a number of articles, or a short book, analyze and answer this puzzle. Although the quantity of reading is relatively light, students must be sure to read each article in greater depth than is typical, being sure to note how puzzles are defined, the method authors use to attack these problems, and the robustness of their conclusions. One week will be set aside to discuss the ongoing research plans.

Week One: Introduction:

In the first class, the philosophy behind the course is introduced. In particular, it is emphasized that the ‘problem-solving’ method of research involves three key decisions: how to demarcate a puzzle of interest, how to choose an appropriate theory and method with which to analyze it, and how to address alternative explanations. The introductory class will also involve an explanation of the course requirements and a guide on how to approach the course readings.

Part One: Comparative Political Economy

Week Two: Why do states have such different welfare policies?


**Week Three: Why has there been increasing wage inequality over the last few decades?**


**Week Four: What causes crime and corruption?**


**Week Five: Why is monetary policy set in different manners in different countries?**


**Week Six: Discussion of Class Research Proposals**
Week Seven: What explains differences in expenditure on education?


Part Three: International Politics and Economics

Week Eight: Why is the gap between developing and developed states not closing?


Week Nine: What explains people’s opinions on globalization?


Week Ten: Why do states (or non-state actors) sign treaties?


**Week Eleven: When do sanctions work?**


**Week Twelve: When does arms control work?**

