

# TWO: LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

## The First Step: Choosing a Topic

Hopefully, you use the spring and summer before your senior year to think about a research topic that fascinates you. At this point, your interests can be incredibly broad—but remember, this is the earliest stage of your research. The process eventually entails that you will narrow down your interests to a workable project. Here are some tips for choosing a good topic:

- **Choose what fascinates you.** This is *your* project, it will consume most of your senior year. Take ownership of your project early on and pick a topic that excites you, but that you can also envision committing yourself to for six months. Think about topics you discussed in your coursework—could you expand on some of those ideas for thesis?
- **Pay attention to the world around you.** How has politics come up in your everyday life? Look to the news, your friends, local issues—what issues come up? What’s the debate? What questions or puzzles need to be solved?
- **Ground yourself.** Make sure that you are choosing a political science topic. Politics is wide-ranging. Can you think of your topic as belonging to one of our subfields: American Politics, Public Administration, International Relations, Comparative Politics, Public Law, Political Theory?
- **Brainstorm.** Don’t force one topic. Students usually go through multiple iterations of their project in which where they begin in September is very different than when they write the paper. Take the time to write out your ideas. Don’t be afraid to write down 5 to 10 topics that interest you.
- **Look ahead.** Perhaps most crucial is to think ahead with your topic. Can you sensibly write 30 to 40 pages on this idea? Have political scientists written about these issues before? What type of evidence will you collect? Will this eventually bore you in the next six months?

Again, your research topic does not have to be specific yet. In the next section, we discuss moving from topic to research question. Talk with friends, professors, and family to see which topics are the most interesting (and could provide the starting point for a strong thesis). Once you have decided on a topic, you are ready for the next step.

## From Topic to Research Question

What is the difference between a research topic and a research question? A topic is a broad subject area while a research question is much narrower. A research question is a specific problem or puzzle that can be addressed with evidence in the typical length of a senior thesis. The research question deals with a narrow topic, identifies a clear causal relationship, is anchored in a discipline, it and is testable with a valid research method.

- **A clear causal relationship.** A research question usually identifies a puzzle by working with two major concepts in which you'll investigate a cause and effect. Research questions can be written a multitude of different ways, but ultimately it will be narrowed down to a cause and effect relationship. Remember, it is a question, so it should be phrased as an open-ended puzzle asking if two ideas connect to one another.
- **What's meant by being "anchored in the discipline"?** Developing a political science research question requires situating your topic within the debates and literature of our discipline. Political science professors around the country publish scholarly articles and books where they outline their own research. Your topic will be structured on the shoulders of this work.
- **Consider narrowing your question to a specific time period and geographic location.** You can't take on the whole world. Often times, thesis projects are focused on a very narrow time period or geographic location. Think about it: you cannot sensibly answer a question that applies to the entire nation, state, or even city. Is it possible to investigate your idea in a local area? in a specific time period? Will this help you in terms of coming up with evidence down the line.
- **Make sure the question is *crystal* clear.** The research question is the heart of your thesis. In early months, students often have a convoluted and wordy research question. Your research question should be narrowed down to a one-sentence, concise statement where your two topics are clearly identifiable.

Finally, remember that you're in charge of answering this question. You must be at least somewhat confident that this question will lead to a feasible, practical project. Don't make your life harder than it has to be, pick a question that you can provide evidence for later on.

## Answering the Question with the Argument

The argument is simply your answer to the research question. Perhaps differently than any other paper you have written before, both the research question and argument should be clearly articulated in the opening pages of your thesis. Thus, while we are doing this work to ensure your project is viable, you will be explicitly presenting your question and argument in the introduction to your thesis. Typically, the exposition and identification of your question and argument should be around 3-5 pages in your final product.

- **Like your question, the argument is *crystal* clear.** If the question is the heartbeat of your thesis, the argument is the heart of the thesis. Like the research question, the argument should be narrowed down to a one-sentence, concise statement.
- **Your question and argument should clearly connect.** Since we do a lot of work on the question and argument separately, sometimes they do not connect. Make sure that your question and argument directly answer one another. They should both be one-sentence long, but write them down side-by-side, it should make sense together!
- **Do not introduce a new idea or concept.** Do not bring a new idea into the fold with the argument. The argument is a definitive statement about how the causal relationship you first raised with the research question. Whatever research question you end up with, it can