**Tufts-in-Washington Program**
**Research proposal guidelines**

## I. BASIC REQUIREMENTS OF THE PROPOSAL

Your proposal should include the following components:

- A clear statement about the research question(s) motivating the proposed research (that is, what is the purpose – not, please note, the "topic" – of this research)
- A clear statement about the hypothesis or hypotheses to be examined (that is, the proposed answer(s) to the question(s) posed)
- A brief sketch of what makes the research questions interesting and the hypothesis/es plausible (that is, what do we know about the way the world works that makes your questions worth asking and your proposed answers worth exploring)
- A brief description of the research strategy to be pursued (that is, what research methods will you employ and what sort of data will you collect and analyze)
- A rationale for doing this project in DC (that is, how will being in DC for the semester facilitate your research)

You must fit all of this information into no more than two double-spaced pages of prose. That means we want to see good, concise, clear writing, in addition to the clear thinking that must go into the elaboration of these required elements of your research proposal.

## II. SOME TIPS ON GETTING A RESEARCH QUESTION

**Question 1: What is the difference between a research topic and a research question?**
Students typically start with a topic for their research – the role of interest groups in democratic societies, the development of alliances between former adversaries, the participation of women in emerging democracies. Good research proposals require getting past this topic stage, however. Topics don't give any form to the proposed project, nor do they typically lend themselves to clearly defined social science inquiry. Instead, they imply that one is going to look at *every* facet of the phenomena in question. Good research, though, requires drawing boundaries and focusing one's analytical attention. So, for instance, if the role of interest groups is too broad and unbounded to lend itself to clear inquiry, one might instead consider examining why the leaders of some group chose to support legislation opposed by a majority of the group's members. What theories about membership organizations and political leadership might shed light on such behavior? Or, while the participation of women in emerging democracies is an amorphous subject, the question of how women in one country borrowed repertoires of action from women in another country might produce a perfectly fine project. What factors are known to facilitate the diffusion of repertoires of action? Which contextual variations across cases affect the likelihood that actors in one sphere will (fail to) learn from actors in another sphere, and to what effect? In short, your research question must be more focused than a general topic, and that focus typically comes from thinking concretely about some phenomena of interest (e.g., leadership-membership dynamics, repertoires of action) and the factors that give rise to these phenomena.

**Question 2: What's the right scale and scope?**
An important corollary to the points made above about the difference between research topics and research questions is that the question(s) you pose must be appropriate to the scale of the project at hand.

Some research questions provide perfectly fine foundations for books, but these typically would be perfectly *dismal* foundations for a term-long undergraduate research paper. As you formulate your research proposal for your application, you will do well to remember that you are writing a paper, not a book. Think focus, not expand. Think specific answers, not sweeping statements. Think feasible, not impossible, given the time (and other) constraints of a semester spent in the Tufts-in-Washington program.

## III. SOME TIPS ON CONSTRUCTING A GOOD HYPOTHESIS

**Question 1: What is a hypothesis?**

Hypotheses are formal statements expressing our expectations about the relationship between some phenomena of interest. They are intrinsically *relational* in character, in that they specify how some phenomenon depends on (is influenced by) some other phenomenon.[1] As such, hypotheses are also *explanatory* statements. They do not merely detail some phenomenon ("the organization of interest groups") but propose an explanation for that phenomenon ("the organization of interest groups increases when communication costs decrease"). More formally, hypotheses link *dependent variables* (in this case, "interest groups") with *independent variables* ("communication costs"). Finally, since hypotheses are in effect "educated guesses"[2] about the relationship between the phenomena of interest, it is always possible that our hypotheses are wrong.[3] That possibility underscores the need for *empirical evidence* in the ultimate evaluation of a hypothesis' validity. Even hypotheses firmly grounded in plausible (even logically convincing) theories require empirical support for us to be convinced of their explanatory power.

**Question 2: What makes for a good hypothesis?**

Constructing good hypotheses requires clear thinking. The biggest barrier to articulating a good hypothesis is typically "confusion about the relationship that is to be tested."[4] Johnson, et al. offer six characteristics of good hypotheses, which are summarized here:[5]

1. *Hypotheses are empirical statements.* Keep yourself to statements about things that *are*, not things that *should be.* Normative claims – statements about what ought to be – do not make good hypotheses because they defy empirical examination. So, for example, "Interest groups are vital to democracy" fails as an empirical statement. It may in fact be true, but as stated it defies empirical verification.[6]

2. *Hypotheses address generalities.* Good hypotheses seek to explain general relationships rather than the specific circumstances of a singular case. Thus, a hypothesis that proposed a relationship between, say, campaign contributions and legislative voting would be more effective (that is, it would add more to our knowledge once subjected to analysis) than a hypothesis that simply sought to tell us that a particular roll call vote was influenced by a particular PAC's contributions.

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[1] See Janet Buttolph Johnson, Richard A. Joslyn, and H.T. Reynolds, *Political Science Research Methods*, Fourth Edition (Washington, DC: CQ Press), 2001, pp. 53-4.
[2] Ibid., p. 53.
[3] Ibid., p. 54.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid., pp. 54-60.
[6] A researcher interested in examining the importance of interest groups to democratic governance *could* rephrase this hypothesis to make it an empirical statement. So we are not prevented from examining such important questions; we just need to be careful that we phrase them in a way that facilitates empirical scrutiny.

3. *Hypotheses are plausible.* The relationship posited by a hypothesis should have some grounding in what we already know about how the world works. That prior knowledge may come from a variety of sources – theory, existing scholarship, even logical deduction in some cases. Implausible hypotheses, please note, may still be testable, so this criterion is something more than just demanding that one's hypothesis by amenable to empirical analysis. For instance: "States whose leaders were born on odd-numbered days enjoy higher rates of economic growth than states whose heads were born on even-numbered days." We *could* test this hypothesis. But what would we learn once we'd done the analysis?

4. *Hypotheses are specific.* Try to avoid ambiguity. You can do so by specifying a *direction* to the relationship posited (e.g., your dependent variable goes up when the independent variable increases) and by avoiding fuzziness in the definition of the variables of interest. Think of all the important political concepts that have potential for ambiguity – democracy, power, interest group resources, prosperity, terrorism, and so on. All of these are important and meaningful concepts, but hypotheses built around them will be better to the extent one makes clear *what sort* of power, resources, etc.

5. *Hypotheses are consistent with the data to be used.* Besides avoiding ambiguity, you also want to phrase the posited relationship in a way that implies how you're going to examine it. Consider the following examples, which parallel ones offered by Johnson, et al[7]: (A) "As an interest group's membership increases, factional conflict becomes more likely." (B) "The larger an interest group's membership, the more likely it is to face factional conflict." These hypotheses are very similar in terms of the basic relationship between size and conflict they posit. However, Hypothesis (A) suggests looking at several groups over time and seeing how changes in their membership size correspond to internal conflict, while Hypothesis (B) implies comparing the size and factional conflict levels of many groups at one point in time and seeing how these two things covary.

6. *Hypotheses are testable.* You can posit a perfectly plausible, generalized yet specific empirical relationship, but if data required to test the thing are impossible to come by, then the hypothesis does you no good. Focus on phenomena that are observable – behaviors that we can document, attitudes that we can survey, and the like. For instance, one might develop a hypothesis about how the decision to launch the Iraq war was driven by secret negotiations between the Bush Administration and particular oil-industry-related corporations. Absent any accessible data documenting the existence and details of these alleged agreements, though, such an hypothesis cannot be subjected to empirical scrutiny.[8]

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[7] See p. 59.

[8] That is not to say that it cannot serve as the basis for any number of film projects, conspiracy theories, or other treatments in the popular (i.e., non-social-scientific) media. See, in general, the recent collected works of Michael Moore…