

## Dissertation Research Supervision

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1. Overarching Approach of Research
2. Specific Themes of Research
3. Structure of Research

### 1. Overarching Approach of Research

As some of you know, I am interested in empirical research with real-world applications that also tests the power of theoretical explanations for outcomes. I have a particular interest in testing the impact of ideational (constructivist) explanations for decision-making, policy style and conceptions of interest. This means a focus on the following questions:

- 1) Can we show the *existence of normative structures* at the national (and where appropriate the international) level that are relevant in understanding public policy (which I take to include questions of European integration)? By normative structures I mean socially validated and embedded understandings of what is right and wrong, what is appropriate and what is not. If they are structures, they channel the behaviour and thinking of actors and the outcomes they generate even in the face of economic interests and other institutional incentives to choose otherwise. Good social scientific research needs to test the assumptions of constructivist, rationalist and institutionalist theory in case studies.
- 2) Can we show the use of *ideas as political weapons in fighting for public policy*? What are the conditions for these tactics having the desired effect? What happens to outcomes when these ideas collide, and are there ways of dealing with conflict? Again, does this form of constructivist theory give any added-value insights that rationalist and institutionalist expectations do not?
- 3) Is there a *socialising effect or a learning effect of ideas* through expertise and international institutions that we can show shapes and changes how public policy decision-makers choose one course of action over another? Are these ideas only powerful when decision-makers are confronted with uncertainty over their decisions, or can the socialising and learning effects go even further (most theory expects this effect only under uncertainty)?

These three questions reflect alternative explanations of how ideas matter in public policy, foreign policy and European integration. It is only necessary to choose one, and to test it against rationalist and institutionalist expectations (this means you need not believe in constructivist theory, but it must be considered in testing your hypotheses). They then need to be applied to specific topics that I can supervise reasonably well, and which are feasible.

## **2. Specific Themes of Research**

The following list is suggestive, not exhaustive, but it does indicate where I wish to supervise the most research papers. In many cases, it is possible for many bachelor and master dissertations to focus on the same question, to the extent that you select the public policies / foreign policies of different countries or focus on how they work in a different international organisation, or within a specific public policy area.

### **1 Banking regulation**

Since the financial crisis, governments have supported banks financially and begun to regulate them more aggressively. How have norms developed in various countries with regard to political discussion of the following issues:

- 1) Is banking still a mainly private matter in principle?
  - this is reflected in questioning the behaviour of managers, asserting the right and responsibility of shareholders to decide on company policy and what happens to managers who step out of line
- 2) Is regulation considered a good or a bad thing, or a necessary evil, in principle?
  - this is reflected in whether regulation is considered to be very important in preventing bank mismanagement from happening again, or whether governments are very cautious because they are afraid of damaging the economy.
- 3) What is the state's legitimate role in ensuring that the banking system doesn't collapse?
  - this is reflected in the choices of providing bail-outs to banks, providing loans, buying bank shares, providing deposit insurance, and in providing money to banks through the central bank

These norms identify business and government in a positive or negative light and justify or restrain certain kinds of regulatory action. Can they be detected in parliamentary debates, government documents and press articles? What is their importance versus the efforts of the banking lobby to get what they want (which is often minimum regulation)? Alternatively, does the response depend mostly on what the previously existing regulatory institutions looked like?

### **2 Financial services regulation**

This can be broken down into two kinds of research projects:

#### *2a National financial services regulation*

This is pretty much the same as for banking regulation, but focuses on how countries deal with the issue of open financial markets more broadly, including lowering regulations on stock market activity (this is a massively important thing across the EU, but particularly in the new member states), and in the regulation of non-bank financial institutions like hedge funds, credit rating agencies and sovereign wealth funds.

*2b European financial services regulation*

Building on a knowledge of how the different decision-makers in the EU and from important member states see financial services regulation, what are the prospects for the EU successfully creating improved financial services regulation? The De Larosiere report of March 2009 proposed the establishment of a European System of Financial Supervisors and a System Early Warning Committee, both under the direction of the ECB. What are the chances that the Commission, Parliament and Member States will agree to this and why?

**3 State Aid and Protectionism**

Has there been a general trend to state aid since the financial crisis that goes beyond the banking sector, and if so, what is responsible for this? Is a change of thinking in the light of the crisis key, is lobbying, and do the institutional tools available to the government make a difference in what it is prepared to do?

**4 European Foreign Policy**

Like question 2, this can be broken down into two categories: national and EU. I have a particular interest in relations with Turkey, but will consider relations with other areas.

*4a Norms and national foreign policies / relations with third countries*

What are the guiding imperatives behind the national interest, and how can we see that? What are the consequences for the EU-third country relations?

*4b Norms and European foreign policy*

Building on an understanding of various national foreign policies, how cohesive is European foreign policy, applied to a particular country or issue? Do normative factors in the member states help us understand this, or do other factors play a more decisive role?

**3. Structure of Research**

Regardless of your research question, you will be expected to complete a series of tasks in the process of writing your paper. You must complete the first of these tasks to my satisfaction before I will agree to supervise your thesis. These are:

**A clear research question**

Be as clear as you possibly can about what it is you want to investigate. Do you want to explain why something happens the way that it does, or do you want to understand why something is the way it is? These are different forms of research. If you seek an *explanation*, then you identify an outcome and seek the cause. The cause means both the things that cause it and the way that those things cause the outcome. If you seek *understanding*, then you are often asking 'what were people thinking that led them to act in that way'?

An *explanation* requires a research question on two levels. The first level is often the practical question that follows from an empirical observation. For example, why does the European Union sometimes choose outcome X, and other times outcome Y, and never Z, even though national governments facing a similar choice sometimes choose Z? The second level of an explanation is to find abstract variables that you can substitute for your initial observation. Ideally, these are variables that you find in theories that apply to the question you want to investigate.

Like explanations, *understanding* requires a research question on two levels. The first level is the practical question that follows from an empirical observation. For example, why is banking regulation so light-handed two years after the onset of the financial crisis, and what is the meaning of scandals right now in changing the willingness of governments to regulate? The second level of understanding is to find abstract variables that serve as a way of interpreting the various bits of empirical evidence in a theoretical context.

At the very beginning, you will probably only have a research question on the first level. Your research question on the second level will normally emerge after your review of the theoretical literature.

### **A review of the theoretical literature**

Which theories in the literature try to predict or understand the outcome you wish to investigate? For each theory:

- identify the main assumptions / laws
- identify the factors they say are important in explaining or understanding outcomes
- identify the main outcomes that the theory expects
- say whether the theory appears to fit the outcome you've already seen or not
- comment on any other weaknesses or strengths that appear appropriate for your study

### **Your hypotheses and research design**

Your review of the theoretical literature has resulted in you being ready to make some initial claims of your own that you will test in your paper, or you will test the value of two or more competing theories that you're not sure about yet. In most cases, you can adopt (or adapt) one of the theories and the hypotheses that flow from it. Spell these out for the reader.

Each hypothesis, whether you are explaining or understanding must address the following questions:

- on an abstract level, the relevant factors
- on an empirical level, how these factors are manifested
- the likely outcome (in a reliable, predictable way)

Your research design must find a reasonable way of showing that your findings are in fact true. How do we actually know that the outcome is determined by the factors you say it is, and not something else (*falsification*)? How do we know that your findings are *accurate* and that the evidence you find actually *valid* (actually measures or gives

insight to the abstract variable that you are investigating, rather than something else)? In all cases of explaining, falsification is achieved by contrasting the expectations of your chosen theory with the expectations of another theory. In cases of understanding, you may either contrast the power of ideas and understanding against the power of explanation, or you may choose to focus on textual analysis and process tracing methods to determining that one idea is particularly powerful motivator of behaviour and outcomes rather than another.

### *Special considerations for constructivist research*

Constructivist analysis not only points attention to ideas and identity, but how they affect behaviour. Speech acts are also a form of behaviour, in which the act of saying or writing something is a significant act in itself. Speech acts are observable in documents and in interviews, either by yourself, or in the media. They give insight into the dominant ideas and norms and identities that may play a role in driving behaviour, but that might not be said directly. This is accessed through a method of identifying keywords that are associated with the key idea. Some of these are core (naming the idea directly) and some of them are peripheral (dependent on the core). For more on this method, see Antje Wiener (2009) *The Invisible Constitution of Politics*. (Cambridge).

When undertaking textual analysis, be aware of possible gaps between rhetoric and reality. In other words, do actors actually behave in ways that is consistent with what they are saying, or are they paying lip service to something they are expected to value, but don't actually?

## **Empirical Research**

If you have performed well on the previous tasks, it will be clear what you need to investigate and how you are to organise it. Remember to re-state your hypotheses, to then assemble information that might prove or disprove your initial expectations, and then to conclude with an evaluation of how strongly or poorly your hypotheses are confirmed.

Sometimes, information appears relevant and related, but is not part of your research question or hypotheses. Set these things aside, and only consider including them if you believe, after looking at the evidence, whether they point to a missing factor in explaining or understanding that really should be included. This usually happens once you have completed assembling the data you initially intended to, then failed to confirm the outcome you expected, then note that the new factor is present each time and appears to be the real cause or key factor involved.

## **Conclusions**

Re-state your hypotheses, your expectations at the beginning, and analyse what you think of those assumptions now, given the evidence you've gathered.