

Constitutional History, Ideas for Papers (required for the 10pt version of the seminar)

The purpose of the paper is to develop some original research using the tools and concepts developed in class. Your paper should apply *the tools and concepts to a historical or current issue in constitutional reform that you find of interest.*

Style counts--in so far as good reasoning is best revealed by clear well-organized prose. A bit of historical and institutional research will be required for essentially every paper. The richer and more professional the application of the tools and concepts, the higher the grade will be. (Remember that a model does not have to be complicated to be sophisticated.)

All papers should be typed *one and a half* spaced (at least 12 pt fonts and 1 inch margins) and be twelve to sixteen pages in length, as necessary. Complete references should appear in a bibliography at the end of the paper (including websites and direct references to the class notes) and do not count in the page count. The papers should be sent as pdf or doc files to my email address, congleto@gmu.edu. The papers are due on September 30.

Here are some ideas for papers. You may write on others as well but be sure to "clear" other paper topics with me before starting the paper

1. King and Council model:

During the 1825-1925 period, nearly every country in Europe saw a gradual shift of power from their kings to their parliaments and also a change in the electoral methods for parliaments that made national parliaments far more representative in 1925 than they were in 1825.

Choose a country and discuss key events that lead to constitutional reform in that country. (A nice table with a time line of major and minor constitutional reforms would be helpful.)

How did circumstances change in a manner that generated new gains from constitutional exchange?

Who gained and who lost from that exchange?

What was the role of industrialization and interest groups in the process of constitutional development?

Did the constitutional reforms that were adopted affect public policy?

2. Bicameralism

Most European governments had bicameral legislatures in 1900 and in 2000, but in many cases the balance of power between the two chambers changed significantly over the course of the 20th century.

Choose one or two countries, and analyze the major and minor institutional reforms that changed the relative balance of power during this period. (A nice table with a time line of major and minor events would be a good idea.)

Describe how changing political and economic conditions changed the bargaining power of the two chambers, and thereby lead to new governmental arrangements. Did interest groups (ideological or economic) play a role in this shift of power? Is the shift of power formal or informal?

Did the change in the balance of power among legislative chambers affect the course of public policy? How so? Why?

3. Voting Rules

In the period between 1900 and 1925, most European countries greatly expanded their electorates as wealth requirements were dropped and women were given the vote.

Pick a couple of countries and look at their electoral reforms during this period.

Describe the sequence of changes in election law that were adopted.

Analyze the changes in electoral pressures that lead to these reforms. Were the suffrage movements important in generating the reforms? Were the Liberal and Labor movements important forces in Parliament during this time?

Were there policy shifts during the 1920s that were results of the new election laws?

4. European Union

The European Union is formally a treaty organization, an organization whose membership duties are described in treaties between sovereign nations. Essentially every peacetime treaty is a voluntary contract between nations, and the voluntariness of "membership" has a number of predictable effects on the structure of treaty organizations.

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Describe the key institutional features of the EU, and discuss how those features have been affected by the "voluntariness" of treaty organizations. In the case of a treaty, all parties must gain from the overall provisions of treaties that they sign and ratify.

Consider the path of reforms that lead to the present EU structure.

Explain the circumstances in which these reforms were adopted, and the "constitutional gains from trade" associated with each reform.

It often appears that elite support for the EU is greater than that among ordinary citizens.

Make a table of EU referenda and try to find poll data among individuals of various income groups. Is your evidence consistent with the "elitist hypothesis?"

5. Governmental Growth

Another common feature of governance within developed countries is a substantial increase in the size of the government sector relative to the private sector.

To what extent can this be regarded as a consequence of institutional reforms adopted during the past century?

Examples of possible institutional links include: (1) broadening the electorate, (2) shifts toward more unicameral forms of government, (3) the use of proportional representation, (4) changes in the tax base, and (5) the adoption of quasi-constitutional public service programs such as public pension and health care programs.

There are, of course, other explanations for government growth as well. Examples include: (1) rising per capita income levels, (2) ideological shifts that change demands for government services, (3) the increasing importance of interest groups, (4) increasing congestion as populations increase, and so forth. Try to evaluate the relative importance of these causes and constitutional ones.

6. Fiscal Federalism

Develop an efficiently rationale for the optimal level of fiscal decentralization --the division of tax and spending responsibilities among local, state and federal governments.

Choose a country (or the EU) and analyze whether it appears to be over or under centralized based on economic and political considerations.

One explanation for the EU is that Europe was over centralized after WWII. Under centralization creates unrealized gains to policy coordination among the nation states of Europe.

To what extent does your analysis of optimal national centralization apply to the EU, or to the UN? Use the argument developed above to analyze the EU.

7. Democracy vs. Dictatorship

The overwhelming majority of rational choice political theorists personally prefer majority rule institutions over dictatorship.

Are there any institutional features of democracy that make democracies more pleasant places to live in than (king dominated) kingdoms or dictatorships.

Are policy decision more "efficient" in democracies than in authoritarian government? Explain.

Empirically test the positive proposition that dictatorships adopt systematically worse economic or political policies than democracies.

8. Any other topic that lends itself to analysis using the tools and or concepts developed in this course..

- ◆ *(Please clear other topics with me. I will try to give you a sense of whether your idea is sufficient or too much for the purposes of this class and the time that we have left in the semester.)*