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Scientific Study of Politics
PLSC 10
Fall 2024
TuTh 1:35PM - 2:50PM, Willard Bldg 360

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Instructor: Dr. Yuehong Cassandra Tai	**Teaching Assistant:** Kadir Cihan Duran
(She/her/hers)	(He/him/his)
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Office Hours: F 11:00 AM–1:00 PM & By appointment	M 1:00 PM – 3:00 PM

Overview

Course Description: This course introduces students to the scientific study of politics. It covers essential elements of scientific reasoning and inquiry, and introduces systematic approaches to studying politics through the lens of important questions about international relations, comparative politics, and American politics. Students learn about data and data sources, as well as how to interpret data appearing in graphs and tables. The course consists of two main parts. The first part offers an overview of the elements of scientific inquiry including causal explanation; empirical verification; theories and hypotheses; concept measurement; and dependent and independent variables. The second part of the course examines dominant approaches to studying politics including experiments; surveys; interviewing and focus groups; archival research and secondary data analysis; and the analysis of "big data". The course concludes with a consideration of the benefits of scientific approaches. By the end of the course, students will understand what it means to "do" political science: i.e., to ask questions about political phenomena, form theories related to those questions, collect data, pick an approach to analyze the data, and draw inferences from the analysis. Students will not learn how to conduct original statistical analysis in this course (for that, take PLSC 309), but they will learn a little bit about interpreting statistical results. Instead, by the end of the semester, students will have a broad understanding of some of the many tools political scientists use to answer questions about the world, as well as how they ask those questions in the first place. Just as importantly, students will learn the pros and cons of different research designs and critique empirical political science research.

Learning Objectives: There are six related learning goals that underpin the design and content of this course. Students who successfully complete the course will be able to:

- Describe the steps in the process of studying politics scientifically.

- Identify the theory, central hypotheses, and independent and dependent variables in a research project.

- Develop hypotheses and measures for concepts to answer questions about political phenomena.

- Explain the features of various approaches to studying politics scientifically, including experiments; surveys; interviewing and focus groups; archival research and secondary data analysis; and "big data"

- Interpret tabular and graphical displays of data

- Identify limitations of various research designs

Course Materials

- There are no required textbooks. They are always too expensive.

- Readings are provided in Canvas.

- We will frequently do class activities that may require you to look things up and/or submit something to me online. You should therefore bring a laptop/computer with you to class regularly. If you do not own one, you should be able to rent one from the library. Let me know if you need assistance.

Course Requirements:

- Readings: Each unit will include readings from books, news articles, or occasional videos to watch. More information about my expectations for readings is provided below, but doing the reading is required. As this is an introductory course, the reading load is relatively light, so there is no reason to not do it.

- Exercises and Assignments (40%): This class emphasizes active engagement with material rather than reading about it. For example, rather than just asking you to read about what a theory is, I want you to practice theorizing. Students should expect

a lot of exercises and assignments in the class. *Some exercises will be done in class, and others will be homework.* They are designed to help you gain understanding and appreciation for the scientific method and various approaches to studying politics. I will give specific instructions for the exercises in class and/or on the CANVAS site, and I will regularly communicate with you about deadlines and expectations. DO NOT submit artificially generated text. *Important Note: the exercises listed in the schedule below are the "larger" ones, but I may also assign small activities during class that you will submit and receive credit for. If you miss class regularly, this can be detrimental to your grade.*

- Two Midterm Exams (**15% each**): You will complete two in-class exams that cover material from class lectures, the assigned reading, and the exercises you complete. The first is scheduled for **Oct 3rd** and the second for **Nov 14th**. I will provide more information about the format of the exams as we get closer. They are intended to assess your understanding of the concepts and ideas covered in each lesson.

- Final Exam (20%): You will complete a final exam during finals week. The date and time of this exam is TBD. Additional details will be provided closer to the exam date. The exam will be cumulative, meaning that it will cover material from the entire semester. This does mean there will be lots to review come final exam time, but because it is worth a larger portion of your grade, you have the chance to replicate your previous successes and make up for previous mistakes in a way that demonstrates a holistic and improved understanding of the material.

- Attendance and Participation (10%): Given the size of the class, taking attendance regularly is not an efficient use of time. Instead, I will take attendance four times throughout the semester (4% of your grade). However, regular participation is crucial for success in this course. While there will be several small in-class activities, which will allow me to track your attendance (3% of your grade), missing half of the assignments will result in a reduction of three full letter grades. Participation goes beyond just being present; it can take many forms. Engaging during class by answering questions or sharing reactions to the material is one way. You can also participate by attending my or the TA's office hours, emailing us with questions, and interacting with the course material in other ways (3% of your grade). Poor participation or infrequent attendance will negatively impact this part of your grade. However, if you submit all assignments, regularly attend class, and actively engage with the course material, you will easily earn full credit for participation.

Grading Scale: Grade values will NOT be rounded. That is, any grade value that is

greater than or equal to 'Lower' and less than 'Upper' will receive the respective grade. I recognize that cutoffs are arbitrary, but I have to set them nonetheless, and they apply to everyone. I do not give grades, you earn them!

Grade	Lower	Upper
A	94	100
A-	90	93.99
B+	87	89.99
B	83	86.99
B-	80	82.99
C+	77	79.99
C	70	76.99
D	60	69.99
F	0	59.99

How to be Successful:

- Read before class and come to class with any questions you have. The best way to learn stuff is to engage with it in multiple ways (e.g., reading, listening, and actively doing).

- Participate in class. At a minimum, attend class, but actively participating is another way to engage the material (see above).

- COME TO OFFICE HOURS AND ASK FOR HELP WHEN YOU NEED IT. Students that come to office hours often do very well in class. Coming to office hours does not mean you aren't smart; it means you care.

- Take handwritten notes during class and while reading/watching the assigned material. Taking notes at all is better than not taking notes. Multiple studies also show that handwritten notes improve retention and improve understanding of material better than typed notes. When we get closer to exam time, re-organizing your handwritten notes by typing them up is also a good study strategy.

- Study regularly. Many students cram their studying before an exam. An alternative strategy is to dedicate a little bit of time every other day or so to just reading through your notes. If you do this (in this class or any other), you will find that studying before exams is far less stressful, and usually you'll do better on them too.

Expectations and Procedures:

- Respect: This course is about some of the tools political scientists use to broaden our understanding of the world around us. Being respectful of different perspectives is essential for us to be successful in this endeavor. At a minimum, this means the classroom will be a welcoming environment for students of all backgrounds, races, ethnicities, gender identities, sexual orientations, and religions. Students will refer to others by their self-identified pronouns, engage in debates and discussion professionally and respectfully, and refrain from using cell phones or turning their attention from course material or the speaker during class.

- Academic Dishonesty: Don't cheat. There are more details in the Academic Integrity section, but if you don't know what if you're cheating, ask me. I do not tolerate academic dishonesty, and claiming ignorance about what cheating entails will not excuse you from the appropriate consequences.

- Office Hours: Office hours will be held at the designated time. To meet the instructor for office hours, students can walk in.

- Attendance: I will take attendance four times throughout the semester. If you are absent during any of these four attendance checks, it will result in a reduction of one full grade. However, if you are ill, caring for a sick friend or family member, or have a documented university excused absence, you will not be penalized. In such cases, please email your excuse form to your TA in advance.

- Extended Absences: During your enrollment at Penn State, unforeseen challenges may arise. If you ever need to miss an extended amount of class in such a circumstance, please notify your professor so you can determine the best course of action to make up missed work. If your situation rises to a level of difficulty you cannot manage on your own with faculty support, reach out to the Student Care & Advocacy office by phone at (814-863-2020) or email them at StudentCare@psu.edu.

- Late Submission Policy: A penalty of 5% will accrue for each day that an assignment is late.

- Statements at the end of the syllabus provide information regarding accommodations for disability; counseling and psychological services; educational equity; and academic misconduct and dishonesty. Please note that any violations of academic integrity – intentional or unintentional – will be reported to the College of the Liberal Arts Academic Integrity Committee for resolution.

Course Schedule

I reserve the right to make changes to the syllabus as the semester progresses. You are responsible for keeping up with these changes, which will be announced either in class or via email.

The course is scheduled below in "modules" or units. Each unit will have a set of reading and often some exercises listed. The first reading listed should be read in advance of the first day of each unit, and then if there are subsequent readings in that unit, I will give you advanced notice about when they should be read.

Part 1: The Scientific Study of Politics

Week 1 and 2 (Aug 27, 29): Introduction to the Scientific Study of Politics

- Syllabus/course overview
- Kellstedt, Paul M. and Guy D. Whitten. 2018. The Fundamentals of Political Science Research, 3rd edition, "The Scientific Study of Politics" (chapter 1). Cambridge University Press, pages 1-3 (read through section 1.1).
- **Exercise 1: Generating Explanations**

Week 2: Sep 3, 5, American Political Science Association Conference

- No class on Sep 3
- **Discussion and Review on Exercise 1 on Sep 5th**

Week 3, 4, and 5 (Sep 10, 12, 17, 19, 24): A Roadmap to Studying Politics Scientifically

- Kellstedt, Paul M. and Guy D. Whitten. 2018. The Fundamentals of Political Science Research, 3rd edition, "The Scientific Study of Politics" (chapter 1). Cambridge University Press, pages 3-22 (begin with section 1.2; skip section 1.6).
- Brancati, Dawn. 2018. Social Scientific Research, "Quantitative Measures" (chapter 15). SAGE, pages 221-226.
- Arthur Conan Doyle. *Silver Blaze.*
- **Exercises 2 and 3: Working through the Scientific Method; Developing and Evaluating Measures**

Week 5 and 6 (Sep 26 & Oct 1): Causality & Part 1 Wrap-Up

- Kellstedt, Paul M. and Guy D. Whitten. 2018. The Fundamentals of Political Science Research, 3rd edition, "Evaluating Causal Relationships" (chapter 3). Cambridge University Press, pages 56-74.
- **Exercise 4: Assessing Causal Claims**

Week 6 (Oct 3rd): First Exam

Part 2: Tools for the Scientific Study of Politics

Week 7 (Oct 8, 10): Experiments

- Kellstedt, Paul M. and Guy D. Whitten. 2018. The Fundamentals of Political Science Research, 3rd edition, "Research Design" (chapter 4). Cambridge University Press, pages 77-87 (begin with section 4.1).
- Druckman, James N. 2005. "Experiments," In Samuel J. Best and Benjamin Radcliff, eds., Polling America: An Encyclopedia of Public Opinion, Volume I. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, pages 209-214.
- Summary of Kim, Eungi. 2022. "Entertaining Beliefs in Economic Mobility." American Journal of Political Science. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12702.

Week 8 (Oct 15, 17), More on Experiments

- Gerber, Alan S. and Donald P. Green. 1999. "Does Canvassing Increase Voter Turnout? A Field Experiment." Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America. 96(19):10939-10942.

- "Professors' Research Project Stirs Outrage in Montana." October 24, 2014. NY Times. Link

- "A Scientific Approach to Evaluating Global Anti-Poverty Programs." August 23, 2019. PBS News Hour. Link

- **Exercise 5: Dissecting an Experiment**

Week 9, and 10 (Oct 22, 24, 29, 31): Survey Research

- Roper's "Polling Fundamentals" Link (read the following sections: Introduction, Sampling, Total Survey Error, and Understanding the Numbers Presented in Tables

- Background information on the 2020 presidential election: Link (read the embedded links if they are of interest to you).

- Theoretical discussion of voting behavior: Link (read the main page as well as the four embedded links in the "sources of individual voting behavior" section).

- Details about the American National Election Study (ANES) 2020 codebook Link

- **Exercise 6 and 7: Interpreting Tables; Exploring Hypotheses About Vote Choice**

Week 11 (Nov 7): Focus Groups

- Brancati, Dawn. 2018. Social Scientific Research, "Focus Groups" (chapter 11). SAGE, pages 155-166.

- Voters respond to 2020 ads from Democrats. Link

- Muslim Americans describe challenges/respond to former President Trump's "Muslim Ban" Link

- Millennials discuss priorities Link

- **Exercise 8: Evaluating and Comparing the Use of Focus Groups**

Week12 (Nov 12): Review for Second Exam

Week12 (Nov 14): Second Exam

Week13 (Nov 19): Archival Research and Secondary Data

- "Ethics of Archival Research on Political Violence." Journal of Peace Research 58(3): 342-354.
- Karstens, Mikaela, Michael J. Soules, and Nick Dietrich. "A Crack in the Foundation: Event Data, Newspaper Databases, and Threats to Validity and Replicability." Political Science and Politics.
- **Exercise 9: Creating Your Own Dataset**

Week13 (Nov 21): Interview

- Leech, Beth L., Frank R. Baumgartner, Jeffrey M. Berry, Marie Hojnacki, and David C. Kimball. 2013. "Lessons from the 'Lobbying and Policy Change' Project," in Layna Mosley, ed. Interview Research in Political Science. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, pages 209-224.

November 26 & 28: Happy Thanksgiving – No Classes!

Week 14 and 15 (Dec 3 & 5 & 10): "Big Data" and Computational Analysis

- Bond, Robert M., Christopher J. Fariss, Jason J. Jones, Adam D.I. Kramer, Cameron Marlow, Jamie E. Settle, and James H. Fowler. 2012. "A 61-Million Person Experiment in Social Influence and Political Mobilization." Nature. 489: 295-98.
- Kosinski, Michal, David Stillwell, and Thore Graepel. 2013. "Private Traits and Attributes are Pre- dictable from Digital Records of Human Behavior." Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America. 110 (15): 5802-5805.

- Isaac, William and Andi Dixon. "Why Big-Data Analysis of Police Activity is Inherently Biased." May 9, 2017. The Conversation. Link
- Bhuiyan, Johana. "LAPD Ended Predictive Policing Programs Amid Public Outcry. A New Effort Shares Many of Their Flaws." November 8, 2021. The Guardian. Link
- **Exercise 10: Ranking Presidents**

Week15 (Dec 12): Final Exam Review/Catch Up Day

Finals Week: Dec 16-20

- Final Exam TBD

Statement

Disability Accommodation Statement: Penn State welcomes students with disabilities into the University's educational programs. Every Penn State campus has an office for students with disabilities. Student Disability Resources (SDR) website provides contact information for every Penn State campus (http://equity.psu.edu/sdr/disability-coordinator). For further information, please visit the Student Disability Resources website (http://equity.psu.edu/sdr/).

In order to receive consideration for reasonable accommodations, you must contact the appropriate disability services office at the campus where you are officially enrolled, participate in an intake interview, and provide documentation: See documentation guidelines at (http://equity.psu.edu/sdr/guidelines). If the documentation supports your request for reasonable accommodations, your campus disability services office will provide you with an accommodation letter. Please share this letter with your instructors and discuss the accommodations with them as early as possible. You must follow this process for every semester that you request accommodations.

Academic Integrity Statement: Academic integrity is the pursuit of scholarly activity in an open, honest and responsible manner. Academic integrity is a basic guiding principle for all academic activity at The Pennsylvania State University, and all members of the University community are expected to act in accordance with this principle. Consistent with this expectation, the University's Code of Conduct states that all students should act with personal integrity, respect other students' dignity, rights and property, and help create and maintain an environment in which all can succeed through the fruits of their efforts. Academic integrity includes a commitment by all members of the University community not to engage in or tolerate acts of falsification, misrepresentation or deception. Such acts of dishonesty violate the fundamental ethical principles of the University community and compromise the worth of work completed by others.

Counseling and Psychological Services Statement: Many students at Penn State face personal challenges or have psychological needs that may interfere with their academic progress, social development, or emotional wellbeing. The university offers a variety of confidential services to help you through difficult times, including individual and group counseling, crisis intervention, consultations, online chats, and mental health screenings. These services are provided by staff who welcome all students and embrace a philosophy respectful of clients' cultural and religious backgrounds, and sensitive to differences in race, ability, gender identity and sexual orientation.

- Counseling and Psychological Services at University Park (CAPS) (http://studentaffairs.psu.edu/counseling/): 814-863-0395

- Counseling and Psychological Services at Commonwealth Campuses (http://senate.psu.edu/faculty/counseling-services-at-commonwealth-campuses/)

- Penn State Crisis Line (24 hours/7 days/week): 877-229-6400
  Crisis Text Line (24 hours/7 days/week): Text LIONS to 741741

Educational Equity/Report Bias Statement: Penn State takes great pride to foster a diverse and inclusive environment for students, faculty, and staff. Consistent with University Policy AD29, students who believe they have experienced or observed a hate crime, an act of intolerance, discrimination, or harassment that occurs at Penn State are urged to report these incidents as outlined on the University's Report Bias webpage (http://equity.psu.edu/reportbias/)