

# PLSC 010: Scientific Study of Politics

Fall Semester, 2021

(Revised: October 26, 2021)

1:35-2:50 Tuesday & Thursday

108 Chambers

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Office hours: Monday 3:00-4:30  
& Thursday 12:00-1:00

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Office hours: Tuesday 11:00-12:00  
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## 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; 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; the analysis of “big data”; and formal models. 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 successfully completing the course will be able to:

- Describe the steps in the process of studying politics scientifically.
- Identify the theory, central hypothesis, and independent and dependent variables in a research project.
- Explain the essential features and concepts of the six approaches used to study politics scientifically -- experiments; surveys; interviewing and focus groups; archival research and secondary data analysis; analysis of “big data;” and formal models -- and provide an example of research using each approach.
- Interpret tabular and graphical displays of data.

Students will not learn how to do statistical analysis.

Class sessions will combine lecture, discussion, and both individual and small-group exercises.

## Laptops

We will be doing regular in-class exercises involving the different scientific approaches to studying politics. You will need to have a laptop for many of these exercises so I ask that you plan to bring one to each class session. However, laptops are to remain closed when they are not being used for an exercise. My experience suggests that having a laptop open presents a major distraction for students – not just the student who is using it for a non-class task but also for those around that student. Whether you learn more by taking notes longhand is less clear – the evidence on the relationship between particular modes of note taking and test performance is mixed. So, bring your laptop to class but only open it when I give you explicit instructions to do so.

## Course Reading Materials

There are no required texts. All course readings are available through the Canvas course site, and/or through links provided on the syllabus. I expect you to read *carefully* the assigned materials in advance of class.

I may assign reading in addition to what appears on the syllabus either in class, through announcements on the Canvas course site, or via e-mail (you are responsible for checking your Penn State e-mail regularly). I will provide these additional readings for you or make them available through Canvas.

## Office Hours

Both the Teaching Assistant and I are currently without offices – there is extensive repair work going on in our wing of Pond Lab. It is unclear when that work will be completed. So, at least until further notice, we will hold office hours via Zoom. I will be holding office hours via Zoom every Monday from 3:00 to 4:30 and every Thursday from 12:00 to 1:00. Please send me an email in advance to schedule a time to meet and to obtain the Zoom link. If you are unavailable during my scheduled hours, we can arrange an appointment outside of them. Ms. Kennedy will be holding office hours via Zoom every Tuesday from 11:00 to 12:00 and every Wednesday from 12:00 to 1:00. Please send her an email in advance to schedule a time to meet and to obtain the Zoom link.

## Course Requirements and Evaluation

Your grade in the course will be based on the following:

### **Exercises: Reaction, Analysis & Interpretation (40% of final grade)**

Over the course of the semester you will complete a number of exercises, some in class and others on your own outside of class. These exercises are designed to help you gain an understanding of the scientific method and explore different ways for studying politics scientifically. Over the course of the semester, you will investigate and react to different data sources; examine and interpret data; prepare for conducting an interview; undertake basic coding of data; respond to ethical issues that arise in research; and much more. Specific instructions for some of these exercises are available through the course site; I will provide instructions for others in class. The course schedule lists the exercises by topic and week;

due dates will be specified as we take them up. If you turn in an exercise after the designated due date, your grade will be reduced by 10 percent each day the exercise is late.

### **Exams (each exam, 15% of final grade x 2 = 30% of final grade)**

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 Thursday, September 23 and the second for Thursday, November 4. The exams, which will follow a short-answer format, are intended to assess your understanding of the concepts and ideas covered in each lesson. The best responses will succinctly and clearly address the question posed. Additional details will be provided closer to the exam dates.

### **Final Exam (20% of final grade)**

You will complete a final exam during finals week. The exam, which is cumulative, will include material from class lectures, the assigned readings, and the exercises you complete. The exam will follow a short-answer format. Additional details will be provided closer to the exam date.

### **Participation (10% of final grade)**

Class participation is essential for success in this course. I expect students to read carefully the assigned materials in advance of class and to participate actively in the learning process by answering questions and sharing reactions to course material on a regular basis. If you regularly engage in the class and do so thoughtfully and constructively, you will earn maximum credit for the participation portion of your grade. If the quality of your participation is poor or if you never contribute to class discussion, your grade for the participation portion of the course will be adversely affected. Note that at mid-semester, I will evaluate your participation to date. This mid-semester assessment will not necessarily be your final participation grade; it will allow you to make adjustments, as needed, in your preparation for and behavior in class. It will also provide a basis for our discussing your participation and whether it should be modified going forward. A grading rubric for participation is posted on the Canvas course site.

### **Attendance**

You are required to attend class and I will take attendance each class session. If you attend each class you will receive a bonus of 1.5 points added to your final grade; if you miss one class, you will receive a one-point bonus. If you miss two classes you will receive a .5 bonus. If you miss three classes you will receive no bonus, nor will you be assessed any penalty. For each class beyond three that you miss, I will subtract 0.75 points from your final grade.

**Important caveat:** *if you are ill; caring for an ill friend or family member; required to isolate or quarantine; or have a documented university excused absence, you will not be penalized for missing class, but you cannot get bonus points for these absences.*

Note that it is not possible in this class to submit extra assignments in an effort to raise your grade, unless I have specified in advance to the entire class that such an opportunity exists.

Course grades will be assigned according to the following distribution (*your grade in Canvas may not be an accurate or complete reflection of your standing in the course -- you should not consider it to be a clear indicator of your performance*):

Letter Grade	Numeric Grade		Letter Grade	Numeric Grade
A	94% or above		C+	77% to 79%
A-	90% to 93%		C	70% to 76%
B+	87% to 89%		D	60% to 69%
B	84% to 86%		F	59% or below
B-	80% to 83%			

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.

## Classroom Etiquette

What you learn from the class is dependent upon your engagement with class discussions and exercises, and attentive listening to me and to others in the class. Consequently, because they represent a particularly potent form of distraction, all electronic devices, including cell phone, tablets, and laptops, must be put away for the duration of the class. The one exception to this rule is when a device is needed for an exercise we complete as a class. In such an instance, use of that electronic device will be allowed for the duration of the exercise only.

More generally, any behavior that distracts from the learning process is prohibited, including: sleeping; eating; and talking apart from the discussion in class. Please remember that everyone comes to the course with a different political, economic, social, and intellectual background. A positive learning environment requires that we be respectful of one another, take care to listen and never interrupt when someone else is talking.

## Masking Policy

Penn State is requiring everyone to wear a face mask in all university buildings, including classrooms, regardless of vaccination status. All students must wear a mask appropriately (i.e., covering both mouth and nose) while indoors on campus. This is to protect your health and safety as well as the health and safety of your classmates, instructor, and the university community. Anyone attending class without a mask will be asked to put one on or leave. I may end class if anyone present refuses to appropriately wear a mask for the duration of class. Students who refuse to wear masks appropriately may face disciplinary action for Code of Conduct violations. If you feel you cannot wear a mask during class, please speak with your adviser immediately about your options for altering your schedule.

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## Course Schedule

*I reserve the right to make changes to the syllabus and course schedule as the semester progresses. You are responsible for keeping up with these changes, which will be announced either in class, through the Canvas*

*course site or by email.*

Unless I indicate otherwise, the first reading listed should be read in advance of the first day of each of the units mapped out below (e.g., you should read pages 77 to 87 in chapter 4 of Kellstedt & Whitten in advance of the September 28 class session). I will give you advance notice about when subsequent readings in the unit will be due.

## **Part 1: The Scientific Study of Politics**

### **Week 1 (August 24 & 26): Introduction**

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: Generating Explanations

### **Weeks 2, 3, & 4 (August 31, September 2, 7, 9, 14, 16 & 21): 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.

Exercises: Working through the Scientific Method; Developing and Evaluating Measures

### **Week 5 (September 23): Causality**

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: Assessing Causal Claims

***First Exam: Tuesday, September 28***

## Part 2: Tools for the Scientific Study of Politics

### Weeks 5, 6 & 7 (September 23 & 30 & October 5): 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. N.d. "Entertaining Beliefs in Economic Mobility." *American Journal of Political Science*. Forthcoming.

"A Scientific Approach to Evaluating Global Anti-Poverty Programs." August 23, 2019. *PBS News Hour*. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/a-scientific-approach-to-evaluating-global-anti-poverty-programs>

Exercise: Dissecting an Experiment

### Weeks 7 & 8 (October 7 & 12): Experiments (cont.)

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*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/29/upshot/professors-research-project-stirs-political-outrage-in-montana.html?smid=url-share>

### Weeks 8, 9 & 10 (October 14, 19, 21 & 26): Survey Research

Roper's "Polling Fundamentals" <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/polling-and-public-opinion/polling-fundamentals> Read the following sections: Introduction, Sampling, Total Survey Error, and Understanding the Numbers Presented in Tables

Exercises: Interpreting Tables

### Week 10 (October 28): Survey Research (cont.)

Background information on the 2016 presidential election:  
<https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/pages/instructors/setups2016/2016.html> (read the imbedded links if they are of interest to you).

Theoretical discussion of voting behavior:  
<https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/pages/instructors/setups2016/voting.html>

(read the main page as well as the six embedded links in the “sources of individual voting behavior” section).

Details about the American National Election Study (ANES) 2016 codebook <https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/pages/instructors/setup2016/dataset/codebook.html> (read the main page and the embedded link “information for each of these variables”).

Exercises: Exploring Hypotheses About Vote Choice

### **Week 11 (November 2): Interviews**

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.

### **Week 11 (November 4): Focus Groups**

Barbour, Rosaline. 2018. *Doing Focus Groups*, “Generating Data” (chapter 6). SAGE Publications, Inc., pages 83-104.

Voters respond to 2020 ads from Democrats  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PDzumtMpSLw&ab\\_channel=LosAngelesTimes](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PDzumtMpSLw&ab_channel=LosAngelesTimes)

Muslim Americans describe challenges/respond to former President Trump’s “Muslim Ban”  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3L3goFD8nwQ&ab\\_channel=CBSThisMorning](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3L3goFD8nwQ&ab_channel=CBSThisMorning)

Millennials discuss priorities  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A5C9zaj0qfc&ab\\_channel=NBCNews](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A5C9zaj0qfc&ab_channel=NBCNews)

Exercise: Evaluating and Comparing the Use of Focus Groups

***Second Exam: Tuesday, November 9***

***Late Drop Deadline: Friday, November 12***

**Weeks 12 & 13 (November 11, 16 & 18): Archival Research**

No reading

Exercise: Creating Your Own Dataset

**Week 14 (November 23 & 25): Happy Thanksgiving – No Classes!**

**Weeks 15 & 16 (November 30 & December 2 & 7): Analysis of Big Data**

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 Predictable from Digital Records of Human Behavior.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*. 110 (15): 5802-5805.

Lazer, David, Ryan Kennedy, Gary King, and Alessandro Vespignani. 2014. “The Parable of Goggle Flu: Traps in Big Data Analysis.” *Science*. 343: 1203-1205.

“Police Program Aims to Pinpoint Those Most Likely to Commit Crimes.” September 24, 2015. *NY Times*. <http://nyti.ms/1VdTclO>

Exercise: Ranking Presidents; Assessing the Costs and Benefits of Big Data

**Wrap Up: The Scientific Study of Politics Revisited**

**Week 16 (December 9): Revisiting & Wrapping Up**

No reading

***Final Exam: Tuesday, December 14  
12:20-2:10  
108 Chambers***



## Academic Integrity and Academic Dishonesty

Penn State defines academic integrity as “the pursuit of scholarly activity in an open, honest and responsible manner” ([Senate Policy 49-20](#)). Dishonesty of any kind will not be tolerated in this course. Dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, cheating, plagiarizing, fabricating information or citations, facilitating acts of academic dishonesty by others, having unauthorized possession of examinations, submitting work of another person or work previously used without permission from the instructor, or tampering with the academic work of other students. In cases of academic misconduct, it is my policy to follow procedures established by the University and the College of the Liberal Arts. You can read about those procedures, as well as academic integrity in general, [here](#). Importantly, students facing allegations of academic misconduct are not allowed to drop the course in which the alleged misconduct occurs. If the allegations are dismissed, drops are permitted. Students found responsible for academic misconduct often receive academic sanctions, which can be severe, and put themselves at risk for disciplinary sanctions assigned by the University's Office of Student Conduct (see [Senate Policy G-9](#)).

## Disabilities

Penn State welcomes students with disabilities into the University's educational programs. If you anticipate needing any type of accommodation in this course or have questions about physical access, please consult the Student Disability Resources Web site <http://equity.psu.edu/student-disability-resources>. In order to receive consideration for reasonable accommodations, you must participate in an intake interview, and provide documentation. If the documentation supports your request for reasonable accommodations, the disability services office will provide you with an accommodation letter. Please share this letter with me and your other instructors as early in the semester as possible. You must follow this process for every semester that you request accommodations.

## Counseling and Psychological Services

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. For more information, please contact Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) <http://studentaffairs.psu.edu/counseling/> or 814-863-0395.

More immediate and emergency assistance is available through Penn State Crisis Line (24 hours/7 days/week): 877-229-6400 and Crisis Text Line (24 hours/7 days/week): Text LIONS to 741741.

## Educational Equity and Reporting of Bias

Penn State takes great pride to foster a diverse and inclusive environment for students, faculty, and staff. Acts of intolerance, discrimination, or harassment due to age, ancestry, color, disability, gender, gender identity, national origin, race, religious belief, sexual orientation, or veteran status are not tolerated and can be reported through Educational Equity via the Report Bias webpage <http://equity.psu.edu/reportbias/>

## **Department of Political Science web site**

You will find a wealth of information on the Political Science Department web site including course schedules, faculty office hours, faculty home pages describing their areas of teaching and research activities, answers to questions about advising, internship opportunities, announcements, and much, much, more. Check back often: <http://polisci.la.psu.edu/>