

Introduction to Political Research

PLSC 308

Spring 2020

Meeting Place: 110 Borland Building

Meeting Time: Tues/Thurs, 9:05–10:25am

Course Website: <http://canvas.psu.edu/>

Instructor: Nick Dietrich

Office: 209 Pond Lab

Office Hours: M/Th 1–3pm, T 11am–1pm

email: nmd184@psu.edu

Course Description

This course is an introduction to designing and conducting research in political science. Students taking this course will learn the basic principals of research design required to conduct independent research in political science or other social sciences. The course material will also help students become better *consumers* of research by teaching them to evaluate claims they might encounter in media, from friends, or in other classes. Research is essentially the systematic use of evidence to evaluate claims about the real world and, as such, is useful in everyday life and in nearly any career.

Students taking this course will learn to:

- Interpret research that uses quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method approaches.
- Evaluate claims by validating the underlying data and research design.
- Design a research strategy to answer questions about political issues.
- Collect data and carry out valid research on topics of interest.

Class will generally involve a discussion of the readings, a short lecture, and a group activity. This class is heavily based on participation in the classroom, so **it is important that you do the readings before class**. The homework load in this course is intentionally light to allow you time to do the readings. You will have regular chances to participate through discussion and in-class activities. The course is designed this way to allow everyone a chance to participate in a way that is comfortable for them.

Assignments and Grades

Participation: 10%. I expect you to be engaged and pay attention during discussion, and I expect that you have read the assigned readings in advance. You do not have to talk a lot to receive full credit for participating. You can participate by asking questions, engaging with the material during in-class activities, or responding to questions in class.

Online Discussion: 10%. In the second half of the class, we will use Canvas discussion boards to discuss the readings. You can receive credit for participating by posting questions, critiques, or discussion of the reading.

Midterm Exam: 20%. There will be an in-class midterm exam based on the material that we have covered up to that point in the class.

Final Exam: 20%. There will be a cumulative final exam based on all material covered in the course.

Homework Assignments: 20%. There will be several short assignments over the course of the semester. These assignments will assist you in building your final research design proposal. Cumulatively, they are worth twenty percent of your total grade. I will give you more information about each assignment at least one week before it is due.

Research Design Proposal: 20%. The final paper will be a proposal for a research design to study a question about politics. The homework assignments in this class are designed to be useful for writing your final research design proposal. This proposal will include a research question, literature review, theory, hypotheses, and a proposed research design. You will *not* be required to actually carry out the research design.

Grades

A	93–100	C+	77–80
A-	90–93	C	73–77
B+	87–90	C-	70–73
B	83–87	D	60–70
B-	80–83	F	<60

If you believe that a grade was recorded incorrectly, please come to my office hours with the graded assignment. Please do this as soon as possible so that I can correct the mistake before submitting grades.

If you believe that you should have received a higher grade on a particular assignment, please submit a sheet with your name, the assignment in question, and one paragraph explaining why the assignment should be re-graded within two weeks of receiving the initial grade. I perform re-grades blind (without checking the initial grade), so this can result in a higher, lower, or the same grade. Please note that I am unable to discuss grades over email.

Class Rules

Be respectful of others. Class will almost always involve some kind of discussion, and I expect you to treat your fellow classmates with respect. Personal insults and inflammatory remarks will not be tolerated. If an interaction in class leaves you feeling hurt, offended, or uncomfortable, please let me know so that we can devise a plan to make the classroom more inclusive in the future.

Don't use laptops or cell phones to disrupt class. Using phones or laptops for reasons not related to class will result in a penalty to your participation grade. That said, I

understand that some people use laptops to take notes or look at readings. I will ask students to put laptops away if they inhibit participation.

Do the readings before class. Coming to class prepared will be a large part of your grade in our discussions and in-class writings. We will have few out-of-class homework assignments, so I expect you to take the time to do the readings.

You can miss class three times before it affects your grade. You do not need to tell me why you are missing class or notify me in advance. I recommend saving your three absences for times when you really need it: sickness, unexpected emergencies, or other unforeseen circumstances.

Late assignments will be penalized 10% per day after the due date. If you turn in an assignment the day after it is due, the highest grade it can receive is a 90%. If an assignment is two days late, the highest grade it can receive is an 80%, and so on.

Contacting the Instructor

I prefer to be called by my first name (Nick) or Professor Dietrich (pronounced Dee-trick). I use he/him pronouns. I default to first names when addressing students, but please let me know if you prefer to be addressed a different way.

The best way to reach me quickly outside of class is by email (nmd184@psu.edu). I try to respond to emails by no later than 5pm the day after I receive them. I may or may not check my email after 5pm and on weekends. I also set aside time every week for office hours. Office hours are listed at the top of this syllabus, and during office hours I am in my office and available to talk about anything related to the course. I can make appointments on most weekdays if you are not available during my office hours. When in-person office hours are not possible, I will be available through video call and email during scheduled office hours.

Counseling and Psychological Services

This class may occasionally cover subjects that some will find difficult or traumatic. Additionally, the stress of performing in school can negatively impact mental health. A majority of college students report feeling overwhelmed, depressed, or anxious at some point (American College Health Association 2018, pg. 31-32). I take mental health very seriously; please contact me if concerns about performance in this class are affecting your mental health.

There are mental health resources available on campus through Penn State Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS). CAPS provides 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 non-emergencies:

Counseling and Psychological Services at University Park (CAPS)

<http://studentaffairs.psu.edu/counseling/>: 814-863-0395

For emergencies:

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

Crisis Text Line (24 hours/7 days/week): Text LIONS to 741741

Student Disability Resources

Students with disabilities can get accommodations through Student Disability Resources (<http://equity.psu.edu/sdr/>). Please let me know as soon as possible if you need any accommodations for assignments, note-taking, or other aspects of the course.

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.

Diversity and Educational Equity Statement

I strive to promote an inclusive environment in the classroom and be respectful of the diverse identities and backgrounds of students in my class. Please let me know if there is anything I can do to make the classroom a more welcoming environment. Students who experience or observe an act of bias, intolerance, discrimination, or harassment that occurs at Penn State are urged to report these incidents at the University's Report Bias webpage (<http://equity.psu.edu/reportbias>).

Academic Integrity Statement

I expect that everyone in this course will behave with integrity and I will never have to enforce the academic dishonesty policy. Academic dishonesty includes turning in work partially or completely written by another person, using sources without citing them, quoting without attribution, fabricating information, or other misrepresentations of your work. It is never in your best interest to cheat in this class; I will have to report you to the university and you will get a worse grade than if you had turned in late or incomplete work.

Academic dishonesty usually occurs when students feel pressured to produce work quickly or without proper guidance. If you are feeling this way, please come talk to me. We can work out a plan together to make sure you are able to succeed in this class.

Safer People Safer Places Network

I am a member of the Penn State Safer People Safer Places Network. I am dedicated to promoting an inclusive classroom environment and I can connect you with resources on campus for issues of sexual and gender diversity. For more information, see the Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity on campus (<https://studentaffairs.psu.edu/csgd>).

Mandated Reporting

As a Penn State employee, I am required to report any incident of sexual misconduct to Penn State's Title IX office. This includes any incident of sexual harassment, sexual assault, domestic violence, or other forms of misconduct, whether disclosed in class, in person outside of class, or in writing. I *must* report any incidents of sexual misconduct or child sexual abuse that is disclosed to me, no matter when it occurred. Please keep this in mind during our discussions inside and outside of the classroom.

Confidential counseling support is available through the Gender Equity Center (204 Boucke, 814-863-2027) or the Centre Safe 24/7 hotline (877-234-5050). If you wish to report an incident (not confidential), you can make a report to Penn State's Title IX Coordinator (814-867-0099, titleix@psu.edu).

Lion's Pantry

The Lion's Pantry is a resource for students in need of food and other essential items. It is open to all undergraduate and graduate students with a valid Penn State ID. For more information, see the Lion's Pantry website (<https://thelionspantry.psu.edu/>).

Required Materials

This course requires articles available through the Penn State library, listed in the course schedule below. You have access to these articles through the University Library web search. In the event that a reading is not available through the university library, I will make it available to you on the course Canvas page.

For additional reading on nearly every topic covered in this class, I recommend the Research Methods Knowledge Base. I like this resource because it is comprehensive, freely available online, and the individual sections are very very short.

Trochim, William M.K. 2004. *Research Methods Knowledge Base*. Available online at <https://socialresearchmethods.net/kb/>.

Course Schedule

Please note that this syllabus is tentative and subject to change. I will notify you of any changes to the course schedule and provide you with an updated syllabus.

Week 1: Introduction

Tuesday, Jan 14 – Introduction to the Course

Introduction to the course (no reading)

Thursday, Jan 16 – The Scientific Process

Lave, Charles A., and James G. March. 1975. “An Introduction To Speculation.” In *An Introduction to Models in the Social Sciences*. Harper Collins.

Guided reading questions: This chapter asks you to think about theoretical “models” of social phenomena. What are the steps of the model-making process? How does a researcher improve a model over time?

Week 2: Theories and Hypotheses

Tuesday, Jan 21 – Theory-Building and Deriving Hypotheses

Moore, Will H. 2001. “Evaluating Theory in Political Science.”

Guided reading questions: What is a theory? What is a hypothesis? What does it mean for a hypothesis to be falsifiable?

Thursday, Jan 23 – Hypothesis Testing

Research Question & Topic Importance Draft Due

No reading – In-class exercise

Week 3: Validity

Tuesday, Jan 28 – Introduction to Validity

“Introduction to Validity,” in Trochim, William M.K. 2004. *Research Methods Knowledge Base*, at <https://socialresearchmethods.net/kb/introval.php>.

Guided reading questions: What are the types of validity? What do they mean?

Thursday, Jan 30 – Internal and External Validity

Research Paper Worksheet Due at the Beginning of Class

Pick one:

Crabtree, Charles, Holger L. Kern, and Steven Pfaff. 2018. “Mass media and the diffusion of collective action in authoritarian regimes: The June 1953 East German uprising.” *International Studies Quarterly* 62 (2): 301–314

OR

Hinkle, Rachael K., and Michael J. Nelson. 2017. “How to Lose Cases and Influence People.” *Statistics, Politics, and Policy* 8 (2): 195–221

Guided reading questions: Fill out the worksheet to identify the important parts of one of the above research papers.

Week 4: Conducting Research in Practice

Tuesday, Feb 4 – The Literature Review

Knopf, Jeffrey W. 2006. “Doing a literature review.” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 39 (1): 127–132

Guided reading questions: What are the benefits of the literature review? How do you decide what to include in the literature review?

Thursday, Feb 6 – Construct Validity

Literature Survey Due

No reading – In-class exercise

Week 5: Experiments

Tuesday, Feb 11 – Experiments I

Mintz, Alex, and Nehemia Geva. 1993. “Why Don’t Democracies Fight Each Other?: An Experimental Study.” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 37 (3): 484–503

Guided reading questions: How do the authors test their hypotheses? What are the pros and cons of this approach?

Thursday, Feb 13 – Experiments II

Chattopadhyay, Raghavendra, and Esther Duflo. 2004. “Women as policy makers: Evidence from a randomized policy experiment in India.” *Econometrica* 72 (5): 1409–1443

Guided reading questions: How do the authors test their hypotheses? How is it different from the article we read last time?

Week 6: Experiments Continued

Tuesday, Feb 18 – Experimental Ethics

Willis, Derek. 2014. “Professors’ Research Project Stirs Political Outrage in Montana.” *The New York Times*.

Guided reading questions: What factors should researchers consider to decide whether an experiment is ethical?

Thursday, Feb 20 – Natural Experiments

Doherty, Daniel, Alan S. Gerber, and Donald P. Green. 2006. “Personal Income and Attitudes toward Redistribution: A Study of Lottery Winners.” *Political Psychology* 27 (3): 441–458

Guided reading questions: Why do the authors study lottery winners? How is this approach similar to an experiment? How is it different?

Week 7: Quasi-Experimental Designs

Tuesday, Feb 25 – Interrupted Time-Series Designs

Campbell, Donald T., and H. Laurence Ross. 1968. “The Connecticut Crackdown on Speeding: Time-Series Data in Quasi-Experimental Analysis.” *Law and Society Review* 31 (1): 33–53

Guided reading questions: How is an interrupted time series different than an experiment? How does this affect the validity of the design?

Thursday, Feb 27 – Other Quasi-Experimental Designs

Literature Review Draft Due

Reading TBA

Week 8: We’re Almost Done With Experiments, I Promise

Tuesday, Mar 3 – Other Quasi-Experimental Designs II

Fowler, James H. 2008. “The Colbert bump in Campaign donations: More truthful than truthy.” *PS - Political Science and Politics* 41 (3): 533–539

Guided reading questions: How does the author test the effect of appearing on the Colbert Report? Are there any problems with this approach?

Thursday, Mar 5 – Midterm Exam

No reading – Exam I in class

Week 9: Spring Break

Spring Break – No Class

Week 10: Review

Tuesday, Mar 17 – Course Changes

No Reading

Thursday, Mar 19 – Exam I Review

No Reading

Week 11: Advanced Theory-Building

Tuesday, Mar 24 – Game Theory

Fearon, James D. 1995. “Rationalist Explanations for War.” *International Organization* 49 (3): 379–414

Guided reading questions: This author turns their argument into a game-theoretic model. How does that model work?

Thursday, Mar 26 – Simulations

Artzrouni, Marc, and John Komlos. 1996. “The Formation of the European State System: A Spatial “Predatory” Model.” *Historical Methods* 29 (3): 126–134

Guided reading questions: How do the authors test their argument? What are the pros and cons of testing a hypothesis this way? Don’t worry too much about the math, but pay attention to the process they use and their results.

Week 12: Qualitative Research Designs

Tuesday, Mar 31 – Case Studies

Skarbek, David. 2011. “Governance and Prison Gangs.” *American Political Science Review* 105 (04): 702–716

Guided reading questions: How is this case study different than the other approaches we have read about? What the advantages and disadvantages of the author’s approach?

Thursday, Apr 2 – Techniques in Qualitative Research

No reading

Week 13: Survey Research

Tuesday, Apr 7 – Survey Research Designs

“Probability Sampling,” in Trochim, William M.K. 2004. *Research Methods Knowledge Base*, at <https://socialresearchmethods.net/kb/probability-sampling/>.

Guided reading questions: How does sampling work? Why is it important to get a random sample?

Thursday, Apr 9 – Political Polling

Theory and Hypotheses Draft Due

Nate Silver, “The State of Polls 2019,” at <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-state-of-the-polls-2019/>.

Guided reading questions: How are polls conducted? What challenges make it difficult to get accurate results from polls?

Week 14: Working with Data

Tuesday, Apr 14 – Data in Political Science

No Reading

Thursday, Apr 16 – Bivariate Relationships

No Reading

Week 15: Observational Research

Tuesday, Apr 21 – Sample Selection and Multivariate Analysis

Lupu, Yonatan. 2013. *Best Evidence: The Role of Information in Domestic Judicial Enforcement of International Human Rights Agreements*. Vol. 67

Guided reading questions: The author identifies a problem with studying the effect of treaties: what is that problem? How does the author solve it? You don't have to understand the math behind the author's solution, but you should try to understand what is wrong and why it needs to be fixed.

Thursday, Apr 23 – Applied Observational Research

Dorff, Cassy. 2017. "Violence, kinship networks, and political resilience: Evidence from Mexico." *Journal of Peace Research* 54 (4): 558-573

Guided reading questions: What does the author think explains political participation? How does the author measure this?

Week 16: Emerging Issues in Political Science Research

Tuesday, Apr 28 – Big Data

Bond, Robert M., Christopher J. Fariss, Jason J. Jones, Adam D.I. Kramer, Cameron Marlow, Jaime E. Settle, and James H. Fowler. 2012. "A 61-million-person experiment in social influence and political mobilization." *Nature* 489 (7415): 295-298

Guided reading questions: What new issues arise when including this many people in a study?

Thursday, Apr 30 – Research Ethics II

No Reading – Work on final paper

Finals Week

Tuesday, May 5

Research Design Paper Due Tuesday, May 5 at 11:59pm

Acknowledgments

This syllabus is subject to change over the course of the semester. Students will be notified of any updates to the syllabus. Elements of this syllabus are based on courses taught by Christopher Fariss, Douglas Lemke, Michael Nelson, and Anne Whitesell.