Course objectives

The primary objective of this course is for students to design an original research project based on field experience, such as an internship. This seminar explores the research strategies and methodological tools social scientists use to frame and answer empirical questions. Unlike other political science courses, the main focus will be on acquiring a particular set of analytical skills rather than on mastering substantive subject matter.

My hope is that when you finish this seminar, you will have developed mastery on three parallel tracks. Track 1 focuses on how to design a study that sheds new light onto a particular question or public policy problem. Track 2 focuses on the basic methodological approaches social scientists employ to make causal claims. Track 3 focuses on sharpening your analytic and writing skills such that you are better able to communicate your research findings to a broad audience.

In this course you will learn how to frame proper research questions and subsequent hypotheses, design an appropriate research plan, and collect and analyze data. This course does not exclusively focus on quantitative or qualitative approaches, but rather on being able to critique causal claims—an intellectual skill that engages a fundamentally philosophical question: “How do we know what we know?” It is also a skill that is increasingly applicable across a host of fields, including law, public policy, nonprofit management and marketing. My aim is to make you a better reader and critic of social science research. However, this course is also designed to make you a creative producer of new insights. When you finish this subject successfully, you will be able to design a research study, be able to communicate and evaluate empirical arguments, and have an employable skill.
Course Materials


Course Policies

*The Basics*

1. Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. Papers should be your own and you must cite sources appropriately. I expect familiarity with Marquette’s policies on academic honesty. Plagiarism on any of the written assignments will result in an ‘F’ in the course (not just the assignment).

2. With the exception of a catastrophic event, I do not accept late work. I will deduct a half letter grade for each day that an assignment is late.

3. Proper email etiquette. A professional email to a professor should read “Hi Dr/Professor ______” and state one’s business clearly and without text-speak. I will do my best to send you a prompt response.

Disability Accommodations

Students requiring disability accommodations should register with the relevant campus office. I will be happy to accommodate in compliance with the ADA and Marquette University policy.

Assignments

Grades will be determined based on small assignments, in-class quizzes, a written research design, and class attendance/participation.

- **Small Assignments:** There are 3 assignments due throughout the semester (specific due dates listed below). They are worth 10% each. (30%)

- **Quizzes:** there will be short, unannounced quizzes in class. You may use your notes, but not your texts. If you’ve done the readings in advance, you should have no trouble doing well on these quizzes. (10%)

- **Research proposal:** A 2-3 page proposal is due October 11th. Your proposal should identify the research question you want to study and why it is worth studying. Then start digging into the literature on your topic. What have others said about your topic? What theories address it? Are the findings in previous studies consistent or is there disagreement? Your proposal should have a logical flow: what is the question, why is it important, what do we know, what don’t we know. At this stage I do not expect you to know the particulars of your research design. The key here is that you have identified a suitable research question and have a path to move forward. (10%)

- **Research Design:** The primary assignment of the course is a research design, which includes a research question, theory and literature review, hypotheses, variable operationalization, and what your expected findings would be if you were to actually conduct the research. You will present your research design at our last class meeting. Each presenter will be assigned a discussant, who will be responsible for constructively critiquing the research design. Papers should be made available to the discussant ahead of time. Your role as a discussant will count towards your participation grade. Presenters may wish to incorporate the suggestions of the discussant and the rest of the audience into their final research design. (30%)
Class attendance/participation: The success of this course depends upon your regular contributions to classroom discussion. Attendance is mandatory and I expect you to come ready to discuss the readings. Unexcused absences will result in a reduction of five percentage points per absence from your participation grade (20%)

Grading scale

94-100 A  
88-93 AB  
82-87 B  
77-81 BC  
72-76 C  
66-71 CD  
62-65 D  
62 and below F

Class Meetings

8/30: Introduction and course overview

Questions for Discussion:
1. What do you expect to get out of this course?
2. How might you connect your internship experience to this class?

9/6: The Scientific Study of Politics

Pollack, Chapter 3, pp. 48-76.


Questions for Discussion:
1. What makes knowledge “scientific?”
2. How do we develop a good political science question?
3. What is a research design? What are its purposes?
4. What distinguishes an acceptable explanation from an unacceptable explanation?

9/13: The Search for Explanations

Pollack, Chapter 4


Questions for Discussion:
1. How many different research designs did you count in studies discussed in Odell? How do they differ? What are they all trying to explain? What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of the different research designs?

2. What are rival explanations? Why it is important to take them into account?

3. What is a literature review? What tips would you give if someone asked you how to do one?

9/20: Research design I: Experimental Logic and Causal Inference


DUE: Theory Assignment

Questions for Discussion:
1. Why do Gerber and Green argue that they need to conduct an experiment to answer their research question? What are the limits to nonexperimental studies of voter mobilization?
2. What is the logic of control?
3. What do we mean by “external validity” and “internal validity”?
4. What are the steps to conducting an experiment?

9/27: Research design II: Non-Experimental Large-N Designs


“NOTE: Be sure to read this one AFTER reading Bartels (2005)

Questions of Discussion?
1. What are selection effects? How did Fowler construct his sample to avoid this problem?
2. What evidence does Bartels give for his hypothesis that public opinion on the Bush tax cuts was unconnected to voters’ economic self-interest?
3. On what grounds do Lupia et al. critique Bartels?

10/4: Research design III: Small-N Designs, Case Selection and Inference


**Questions for Discussion:**
1. What is case-study research?
2. What were Dreze and Sen trying to explain? What evidence does their comparative case study provide?
3. What was Gamson trying to explain? What evidence does he present?

10/11: Conceptualization and Measurement

Pollack, Chapters 1 and 2


Questions for discussion:
1. What is measurement error?
2. What do we mean by “measurement validity” and “measurement reliability?”
3. What measurement problems are raised in the personality tests discussed in Gladwell’s article?
4. What sorts of problems are raised in Gladwell’s article on college rankings?

DUE: Research proposal

10/18: No class – Fall Break

10/25: Making Controlled Comparisons

Pollack, Chapter 5


**Questions for Discussion:**
1. What is a “spurious relationship?”
2. What was Cooper and Schwerdt’s research question? What data did they use? What was their sample? How did they test their hypotheses?

11/1: Foundations of Statistical Inference

Pollack, Chapter 6


Questions for Discussion:
1. What were the problems with the 1936 poll?
2. What is a sample?
3. How do we calculate the mean and standard deviation of a sample?
4. How can we use the normal curve to make inferences about the information in a sample?

11/8: Tests of Significance and Measures of Association
Pollack, Chapter 7

Questions for Discussion:
1. How can we gauge the strength of an empirical relationship?
2. What relationships did Bennett and Resnick test in their article? How can we interpret their results?

DUE: Descriptive Statistics Assignment

11/15: Correlation and Linear Regression
Pollack, Chapter 8

Questions for Discussion:
1. What is “correlation?”
2. How did Caiazza assess the relationship between women-friendly policy and women’s representation in elected office? What did she find?

11/22: Public Opinion Polls

Questions for Discussion:
1. What are some of the pitfalls of public opinion polling? What kinds of mistakes can skew poll results?
2. Do you think journalists do an OK job reporting poll results? Why or why not?

DUE: Regression Assignment

11/29: Participant Observation and Focus Groups


Questions for Discussion:
1. Why did Pinderhughes choose to conduct focus groups? How did they give him leverage on his research question?
2. Pinderhughes concludes that “the process of racial conflict can only be understood by examining how a number of factors combine to produce ethnic and racial conflict.” How does this research logic differ from the “logic of control” we discussed earlier in the semester?
3. What is participant observation? How can it guide and inform theories of politics?
4. What does Fenno mean by: “the observation of politicians brings with it a sharpened sensitivity to sequence as a variable in political analysis”?
5. What are Glaser’s seven lessons of participant-observation research?

12/6: Student research design presentations
***Class will go until 7:00, Pizza will be provided***

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