POS 3703
Scope & Methods of Political Science
Spring 2021

Instructor: Jonathan Knuckey

Course Overview

The majority of political scientists have adopted a method for studying political questions that differs from the approach taken by journalists, historians, and political commentators. They have adopted the **scientific method**, to systematically test explanations of political phenomena. Much of the research in political science uses statistical tests to determine which explanations are best supported by the data. This course, however, is not a statistics course and you will not be expected to learn and memorize scary looking mathematical formulas! Indeed, we use statistics regularly in our lives without ever fearing statistics, as any sports fan would attest! It's just the same for political scientists, except rather than using statistics to help describe the performance of a football or baseball team we are using statistics to better help us describe and explain politics.

This course will certainly help you understand the reading materials in many upper-level classes and equip you with the skills to research topics for term papers, to participate in

the internship program and to design an honors thesis. Specifically the course will help you hone your skills in the following areas:

- How the scientific method is applied to the social sciences;
- How social science research is designed;
- How data are collected;
- How data are analyzed;
- How presentations of research findings are interpreted.

Thus, by the time you complete this course you will have developed critical thinking and analytic skills that you can also apply in a variety of career settings, and which are prized by many employers in both the public and private sectors.

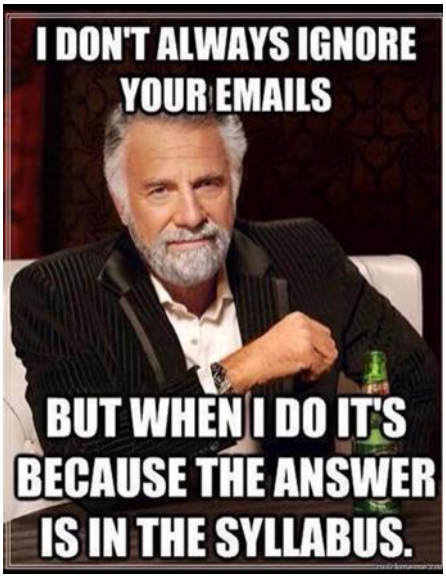
I know this will seem like an entirely different kind of course that you are used to. In this course, we are not focused on the content knowledge of subfield in political science, but are more interested in understanding the **methods** that most political scientists use to understand and build knowledge about political phenomena. Thus, you will be learning how to "do" political science yourself, and critically how to become a producer - not just a consumer - of research on politics.

How to Contact Me.

Office hours: Via Zoom, Monday, 9.00-11.30am; Wednesday, 9-11am

Email: Use email in Webcourses. If you write me M-F, I should get back to you within 24 hours. If I don't, please feel free to send me a reminder!

Please don't use the comments box on assignments to message me. I receive no notification of messages sent here (why it is set up that way, I have no idea!). So always use the email in Webcourses if you wish to follow up on any assignment.



I will answer any message within 24 hours. Remember to allow adequate time for a reply to a question about an assignment. If you send a question a few hours before an assignment is due, I may not see it in time to provide help you out.

A note on etiquette: You are what you email, which means your instructors will often shape their opinion of you according to the quality of the email messages you are sending. To that end, be sure to please keep the tone of your emails professional, sign your emails with your name and include an appropriate salutation (Hint: you can't go wrong with "Dear Dr. Knuckey").

Requirements for a Web-Based Class

This is a completely web-based class, and, consequently, requires a different approach in terms of requirements than a regular class. Most obviously, we will not be meeting as a class where you are listening to lectures two or three times a week. However, you should realize that a web-based class does not mean that you will be doing less work. Indeed, as those of you who have taken web-based classes before will attest, a completely on-line class will require that you take a much more active role in your education as compared to a regular face-to-face class.

Generally I have found that students who do well in a web-based class are self-motivated and have usually received good grades (B or higher) in regular face-to-face classes.

My general rule of thumb for any undergraduate college-level course is that you should devote **2 to 3 hours of study per course credit hour per week**. As this is a three

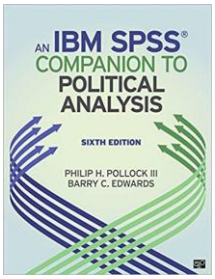
credit hour class you should plan on devoting **6 to 9 hours** per week to this class. This involves reading, taking notes and taking quizzes and other writing assignments.

I know you have other commitments—other classes, jobs and life in general—and that you will not *always* be able to devote this time every week. But managing your time is essential to doing well in any class, especially a web-based class. You will also find that much of the material in this class is about applying the material learned, rather than memorizing or looking things up.

Thus, to do well in the class you need to make an investment in it throughout the semester—not just the night an assignment is due.

Book to Purchase

You should buy the following book: *An IBM SPSS Companion to Political Analysis (6th edition).* Make sure it's the 6th edition -- that has the **blue cover** shown below. , which might be cheaper than through the UCF bookstore. I would caution against buying a used copy as the exercises at the end of each chapter may have been torn out. An eTextbook version is fine, and is cheaper -- and maybe more convenient -- that a physical copy.



You will need this book when we start to the second part of the course -- after the midterm exam -- that deals with data analysis using SPSS, which is one of the best data analytic software (more on SPSS below). Not only will this book help you learn how to use SPSS, but it contains exercises at the end of the chapter that will gives you hands-on practice in actually "doing" political science research.

I strongly recommend purchasing this book no later than October 1st. Of course, you may want to just go ahead and get it at the start of the semester so you know you definitely will have the book when needed.

For the material we will cover up to the midterm exam, I've decided not to use a second book. I'm well aware how expensive college textbooks are, and having you buy two would be a bit much. Thus in lieu of a textbook I'll be posting narrated Power Point presentations. Essentially each one of these will be like a mini lecture. I think you'll get just as much out of these as you would reading the material from a textbook

Statistical Software - SPSS

After the midterm exam, the course will introduce you to SPSS, a widely used program for data analysis. You will use SPSS to learn the types of data analytic skills that is common-place in contemporary political science research.

I'll got into more depth about SPSS after the midterm exam. However, for now just be aware that after the midterm exam you will need access to SPSS. UCF now has off-site access to SPSS available for those with an NID (via the UCF Apps site). I'll have detailed instructions on how access SPSS this way later in the semester.

Weekly Modules

Requirements for each week of class will be detailed in modules that are accessed in Webcourses. I strongly recommend printing out the requirements for each module and making sure you note due dates for assignments. Always begin by reading the Module overview as that gives you a sense of what you be learning from each module.

I do not release all the modules at once in order to provide as much feedback as possible on quizzes and assignments. If every module was released at once some students would invariably rush through several in a week, giving little time to provide feedback and hence facilitate understanding of the material. I believe this approach best captures the pace of a regular course.

Assignment due dates: Due dates can be found in the Course Schedule below and in each module. With just a few exceptions this is always a Sunday.

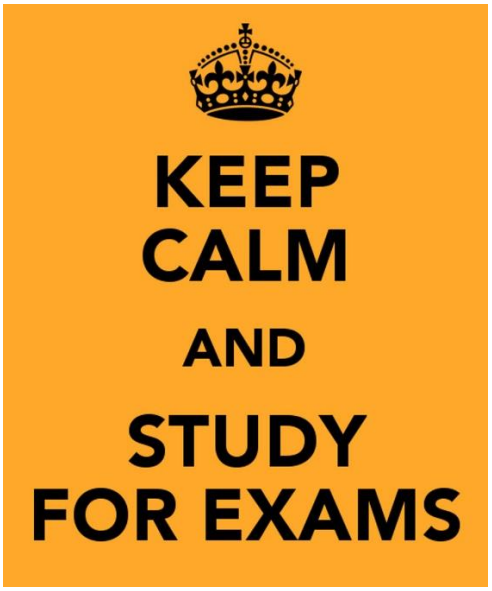
The deadline for any work will always be midnight on the day due. However, submissions will still be accepted up to 5pm on the following day. Anything submitted after 5pm will not receive credit.

All deadlines are, of course, for Eastern time, so keep that in mind if you are in a different time-zone for part, or all, of the semester!

Please remember that you will know what assignment is due, and what that assignment entails, well in advance of a due date. **The single biggest source of missed points on assignments is starting an assignment too late and not making enough time to complete the assignment.** So pace yourself on all assignments. If you plan ahead you can complete an assignment over multiple days, which is far more conducive to learning than opening an assignment up just a couple of hours before it is due and rushing through it.

Full assignment details will be given in each Module.

Exams



There will be two exams given during the semester scheduled as follows:

- The midterm exam is taken in Webcourses. The exam must be submitted by **Sunday, February 14th** You will have 3 hours to complete the exam once you open the exam.

- The final exam exam is taken in Webcourses. The exam must be submitted by **Sunday, May 2nd.** You will have 3 hours to complete the exam once you open the exam.

Details on the format of each exam and content covered can be found on the Midterm and Final Exam tabs, which you can access by clicking on "Modules" on the navigation bar on the left.

Once you begin the exam, it must then be completed within the allotted time period of 3 hours. I strongly recommend that you take the exam somewhere that you won't be distracted and that has reliable internet connection. If you know somewhere that is prone to internet connections being down then take the exam somewhere else.

Remember, while the exams are essentially like a take-home exam they are timed. Furthermore, you will need to have understood and absorbed the material ahead of the exam. So treat these exams like a regular exam that requires studying for ahead of time. Students who take the exam without studying can and do fail the exams.

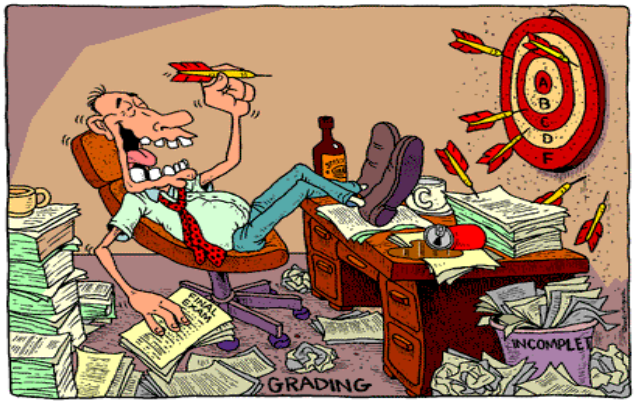
Student Conduct

All students are expected to adhere to the UCF Golden Rule, which includes conducting oneself in a professional manner both in the classroom and in written and verbal communication with me and to other students. Violations of the Golden Rule -- both academic and non-academic -- can result in a referral to the Office of Student Conduct.

Unauthorized Use of Class Materials

There are many fraudulent websites claiming to offer study aids to students but are actually cheat sites. They encourage students to upload course materials, such as test questions, individual assignments, and examples of graded material. Such materials are the intellectual property of instructors, the university, or publishers and may not be distributed without prior authorization. **Students who engage in such activity are in violation of academic conduct standards and may face penalties.**

Grades



My philosophy of grading is decidedly against what is generally known as "competitive grading" or "grading on the curve." You are not competing against fellow students for grades in this class. You are competing against yourself at all times, hopefully pushing yourself to excel against my objective standards of what students should reasonably get out of this class.

Average mastery of those standards is the baseline for earning an "average" grade of C. Do above-average work, you earn a B. Do excellent work, you earn an A…. and so on. In any case, please understand that the points you earn toward a final grade will not be jerked around up or down to fit some predetermined grade curve. If everyone deserves an A, they'll get it. If everyone flunks, they'll all get an F and then, in all likelihood, I will leave the jurisdiction quickly under cover of night in heavy disguise and an assumed name!

Your final grade will be weighted as follows:

- Quizzes: 25%
- SPSS exercises: 25%
- Midterm exam, 25%
- Final exam, 25%

As there are ample grading opportunities in this course **there will be no extra credit given.** If you know you need a certain grade at the end of the semester, you know you need it at the beginning. Under no circumstances can or will a course grade be awarded on any basis other than those stated in the syllabus.

Grade boundaries are as follows:

A, 90%+

A-, 89-89.9%

B+, 86-88.9%

B, 82-85.9%

B-, 80-81.9%

C+, 76-79.9%

C, 72-75.9%

C-, 70-71.9%

D, 62-69.9%

D- 60-61.9%

F, 59% and below.

Students typically obsess about grades too late, often at the end of the semester. There is little that can be done at that point. So, if you think you are struggling in this class please come and talk to me as often as you like - never think you are being a pest! I cannot recall ever failing a student who early sought this kind of help. However, students who are struggling and delay assistance do fail.

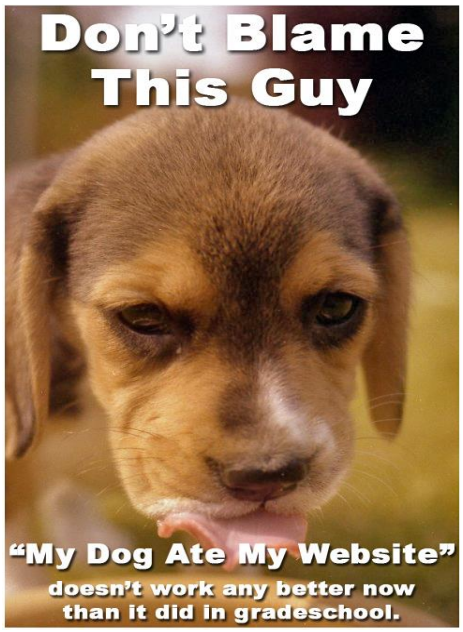
You will be able to access your grades in Webcourses. Please make sure that grades entered here are correct. While every effort is made to ensure grades are correct, from time-to-time errors can occur (incorrectly add/subtract, miss points, and even fail to understand what a student wrote).

A time limit of **1 week** is imposed on all change of grade requests after the grade has posted for a completed piece or work. This is sufficient time to identify any errors. After that prior grades will not be reviewed. This is to bring the course grade to completion and to minimize "end of semester" opportunism.

When grades fall exactly on the borderline of letter grades (91.9%, 89.9%, 85.9%, 81.9, 79.9, etc, etc), I'll take the overall performance of a student throughout the semester into account when deciding whether to round up.

Grade grievance policies are outlined under the UCF Golden Rule.

Make-up Policy and Incompletes



The time and dates for all assignments and the exams are fixed in krypton-coated granite encased in a hydrogen bomb-proof vault! These dates are also known at least one week ahead of time. In other words, an extension on an assignment, or make-up exam will only be given in the most exceptional circumstances that are beyond the control of a student.

Note that requests for an assignment extension after an assignment deadline will not be granted, unless a student was unable to make such a request prior to the deadline. However, this will have to involve something truly exceptional.

The time and dates for all assignments are fixed in krypton-coated granite encased in a hydrogen bomb-proof vault! These dates are also known at least one week ahead of time. As noted above you always get a grace period on any assignment. An extension on any assignment will only be given in the most exceptional circumstances that are beyond the control of a student, and will require documentation.

Note that requests for an assignment extension after an assignment deadline will not be granted, unless a student was unable to make such a request prior to the deadline.

Here are some unacceptable excuses for late-work, and it is by no means an exhaustive list:

- *"My computer is broken...."*
- *"My computer was stolen...."*
- *"I accidentally deleted the file....".*

- *"My computer magically deleted my homework from the hard drive. I do not understand it myself...."*
- *"The internet is broken...."*
- *"I forgot to attach the assignment...."*
- *"I could not find the assignment...."*
- *"I did the quiz but forgot to submit it..."*
- *"I was on holiday..."*
- *"It was my birthday so I never got around to the assignment..."*

The above are all **actual excuses** I have received. Many, as you can see, are computer-related, which are the "dog ate my homework" excuses of the technology age and will not fly! It is your responsibility to secure ample time at a computer, make backups of your work, check you did not submit a blank assignment, check you correctly submitted the right assignment and generally plan ahead—do whatever it takes! Completing an assignment the day before it is due is always a wise move as that provides a cushion for anything that might come up that is unexpected.

From time to time the servers hosting Webcourses at UCF have been known to go down. If this happens UCF will normally post an announcement and if this coincides with the time when an assignment or exam is due, I will make alternative arrangements.

I do not consider vacations or other trips out of town (other than when the student is away from campus representing an official university function) to be exceptional circumstances. Of course, this is an on-line class, so as long as you have reliable internet access being out of town does not really present a problem. Having internet access for a web-based course is assumed. If you are going to be out of town for more than a week with no internet access during the semester, then you may want to reconsider taking this web-based course.

Religious Holidays

Any student missing an assignment, exam or any other work because of observance of religious holidays shall be given an opportunity during that semester to make up missed work. The make-up will apply to the religious holiday absence only. It shall be the **responsibility of the student to notify the instructor no later than the end of the first week of class of his or her intention to participate in religious holidays** which do not fall on state holidays or periods of class recess. This policy shall not apply in the event that administering the test or examination at an alternate time would impose an unavoidable hardship on the instructor or the university.

Incompletes

An incomplete standing will only be granted if requested in writing to me (a phone call is not acceptable). You must explain why you are requesting an incomplete standing and include, where appropriate, documentation that must be original and verifiable. Such documentation must be on a letterhead, and contain a contact name and telephone number. An incomplete will only be granted if you have a passing grade in the class.

Accessibility Statement

The University of Central Florida is committed to providing reasonable accommodations. This syllabus is available in alternate formats upon request. Students who need accommodations must be registered with Student Accessibility Services before requesting accommodations from the professor.

Deployed Active Duty Military Students

If you are a deployed active duty military student and feel that you may need a special accommodation due to that unique status, please contact me at the start of the semester to discuss your circumstances.

Disclaimer

I reserve the right to change, add or modify any part of the syllabus. Of course, advance notice will be given of any such changes.

Course Schedule

Module 1 - The Scientific Method and the Study of Politics

- Quiz: Syllabus Quiz (1/13) *(This quiz will be used to demonstrate student academic engagement during the first week of the semester)*
- Quiz: "The Scientific Method and the Study of Politics" (due 1/17)

Module 2 - Conceptualizing and Measuring Political Phenomena

- Quiz "Conceptual and Operational Definitions." (due 1/24)

Module 3: Approaches to Data Collection and Types of Data in Political Science Research

- Quiz "Approaches to Data Collection and Types of Data" (due 1/31)
- Quiz: "Identifying Units of Analysis and Levels of Measurement" (due 2/3)

Module 4 - Types of Variables in Political Science Research

- Quiz "Variables, Variation & Explanation" (due 2/7)

Module 5: Testing Hypotheses in Political Science Research

- Quiz "Hypotheses & Hypothesis Testing" (due 2/14)

******Midterm Exam******

The exam is taken in Webcourses. The exam must be submitted by **Sunday, February 21st (midnight)**

You will have 3 hours to complete the exam once you open the exam.

Module 6: Doing Data Analysis in Political Science - An Introduction to SPSS

- Assignment: Chapter 1, Introduction to SPSS exercises (due 2/28)

Module 7: Descriptive Statistics; Transforming Variables

- Assignment: Chapter 2, Descriptive Statistics exercises (due 3/7)
- Assignment: Chapter 3, Transforming Variables exercises (due 3/14)

Module 8: Bivariate Analysis - Comparing Two Variables

- Assignment: Chapter 4, Making Comparisons exercises (due 3/21)

Module 9: Controlling for and Assessing the Effects of a Third Variable

- Assignment: Chapter 5, Making Controlled Comparisons exercises (due 3/28)

Module 10: Sample Means, Statistical Significance and Measures of Association

- Assignment: Chapter 6, Making Inferences About Sample Means exercises (due 4/4)

- Assignment: Chapter 7, Chi-square and Measures of Association exercises (due 4/11)

Module 11: Correlation and Regression Analysis

- Assignment: Chapter 8, Correlation and Linear Regression (due 4/25)

Final Exam

The exam is taken in Webcourses. The exam must be submitted by **Sunday, May 2nd (midnight)**

You will have 3 hours to complete the exam once you open the exam.