POS 3703

Scope & Methods of Political Science

Fall 2023

Instructor: Jonathan Knuckey

Course Overview

Welcome to the real world of political science research! 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 empirical data to test hypotheses, and statistical tests to determine which explanations are best supported by the data.

Although you will be introduced to how political scientists use data and statistics in their research, 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 or undertake your own independent research, for example an Honors Undergraduate 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 in addition to law school and graduate school.

So, I know this will seem like an entirely different kind of political science course than that you are used to. This is because we are not focused on the content knowledge of subfield in political science, but are more interested in understanding the **approaches and methods** that most political scientists use to understand and build knowledge about questions and puzzles about politics that interest them. However, I hope you will find that learning how to "do" political science yourself, and how to become a **producer** --- not just a consumer of the work of others -- is both empowering and fun!

About Me and How to Contact Me.

I joined UCF in 1999. I received my BA in Political Theory and Institutions from the **University of Liverpool,** my MA in U.S. History and Politics from the **University of Keele** and my Ph.D. in Political Science from the **University of New Orleans**.

My main areas of research and teaching are southern politics, voting behavior, campaigns and elections, political parties, race and politics, gender and politics and comparative politics.

Outside of of my day job I am a huge football (soccer!) fan and an avid supporter of **Liverpool** and, of course, **Orlando City F.C**.

Office: Political Science department, Phillips Hall 302L

Office hours. Face-to-face, **Tuesday, 1.30pm-2.30pm; Thursday, 4pm-6pm.**

I am also happy to meet outside of these times if it conflicts with your schedule. If you want to use Zoom to meet, use the following Zoom link: **https://ucf.zoom.us/j/6720872288**

Use office hours to not only ask anything about the course material, but also any research ideas you might have or if you just want to talk about future educational or career plans.

Email: Use email in Canvas. If you write me Monday through Friday I should get back to you within 24 hours.

Do 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 an adequate answer.

Please don't use the comments box on assignments to message me. I receive no notification of messages sent here. So always use email in Canvas if you wish to follow up on any assignment.

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").

Textbook

For this course we will read chapters from the following:

- **Josue Franco et al, *Introduction to Political Science Research Methods, 1st edition***

This is a free online Open Education Resource Textbook that surveys the research methods employed in political science. The textbook includes chapters that cover: history and development of the empirical study of politics; the scientific method; theories, hypotheses, variables, and units; conceptualization, operationalization and measurement of political concepts; and elements of research design.

Links to chapters associated with topics are also provided in each Module.

When we turn to doing data analysis using SPSS (see below) after the midterm exam, I will simply post my own notes on how to run different procedures in SPSS -- this along with the Power Point slides will provide sufficient information that does not necessitate you having to shell out money for another textbook, which really is just going to give you exactly the same information.

SPSS

This course will introduce you to SPSS(Statistical Package for Social Scientists), a widely used program that political scientists use to conduct data analysis.

Using a series of data sets, -- which are among the best data available to professional researchers -- we will use **SPSS** to learn the types of data analytic skills that are common-place in contemporary political science research. Even after our class is over. You might even want to use SPSS to further analyze these data files and conduct your own research in an independent study or Honors Undergraduate Thesis.

You will need access to SPSS. In addition to on-campus access, such as the computer lab we meet in for classes, the Classroom Building Lab and Tech Commons lab, UCF now has off-site access to SPSS available (via the UCF Apps site). I'll have detailed instructions on how to access SPSS this way later in the semester.

Overall research process assignment

Don't worry -- I'm not going to hit you with a long research paper at the end of the semester! Instead, the purpose of this assignment is to help you put back together the various stages of the research process that we have covered during the semester.

You will choose from a list of research topics I will provide and then go about the different stages of the research process, including testing your own hypotheses using SPSS to analyze data from an original data set. Actually I hope this assignment is fun to do! Potentially it might form the basis of an original research project you might want to further develop in an independent study or an **Honors Undergraduate Thesis (HUT).** In fact I have recently chaired several HUTs that started their life as this assignment.

You will have ample time in the last week of our course to work on it. I will be more than happy to provide input, assistance and suggestions, as you work on it.

Exam

There will be a final exam at the end of the semester. It will be taken in Webcourses. You will have 2 hours to complete the exam. While you will be presented with output from SPSS to interpret you will **not** need access to SPSS for the final exam.

The exam will be open during the final exam period from **Monday, December 4th to Friday, December 9th.** You can take the exam on any during during the final exam period. If taking it on Friday, December 9th, the submission should be made by midnight.

Details on the format of the exam can be found on the **Final Exam** page.

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 chapters, test questions, quizzes, assignments, and examples of graded material. Such materials are the copyrighted, 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.

A note on AI

Any work **written, developed, created, or inspired by artificial intelligence (AI)** is considered plagiarism and will not be tolerated. While the ever-changing (and exciting!) new developments with AI will find their place in our workforces and personal lives, in the realm of education and learning, this kind of technology does not belong. This is because the use of AI robs us all of the opportunity to learn from our experiences and from each other, to play with our creative freedoms, to problem-solve, and to contribute our ideas in authentic ways. In a nutshell, **college is a place for learning.** AI simply cannot do that learning for us.

Group Chats

Group chats -- via GroupMe, Whats App, etc -- are increasingly common and can be used positively for collaboration and connection with your peers. That is good. But they can also be used for nefarious purposes such as sharing answers and other forms of cheating.

Recently I've had to deal with instances where students are reporting other students for sharing information via the class group chat. **Any students on a group chat where cheating is occurring will all be included in any disciplinary action that results from content shared on the chat.**

How can this be avoided, you ask? Just do you own work and don't cut corners. It's pretty easy to avoid.

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.

Your grade will be weighted as follows:

- Homework assignments (not including SPSS exercises): 35%
- SPSS data analysis assignments: 35%
- Overall research process assignment: 10%
- Final exam: 20%

A course grade cannot be earned on any basis other than those stated above.

There is no extra credit for this course.

Grade boundaries are as follows:

A, 92%+

A-, 90-91.9%

B+, 86-89.9%

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% *(Note: For the Political Science major a D- is the minimum passing grade)*

F, 59% and below.

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 requests to review a grade 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.

I sometimes get requests to "bump" overall grades up. Only when grades fall exactly on the borderline of letter grades (91.9%, 89.9%, 85.9%, etc., etc.), will a grade be eligible for the next letter grade. This is not automatic and I'll take the overall performance of a student throughout the semester into account when deciding whether to round up, which includes but is not limited to submission of all assignments and making an effort to answer all questions on assignments.

All work in this course will be graded by me, not a Graduate Teaching Assistant. If you have any questions about grades please don't hesitate to touch base with me directly.

Grade grievance policies are outlined under the **UCF Golden Rule.**

Work Due Dates/Late Submission of Work

Work due dates/time

Due dates will be given in each Module as well as the course schedule below. All deadlines will be **midnight** (eastern time).

"After Hours" Submission Policy

Please note the following policy for late submission:

- Work submitted ***after midnight up to 9.00am the following day*** is considered late, but will fall in the automatic grace period for submission of work and still receive full credit.
- Work submitted ***after 9.00am the following day up to midnight the following da****y* is considered late but can still be submitted but will only receive half credit.
- *No late work will be accepted for credit after this.*

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.

Homework assignments and the SPSS data analysis exercises are not timed, so if you plan ahead you can complete work over multiple days, which is far more conducive to learning than opening a quiz up a few hours before it is due and rushing through it. It also gives you the chance to ask me questions if you are not grasping the material.

Even with an after hours submission policy, some students occasionally still want longer to complete an assignment. Such extensions will not be granted, unless they genuinely are unexpected or there extenuating circumstances beyond the control of the students -- basically, it is an extremely high bar to clear!

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

- *"I had an assignment due for another class..."*
- *I didn't know there was an assignment due..."*
- *"My computer is broken...."*
- *"My computer was stolen...."*
- *"My computer magically deleted my homework from the hard drive. I do not understand it myself...."*
- *"The internet is broken...."*
- *"Canvas mysteriously deleted all my answers..."*
- *"I forgot to attach the assignment...."*
- *"I could not find the assignment...."*
- *"I did the assignment but forgot to submit it..."*
- *"I was on holiday..."*
- *"It was my birthday so I thought you would give me an extension..."*
- *"I didn't understand the assignment..."*
- *"I was on a two week cruise and had no internet access..."*

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's 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 and avoid procrastination—do whatever it takes!

Tip: The wise student will aim to complete an assignment the day before it is due, as that provides a cushion for anything that might come up that is unexpected.

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.

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

Readings, Power Point lectures and assignments will be shown in each Module. New Modules will generally open on Friday of each week.

Module 1: The Scientific Method and the Study of Politics *Assignment: Putting the "Science" in Political Science (due 8/25). Note this assignment is due Friday as it is the assignment that demonstrates academic engagement for financial aid purposes.* *Assignment: The Scientific Method and the Empirical Study of Politics (due 9/3)*
Module 2 - Conceptualizing and Measuring Political Phenomena *Assignment: Conceptualization, Operationalization & Measurement (due 9/10)* *Assignment: Measuring Ideology with the Political Compass (due 9/13)*

Module 3: Approaches to Data Collection and Types of Data in Political Science Research *Assignment: Levels of Measurement (due 9/17)* *Assignment: Units of Analysis & Approaches to Data Collection (due 9/20)*
Module 4 - Types of Variables, Explanation & Causality in Political Science Research *Assignment: Theoretical Explanations for Relationships (due 9/24)* *Assignment: Variables, Explanation & Causality (due 9/27)*
Module 5: Testing Hypotheses in Political Science Research *Assignment: Hypotheses & Hypothesis Testing (due 10/1)*
Module 6: Introduction to SPSS *SPSS Assignment: Access to SPSS (due 10/8)* *SPSS Assignment: An Introduction to SPSS (due 10/15)*

Module 7: Descriptive Statistics *SPSS Assignment: Descriptive Statistics (due 10/22)*
Module 8: Bivariate Analysis - Comparing Two Variables *SPSS Assignment: Bivariate Analysis (due 10/29)*
Module 9: Statistical Significance & Measures of Association *SPSS Assignment: Statistical Significance & Measures of Association (due 11/5)*
Module 10: Controlling for a Third Variable *SPSS Assignment: Controlling for a Third Variable (due 11/12)*

Module 11: Scatterplots, Correlation and Regression Analysis *SPSS Assignment: Scatterplots, Correlation & Regression Analysis (due 11/19)*
Module 12: Overall Research Process *Assignment: Overall Research Process assignment (due 12/3)*
Final Exam *The final exam is taken in Webcourses.* *You will have 2 hours to complete the exam.* *While you will be presented with output from SPSS to interpret you will **not** need access to SPSS for the final exam.* *The exam will be open during the final exam period from **Monday, December 4th to Friday, December 9th.** If taking it on Friday, December 9th, the submission should be made by midnight.*