COLBY COLLEGE
Government 281: Concepts and Methods in Political Science Research

Instructor, Carrie LeVan
Spring 2025
M/W/F: 9:00 – 9:50 AM
Location: Diamond 241

Email: calevan@colby.edu
Office Hours: M/W 10:00—11:00 or by apt.
Office: Diamond 267

Course Description

An introduction to a variety of approaches to the study of political phenomena, intended to prepare students to craft and complete more sophisticated research projects in political science. After discussion of the nature and aims of scientific inquiry and the general features of effective research design, focus is on two broad methodological perspectives: explanation and interpretation. Topics include hypothesis testing, Survey Research, Sampling, Lab and Field Experimentation, Case Studies, Content Analysis, and Statistical Analysis. Students will complete a number of different types of assignments and will apply course ideas to develop their own original research design.

Course Learning Outcomes/Goals

There are two types of Learning goals in this class. The first is "Substantive," which describe the content I hope you learn by the end of this class. The second is "Skill-Development," which describe the critical skills that I hope you develop or improve upon by the end of this class. They are as follows:

Substantive Outcomes:
1. To observe the political around oneself
2. To develop a researchable question
3. To synthesize the existing literature that attempts to address that researchable question
4. To identify a testable hypothesis
5. To differentiate between dependent and independent variables
6. To evaluate the different methods—sampling, surveys, lab experiments, field experiments, case studies—used in the study of politics
7. To analyze the data collected and test the hypothesis
8. To draw conclusions about the results of your test

Skill-Development Outcomes:
1. To improve the clarity—Planning, Organization, Language Choice—of writing
2. To practice public speaking skills
3. To develop Team Working skills
   a. Leadership: organizing team meetings, setting team goals, holding individuals accountable to those goals
   b. Delegating Responsibilities: allocating pieces of a larger project to individual team members
   c. Reliability: following through with assigned tasks, making deadlines, producing high quality results

Requirements

The course will have the following requirements:

Class Attendance and Participation: Each student is required to attend class. It is expected that each student will complete all assigned reading and homework assignments prior to class, so that he/she is prepared to participate. On Mondays, key concepts from the reading will be discussed; on Wednesdays, we will have guided/hands-on practice; on Fridays, we will workshop homework assignments. Attending class is critical to a student's success in this class.

Homework: Every week, a mini assignment will be posted to the Course Moodle page on Monday. The assignment, for most weeks, will be due the upcoming Friday. Students must have the assignment complete before class on Friday, as we will use the assignment in Friday's class. The goals of these assignments are as follows:
*   Apply what was **introduced** in course reading and in Monday's lecture
*   Practice **independently** the skills that were demonstrated on Wednesday.
*   Assess **comprehension** of key research skills before submitting the final project, in which mastery of these skills is essential
*   Receive **feedback** on components of the Final Project before final submission
*   Stay on **schedule** to complete their final project on time

Literature Review: In place of a course Midterm Exam, students will complete a review of the literature. The Literature Review will be a major component of their final course project. I will distribute a description of this assignment in class during Week 4 on February 24th. The assignment will be due Week 7 on March 21st.

Course Paper: Throughout the semester, students will be working in pairs or groups of 3 towards the completion of an original research project, which will be presented in a 20-25 page paper. Each group will develop a research question, review the academic literature, derive a hypothesis, and either propose a test or conduct an actual test of the hypothesis. The final draft of this paper will be due during Week 14 on May 9th.

Final Presentation: In place of a final exam, students will prepare an 8-10 minute presentation of their Original Research Project. I will distribute an overview of the presentation requirements on the final day of class. The Final Presentations will be given during our exam period on TBD.

Required Texts

Johnson, Janet Buttolph; H.T. Reynolds and Jason D. Mycoff. *Political Science Research Methods (8th Edition)*. CA: Sage Press, 2016.
> -Shorthand: PSRM
> -Note: The 7th edition should also be fine

Additional readings will be posted to the course website

Grade Distribution

The weights of grades are distributed as follows:

Participation	10%
Homework	35%
Literature Review	20%
Course Paper	25%
Final Presentation	10%

Grading Scale:
94-100 = A
90-93.9 = A-
87-89.9 = B+
84-86.9 = B
80-83.9 = B-
77-79.9 = C+
74-76.9 = C
70-73.9 = C-
67-69.9 = D+
64-66.9 = D
60-63.9 = D-
Below 60 = F

Student Hours/Office Hours

Student hours (a.k.a. Office Hours) are available on Mondays and Wednesdays from 10:00 to 11:00. Students may also schedule a time to see me via email.

Student hours are an opportunity for you to discuss with me the following: (1) questions about course content, (2) conflicts with class schedule, (3) opportunities for internships, research, jobs, etc. (4) graduation requirements, (5) crazy stuff happening in the news, (6) problems with campus climate, (7) struggles with physical/mental illness, (8) drama with roommate/partner/friends/teammates, (9) just to say, "What up", (10) all of the above and anything in between.

In other words, you don't need a reason to stop by and talk, just do it.

Late Work

Assignments should be handed in when they are due in order to avoid penalties. Students must provide hard copies of assignments, unless otherwise told. Students should not email copies of assignments to me, unless otherwise told. Any work handed in late receives a *penalty of one-third of one letter grade* for every day it is late (starting immediately after the work is due).

This being said, there are legitimate reasons to ask for extensions: illness, injury, family emergency, mental health crisis, Title IX cases, etc. Please, ask for help—including extensions—if you need them. We can make a plan to ensure your success.

Students With Disabilities

Students with College documented disabilities should inform me as soon as possible, so that I can help meet their needs. If you have question or concerns about your disability or suspect that you may qualify for services, you should contact Director of Student Access and Disability Services, Kevin Murray at kjmurray@colby.edu.

For more information on how to attain services, see here: https://life.colby.edu/get-support/access-disability-services/

Instructions for how to use the Alternative Testing Center, if you receive accommodations, can be found here:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1KmJNJmWq2maKtmSPkNoR4_tzXySBxmS2/view

Online Course Evaluations

Every student should complete an evaluation during the evaluation period near the end of the semester. I ask that you provide feedback so that I can improve the course and my teaching in general.

For more information, see
http://www.colby.edu/deanofthecollege/deanofstudents/support/support-services/

Academic Dishonesty

All work completed in this course is expected to be your own. If you are unfamiliar or have questions regarding the College's policy on academic dishonesty, see
http://www.colby.edu/academicintegrity/academic-integrity-on-the-syllabus/

A couple notes about Academic Dishonesty:
1. It is okay to use other people's ideas and/or words, just give them credit when you do. That is not cheating. Use proper citation to do this. You should do this for major assignments and on smaller assignments as well. You should do this in tweets, and Instagram posts too just by tagging/hyperlinking the original author or creator.
2. It's okay to work together with classmates on assignments, when a professor has explicitly given permission. When in doubt, ask. When a professor explicitly says you should work independently on an assignment, you should ALWAYS do the work alone.
3. If you are unsure whether you should cite something, ask. Transparency is always the best policy.
4. Lying to a professor is considered academic dishonesty.
5. People turn to cheating when they lack confidence or mismanage their time. Avoid both by using the resources provided at Colby: go to tutoring, the writing center, library office hours, professor office hours, TA office hours, create study groups, block out time in your schedule dedicated to completing assignments.
6. Ask for help, everyone else is and you should to. Asking for help is NOT cheating, it is how you are successful.

Policy on the Use of Generative AI (i.e., Chat GPT)

Generative AI is increasingly becoming a part of our day-to-day lives and it is a tool that can "potentially" help us master content and skills more efficiently. Not learning to use generative AI tools, like Chat GPT, is not an option; we must and we should.

In this course, you *may* use generative AI programs in particular stages of your work: preparatory—brainstorming, outlining, prewriting, idea generating—and proofing—editing, spell checking, grammar checking, creating works cited, etc. This, however, comes with some caveats and warnings:

1. Be aware that the use of these tools may also stifle your own independent and creative thinking by causing you to constrain your ideas to the ones the tool has produced and to not include your own unique lived experience, your own learning from across campus, this course's specific content, and your discussions with classmates and peers.
2. Know that material produced by these tools tend to be inaccurate, incomplete, and/or problematic (racist, sexist, homophobic, antisemitic, etc.). You are responsible for the final product you present and will be graded based on what you have submitted.
3. These tools have a tendency to "hallucinate" references (present seemingly plausible sources/citations as real when they are not). Do NOT trust any references until you have cross-listed and read them.

Like any other source, you MUST disclose the use of generative AI and appropriately cite all use. For example, you must place in quotation marks any sentences or suggestions written by the tool. Failure to do so will be considered a violation of our academic integrity policy and will be reported as plagiarism. *If you are unsure whether you should cite, just ask me.* Transparency is the best policy. You are not breaking the rules by using generative AI; so, let me know when you are. Do not take credit for ideas that are not your own.

Last note: Generative AI is here forever; you must learn to use it. However, you *must* remain more creative, critical, analytical, inventive, intuitive than the model. Do not make yourself obsolete; be better than ChatGPT![1]

Schedule of Course
PART I: LAYING THE FOUNDATION—MOVING FROM PUNDIT TO SCIENTIST

Week 1: Is Political Science a Science?
February 5: Course Introductions
Reading: None

February 7: The Debate
Reading: PSRM—Chapter 1
NOTE: Distribute the Course Paper Assignment

---

[1] Used language and ideas from here to construct this policy around generative AI

Week 2: The Scientific Method Applied to Political Science
February 10: What is the Scientific Method?
Reading: PSRM—Chapter 2
(ONLINE): "What Does 'Political' Mean?"

February 12: Applying the Scientific Method to the Study of Politics
-Workshop: Topics in the News

February 14: Making your First Observation
HW: Excited about News
Goal: Finding Our Research Groups

Week 3: What do you Want to Know: Finding Your Puzzle
February 17: Forming your Research Question
Reading: PSRM—Chapter 3, pages 74-82

February 19: Reading Academic Articles
Online Article
  -"How to Read (and Understand) a Social Science Journal Article"
  -"How to Read Political Science: A Guide in Four Steps
-Workshop: How to Read and Comprehend Academic Articles?
February 21: Specifying Your Research Question
HW: Group Research Question
Goal: Group establishes research question: each member proposes a research question

Week 4: Literature Review—A Quest for Answers
February 24: Synthesizing Academic Literature
Reading: PSRM—Chapter 3, pages 82-101
Online Articles
  -"Does Politics Matter?"
  -"Do Politicians Discriminate Against Constituents?"
  -"Racial Winners and Losers"
-Workshop: Practice Synthesizing Literature

February 26: Finding Sources (Resource Librarian Bonnie Paige)
Reading:
Online Article:
  -"Doing a Literature Review"
-Workshop: Practice conducting Library Searches

February 28: Connecting Dots and Restructuring Your Question
HW: Practice Synthesizing
-Goal: Each group member will find 3 articles for Literature Review and Synthesize independently. As group, they will synthesize all articles (6-9) to start their literature review.
-*NOTE:* Distribute the Literature Review Assignment Today

Week 5: Developing a Hypothesis
March 3: What is a Hypothesis?
Reading: PSRM—Chapter 4

March 5: Examining Hypotheses and Identifying Variables
Reading: Online Article
        -"What Happens After Alarm?"
-Workshop: Reading and Understanding Hypotheses in Academic Articles

March 7: Hypotheses Specific to Your Project
HW: Identifying Hypotheses in the Literature
-Goal: Each group member will find 3 articles for their Literature Review and Identify the key hypothesis in each and whether the evidence was supported. Groups will then share their findings. Groups will revise and brainstorm hypotheses for their study.

Week 6: Thinking About Measurement
March 10: What am I Measuring in Political Science?
Reading: PSRM—Chapter 5

March 12: Understanding Measurement in Political Science Articles
Reading: Online Article
        -"Indivisibility and Human Rights"
-Workshop: Breaking down Operationalization and Independent vs. Dependent Variables

March 14: Samples of Operationalization of Variables Specific to Your Project
HW: Operationalization of Key Variables: Independent vs. Dependent Variables
-Goal: Each group member will find 3 articles for their Literature Review and Identify the key variables. They should be able to describe how these variables are measured and whether they are independent, dependent, or control variables.

PART II: COLLECTING DATA—MODES AND METHODS
Week 7: Sampling
March 17: What is it and why does it matter?
Reading: PSRM—Chapter 7

March 19: Finding Data
-Workshop: Exploring the ANES

March 21: Exploring the Census and ICPSR database
Assignment: Literature Review Due Today
-Goal: Librarian Bonnie Paige coming in today. Students should learn where they can acquire pre-collected data to test their hypotheses

Week 8: NO CLASS—Spring Break
March 24-28
HW: Search around the ICPSR database

Week 9: Survey Research
March 31: The Do's and Don'ts of Survey Research
Reading: PSRM—Chapter 10

April 2: Evaluating a Survey
-Workshop: Evaluating Survey Questions

April 4: Practice with Polling
HW: write your own survey question
-Goal: Students should learn to evaluate the validity of survey questions
-Due: Have your dataset picked

Week 10: Experiments and Politics
April 7: What do experiments look like in the Study of Politics?
Reading: PSRM—Chapter 6, pages: 171-194

April 9: Real World Experiments and Their Results
Reading: (Online Articles)
      -Field Experiment: "Does Door-to-Door Canvassing Work?"
      -Lab Experiment: "Campaign Ads"
      -Natural Experiment: "Demolition Of Public Housing"
-Workshop: Breaking down Treatments vs. Controls

April 11: Create your Own
HW: Design your Own Field or Lab Experiment
-Goal: Students should learn how to create an experiment

PART III: DRAWING CONCLUSIONS—MAKING SENSE OF IT ALL
Week 11: Descriptive Statistics
April 14: First Steps of Data Analysis
-Workshop: Introducing STATA and Descriptive Statistics
Reading: PSRM—Chapter 11

April 16: Practice with Descriptive Statistics
-Workshop: More Practice with STATA

April 18: Descriptive Statistics and Your Data
HW: Group Descriptive Statistics in STATA
Goal: Checking your Work with Descriptive Statistics

Week 12: Statistical Inference
April 21: Statistical Inference
Reading: PSRM—Chapter 12

April 23: Practice with Hypothesis Testing
-Workshop: STATA and Hypothesis Testing

<mark>April 25: No Class (NEPSA)</mark>
Testing Your Hypothesis
HW: Hypothesis Testing: Results or Predictions—Upload your assignment by 9:00 AM to Moodle
-Goal: Groups should practice producing Hypothesis Testing

Week 13: Regression Analysis
April 28: Investigating Relationships between Two Variables
-Workshop: STATA and Regression Analysis
Reading: PSRM—Chapter 13 and 14

April 30: Regression and Your Data
-*HW*: Initial Regression Results
Goal: Groups should practice testing their hypothesis using Regression Analysis
Note: Distribute Final Paper Presentation Outline

<mark>May 1: No Class—for CLAS</mark>

Week 14: Final Draft
May 5: Formatting Your Paper: Section Headers, Tables, and Figures
Reading: PSRM—Chapter 15

May 7: Peer Editing
-Workshop: Peer Revising and Editing
Goal: Groups should work together to revise/edit their final paper, paying close attention to formatting norms in Academic Writing

May 9: Sample Research Paper Presentation
<mark>*Assignment*: Final Paper Due Today</mark>
Goal: Model a professional research presentation and discuss Requirements for final presentation

Week 15: Final Exam Week
Final Exam—Final Student Presentations
TBD?