POLS 3180: Research Methods I

Department of Political Science – University of Guelph – Fall 2017

Lectures: Mondays and Wednesdays 9.30-10.20, LA 204
Tutorials: section-specific

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Course description

Every day we hear statements about the political world from friends, family members, journalists, and politicians. All these comments are relevant to political science, but are not considered part of the discipline. To qualify as such, they would need to be based on a systematic and transparent investigation. In other words, it is in its reliance on rigid standards of research methods that the claims of political scientists differ from everyday political debate. This class offers an introduction to these research methods.

The class consists of three components. It starts with an overview of different philosophical perspectives on the conduct of social science in general and political science in particular. We will discuss whether it is possible ever to acquire ‘true knowledge’ about the world around us, and if so, how we can best go about doing so. The course then moves to the basic logic of social inquiry and research design, and reviews the most important concepts in and components of empirical political analysis. The final part of the class discusses methods of data collection, in particular interviewing techniques, field research techniques, and unobtrusive techniques.

Learning outcomes

At the end of the course, successful students will be able to:

- Explain the difference between contrasting perspectives on truth, knowledge, and the conduct of social science
- Reason through the stages of a research project, in particular question formulation, theorization, operationalization, research design, case selection, and data collection
- Evaluate the methodological choices in other researchers’ work
- Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of different methodological approaches
- Develop a research proposal based on informed methodological decisions
Methods of instruction

This course relies on two methods of instruction. First, a series of 24 biweekly lectures discusses the most important course material. Students are strongly encouraged to attend all lectures and to read the relevant material beforehand. Missing a lecture can make it difficult to understand the remainder of the class.

Second, in tutorial sessions students have the opportunity to discuss some of the readings in detail with each other and the tutorial instructor. These tutorials are also meant to assist students in working towards the relatively difficult final assignment, the writing of a research proposal.

Methods of evaluation

The final grade in this class will be based on five components:

1. Tutorial participation (10 percent)
2. Paper I (10 percent)
3. Paper II (30 percent)
4. Three online quizzes (5 percent each, 15 percent total)
5. Final exam (35 percent)