POLS 5020: Research Methods

Fall 2020 – Wednesday 4:15-7:00 pm
Professor Matthew Nanes
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Office Hours: By appointment (via Zoom or phone)

Course Description and Introduction
This course presents the fundamental tools that social science researchers use to ask and answer questions about the world. While the class is geared towards Political Science MA students, early-stage graduate students in any social science discipline should find it useful and are welcome to enroll. I also welcome undergraduate students who want to dig a bit deeper into the basic toolkit of social science research and are up for a small challenge (really, just a small one!).

The course teaches students to use the scientific method should to answer questions about politics and build knowledge about the way political actors operate and interact with one another. THIS IS NOT A MATH CLASS. You can succeed in this class without doing any math by hand, though you will learn how to tell a computer to do complex math on your behalf. Similarly, THIS IS NOT A STATISTICS CLASS. Rather, I hope to explain how scientific methods of inquiry can be used for research on politics, present a basic toolkit that you can use to develop and answer questions you care about, and train you to use those tools productively.

This course will cover qualitative and quantitative methods. Many the topics we cover – theory building, accuracy and precision, hypothesis testing, and field research – transcend any division between the two methods. You will learn to do evidence-based research; evidence comes in many forms.

For the portions of the class which do involve statistics, we will use Stata. There is no "best" software; Stata is one of several programs that is "good enough" for the tasks at hand. It is freely available on most campus computers at SLU. I will use examples from Stata in class, and you are expected to turn in assignments completed in Stata.

Course Goals
By the end of this course, you will:

- Produce knowledge using scientific methods and empirical evidence
- Identify the limitations of statistics presented in the media and communicate those limitations effectively to a non-specialist audience
- Understand and evaluate the claims, strengths, and weaknesses of qualitative and quantitative evidence in contemporary social science research
- Use statistical methods appropriately to draw inferences about politics
- Interpret and evaluate evidence presented in political science research

A Note on Learning Methods
Empirical (i.e. evidence-based)

6. Working with imperfect qualitative and quantitative data
    - Threats to inference: omitted variables, directionality, missing data, measurement error, selection
    - READING:

        King et al Chapter 5 “Understanding What to Avoid”

- ~~Fearon, James and David Laitin, "Integrating Qualitative and Quantitative~~ Methods." In *Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology*