

Research Methods in the Study of Politics

POLS 3950

Syllabus

Contacting your instructor

For information on contacting your instructor as well as other important information from your instructor see the Instructor Letter in your course website.

Course description

The *Undergraduate Calendar* of the University of Manitoba describes POLS 3950 as follows:

An introduction to the major quantitative and qualitative research strategies employed in the study of politics. The topics addressed include interviewing, content analysis, comparative studies, survey design, sampling, research ethics and basic statistical analysis. Students may not hold credit for both POLS 3950 (or 019.395) and the former 019.390. Prerequisite: a grade of "C" or better in six credit hours of Political Studies at the 2000 level or written consent of instructor or department head.

This course is designed to provide you with an introduction to the use of social science methods in the study of politics. You will become familiar with the terms employed in social science research methods, the importance of empirical evidence, the requirements of applied research, and the strengths and weaknesses of the main types of data collection available to social scientists. Since this course assumes that you do not have previous experience in the study of research methods, the text and assigned readings that have been selected are clearly written, and provide helpful examples, definitions, and concepts.

This course will also alert you to the political nature inherent in any methodological approach. Generally speaking, there is a tendency in the study of research methods to assume that you are only concerned with the objective search for truth. However, consider the controversy that has surrounded the recent work of Philippe Rushton regarding his study of the hypothesized relationship between race and intelligence. Rushton completed extensive work employing the social science mode of inquiry. Nevertheless, Rushton's conclusions led to such public controversy that even the Premier of Ontario called for his dismissal from the University of Western Ontario. While this course will not address the substantive issues explored in Rushton's studies, it will show you how to critically apply social science methods. Following the completion of this course, you will be in a position to examine his work, assess the reasoning behind the selection of his particular research methods, and offer conclusions on the *validity* of his approach. In this manner, you will be able to gain an appreciation of the significance of the choices made in designing a major research study.

The scientific status of political science (and public administration) has always been problematic. Attempts to impose the rigours of one particular paradigm, in this case the natural sciences, of inquiry have been numerous but not entirely successful. As a result, the study of politics is characterized by a large plurality of methodologies, none of which enjoys support from all political scientists. Thus, not only is it necessary for you to have an understanding of the various methods within social science that you may employ in undertaking political inquiry, but you must be sensitive to the strengths and weaknesses that each entails. Nonetheless, there are certain principles of scientific inquiry that must be employed if the selected research design is to be viewed as being sound. You will therefore, be introduced to these principles.

As members of a modern industrial society, Canadians are constantly faced with a wide range of political events and behaviours: wars, elections, replacement of political leaders, discussions of important issues such as child care and social policy, and government decisions concerning the taxes Canadians pay and how they are to be paid. Human beings try to understand things by identifying patterns of cause and effect, and by examining the likelihood that certain cause and effect relationships will occur. These patterns may be attributed to the work of a supreme being, the luck of the draw, or the result of a secret plot being masterminded by some shadowy group that operates beyond the control of any government.

For many people these explanations are sufficient. However, as university students you have likely already recognized the need to move beyond these types of explanations to discover a more rational way of explaining the political world. This course will give you the opportunity to do so by acquiring research skills based on a social scientific approach to knowing and understanding politics that we will refer to as the “Social Science Mode of Inquiry.” Social science is concerned with the interaction of theory (explanation), evidence (observation), and inference (drawing conclusions). In general, the main principles of the scientific approach that play a key role in structuring this interaction are as follows:

- **Empirical.** Scientific research is based on observations. It is not guessed at, nor attributed to “unknown forces.”
- **Regularities of behaviour.** The search for patterns. The assumption is made that, all things being equal, the same factors combined will lead to the same outcome.
- **Openness.** Research is public. Results are openly arrived at, and employ procedures made known to others and which others could follow in their own work.
- **Replication.** Results and procedures are repeated by oneself and others. This allows researchers to be reasonably certain that the results they are observing are being caused by the factors they have isolated and are not the result of mistaken measurements.
- **Variation.** Scientific research concentrates on the observation and measurement of change or differences in behaviour or attributes.
- **Error control.** The establishment of procedures that apply to case selection, identification of conditions that may affect results, measurements, and alternative explanation.
- **Open system of knowing.** Scientific research is always subject to new findings and new interpretations. The pursuit of knowledge based on the scientific mode of inquiry is dynamic and ongoing. As new information and research techniques are developed it is both expected and hoped that our knowledge of reality will grow. This growth of course means that changes in the preceding knowledge will take place.

These principles represent a compressed view of social science that is frequently found in research methods textbooks, including your own. It is worth making three important comments on these principles. First, a scientific approach is but **one** of many approaches to knowing. For example, we could rely instead on faith, on our personal experience without regard to that of others, or we could rely on an external standard such as our horoscope or the words of a leader. When compared with these alternatives, the social science mode of inquiry has strengths and weakness, which will be identified as this course proceeds. Nevertheless, most social scientists conclude that the social science mode of inquiry provides the best means of understanding the world and ourselves.

Second, the scientific emphasis on observations (on what is) is often said to exclude values (what ought to be) from scientific inquiry. Since value-based conflicts and issues are important to political life, we might ask whether or not the scientific approach is marginal for us as students of politics. It may be true that issues of justice or inequality, or questions about which form of political system is best, cannot be addressed directly by the social science mode of inquiry. However, social science researchers are motivated by value-based concerns, and the decisions they make in designing and implementing a research project are also informed by their values. In addition, social science provides a way to observe the potential effects of applied values. For example, we might agree that gender-based employment equity (value) is best observed by comparing the median pay rate for women against that of men, or the proportion of males and females in different occupational classifications. The social science mode of inquiry will not allow us to determine if we should utilize gender preferential hiring, but it can indicate the effects of either adopting or not adopting such policies.

Notice that social science as a whole, and we as practitioners, are embedded in a network of values and debates. Social science may not state directly what “ought to be,” but it is not isolated from such concerns. More importantly, social science can often serve as an important basis upon which value-based decisions may be made. For example, if it can be shown through a social science mode of examination that, for any given occupation, women receive a lower rate of pay than men, then society can make decisions on how to react. In a society such as Saudi Arabia, it would be unlikely that such a finding would cause any reaction from the country’s leadership. In Canada, such a finding would probably result in decisions being taken to

remedy the imbalance. Social science can help to determine if pay is determined by gender, but it cannot determine if that is the “right” value for the society in question.

The third point is that the meaning, role, and importance of social science in the overall study of politics have changed since social science was first introduced many decades ago. Thirty years ago, many political scientists were convinced that scientific techniques of the natural sciences (for example, physics) were the most appropriate for political research. They emphasized observation, the rigorous testing of propositions and the certainty of unambiguous results. Today, this view has largely disappeared for several reasons, not least of all because political phenomena cannot be easily isolated in a laboratory. The laboratory of politics is the real world. Political phenomena have complex causes that are significantly affected by the environment in which they reside. In summary, you should expect some soft edges in this discipline’s contemporary use of social scientific principles and techniques. Theories will sometimes be incompletely specified, disputes about appropriate measures will be evident, replications will be infrequent or partial, multiple meanings and measures of single concepts will be common, and value-based considerations will intrude. Despite these problems, the principles and practices of social science offer us a rewarding way to learn about politics.

Course goals

This course emphasizes the development of your research and analytical skills. You will learn how to analyze theories, to develop research designs, and to research problems. You will learn about the criteria that social scientists use to judge and evaluate the ways in which the various parts of a research project fit together. A primary goal of the course is to engage your ability to examine interesting problems. Your critical ability to analyze the work of others will be developed and challenged. Your practical skills in the development of research designs and in data collection will be enhanced, and you will be asked to demonstrate some of these skills in the assignments later in the course. The course and the readings are divided into four units.

The knowledge and skills that you gain in this course will also be of use to you later in your career path. If you are headed toward further studies in political science, public administration, law, or other research-focused occupations, the ability to undertake solid social science research and to be comfortable with data collection and assessment will benefit you greatly. Moreover, these have now become one of the most readily marketable skills that you can offer in the increasingly fluid job market of today. It is interesting to note that one of the fields in which social scientists have been able to apply their skills in an entrepreneurial style has been in the polling business. Individuals such as Angus Reid and Allan Gregg have not only parlayed their social science skills into very successful businesses but have also become influential researchers in the Canadian political process. Few social scientists are able to replicate the success enjoyed by these researchers, but it is important to recognize the advantages that social science skills bring to a wide range of potential sources of employment.

The overall objectives of the course have already been discussed. In fact, your successful development of these skills—analytical, critical assessment, measurement, communication, and vocabulary—constitutes the main educational objective for the course. The following discussion addresses the specific course goals.

Goal 1: Developing literacy in the terms and concepts of analysis

All fields of human inquiry have a vocabulary: terms and definitions used for understanding and communication. The discussion in the introduction stated that the language of social science has partly to do with variation. It also has to do with the substitution of signs and symbols for words. Part of your initial task will be to learn the basic vocabulary of a social scientific approach to politics. The development of this type of literacy will continue throughout the course.

Goal 2: Developing and applying research design assessment skills

The creation and assessment of research design initially require familiarity with types of research design and their applicability to a given research problem. A research design reflects theory statements used to understand a research problem. Learning about research design, therefore, challenges your conceptual abilities. A research design provides important clues about the logic and procedures employed to collect evidence. As a result, learning about research design will develop your analytical and evaluative skills. Finally, a research design sets important constraints on the kind of inferences that can be appropriately drawn from the results of a particular research project.

Goal 3: Developing skills in measurement

Measurement is often said to consist of the assignment of a number to objects according to a fixed rule. Objects of interest to a political scientist might include political attitudes, votes, budget categories, and the like. In addition to identifying objects that vary (i.e., variables) and their attributes, a researcher must make critical decisions about the most appropriate type of measure that can capture or represent the object of interest. Therefore, it is necessary to learn more about the relationship between objects (concepts or variables) and measurement, and how concepts can be most accurately and reliably represented.

Goal 4: Developing awareness of data collection methodology and analysis

Since social scientific research is an empirical enterprise, it depends heavily on observation. Researchers, therefore, must decide on **what** to observe and **how** to observe. These decisions are connected to the number of observations needed or available and to the procedures used to select observations.

The researcher must become familiar with the logic of sampling (the act of drawing on a relatively smaller set of cases or observations from a larger population). Thus, you will be introduced to the rules of probability sampling and the relationship between these rules and the testing of a hypothesis. In mastering this material, you will learn about the logical connections between research design and the selection of observations.

Once this material is completed, you will then be ready to examine the various techniques by which data can be collected. These include interviews, content analysis, field research, and the use of public records. You will examine the manner by which these techniques are conducted and will assess the strength and limitations of each.

Course materials

Required

Bookstore

The following required materials are available for purchase from the [University of Manitoba Bookstore](#). Please order your materials immediately, if you have not already done so. See your [Distance and Online Education Student Handbook](#) for instructions on how to order your materials.

- Textbook

Babbie, Earl and Lucia Benaquisto. *Fundamentals of Social Research*. 3rd Canadian edition. Toronto: Nelson Education, 2014.

The text is written by sociologists; a fact that may seem somewhat puzzling given that this is a course in political science. There are two reasons for this choice. First, the textbook gives top priority to the rewards of creativity and clear thinking. Creativity is a beneficiary of rigorous research. Similarly, good research practices provide the basis for the clear communication of objectives and results. Second, the fact that a political scientist employs a text written by a sociologist illustrates the important point that research skills are transferable across disciplines.

Several features of the textbook are useful in grasping the basic elements of the material. Read the Introduction in each chapter that lays out the main ideas and how they relate to the content of other chapters. You should also pay very close attention to the summary at the end of each chapter, "Main Points."

Nelson Premium Companion Website for *Fundamentals of Social Research*, 3rd Canadian edition is a study tool that will allow you to further develop and explore the issues and concepts discussed in the text and the lecture notes. Given the inherent challenges presented in distance education courses such as this one, we strongly recommend that you take full advantage of the exercises offered in the study guide even though these are not to be submitted for grading. Go to www.nelsonbrain.com to register and enter the Access code available in the front of the purchased textbook.

- Readings package

Readings package for *POLS 3950 Research Methods in the Study of Politics*

Another source of course reading is found in your *Readings Package*. Two chapters have been reprinted from *Studying Politics* (1994), one from *Empirical Political Analysis* (2002) and a research article from *The Canadian Journal of Political Science*. These chapters are specifically written for political scientists and, therefore, utilize examples of direct relevance to the material. The chapters do not focus on the practical issues of research methods to the same degree as Babbie; rather, they examine several issues surrounding the foundation of research methods for political science that are not examined by Babbie.

Course overview

This course is designed to provide you with the basic knowledge and skills to employ the social science approach to the study of politics. In so doing, it introduces you to the various elements, steps, strengths and weaknesses associated with this particular approach or research method. Not only will you learn how to develop a social science research project, but also the strengths and weaknesses of this type of research as distinct from other methods which you are familiar with from previous courses in politics.

Unit 1 introduces you to the general nature of social science research. The ways in which knowledge is generally or traditionally acquired, and the errors or mistakes we make in acquiring knowledge are central themes in this unit. You are then exposed to the fundamentals of philosophy of science generally, as well as to issues concerning the relationship of science, or the scientific method to the study of politics. Key concepts and ideas of science, or more accurately social science, are presented to you.

Unit 2 begins your study of key steps you need to take in applying the scientific method. You are provided with an understanding of the meaning and nature of theory, and the key process of operationalization. Specifically, you will be shown the steps a social science researcher takes in translating the concepts found in a theory to the development and employment of measures, which can represent and account for these concepts in testing hypotheses, that are drawn from explanations (theory) of political behaviour. These measures are what social scientists employ to observe the real world and examine our beliefs about this world, and political behaviour within it. At the end of the unit, your first assignment is found, which requires you to take the initial steps in developing a research project.

Unit 3 introduces you to various ways in which we, as social scientists, can observe or measure behaviour in the real world of politics. The nature of sampling, or what you may better know as public opinion polling, and the construction of surveys are key elements of this unit. You are also exposed to other ways to observe political behaviour through field research, content analysis, and focus groups. Your second assignment is found here, and requires you to identify the way in which you would observe political reality on the basis of the project presented in Assignment 1.

The final unit exposes you to basic elements of statistics. Although your assignments do not require you to collect data and undertake a statistical analysis, it is important for you to acquire a basic understanding of statistics. Your final assignment, which provides you with the opportunity to revise the first two assignments on the basis of my comments, and the knowledge you have developed through the course, is found here.

Evaluation and grading

Your final grade will consist of your earned grades on three assignments and a final exam as listed below:

Distribution of marks

Assignment	Percent
1	20%
2	20%
3	30%
Final exam	30%
Total	100%

Grading scale

Letter grade	Percentage range	Description
A+	90 – 100	Exceptional
A	80 – 89	Excellent
B+	75 – 79	Very good
B	70 – 74	Good
C+	65 – 69	Satisfactory
C	60 – 65	Adequate
D	50 – 59	Marginal
F	Below 50	Failure

Note: All final grades are subject to departmental review.

Assignments

You can find a detailed description of the assignments at the end of units 2, 3, and 4. There is also a sample final exam located on the course website.

Your three assignments will form one complete research project that could be implemented. You are not asked to implement the project, but only to develop it through to the stage at which implementation would begin. Of course, many of the points that you will deal with, especially those concerning the choice of measures for the major variables and the actual design, are vital parts of implementation. However to take the step to implementation and data analysis has an additional set of requirements that concern the use of statistics that are beyond the purview of this course, although you will be provided with a basic introduction to statistics. Also, most of you are likely to lack the resources to implement the project, as you will discover as you proceed through the course. Simply, major research projects can be very costly in terms of time and money, and in designing your project these will have to be taken into account.

The assignments require you to select a research topic of your choice and to apply the main elements from the units. An overview of each assignment is provided here. Each assignment will be explained in greater detail at the end of the relevant units. It should be understood that not all the units are necessarily directly applicable to the particular project that you have chosen. You will understand their relevance as you proceed to develop your project. Regardless, you should start thinking now of a political issue or topic that is of direct interest to you. As will be shown, any and every political issue or topic is amenable to social science inquiry.

Assignment 1

Literature review, theory discussion, and hypothesis identification

Having selected a political topic of interest, your first step is to survey the literature to find out what it has to say about the topic. For most of you, your academic written work to date has primarily been a literature review about a topic, whether you are aware of it or not. This review serves the valuable purpose of exposing you to how your chosen topic has been analysed in the past, including the conclusions drawn. In some cases, these may be social science studies, and in others only qualitative critical analysis and perhaps opinion pieces. Regardless, no social science inquiry can proceed without an examination of the literature.

Central to your examination of the literature will be your identification of the major explanations for political behaviour. In some cases, you may find a limited explanation or theory, a single explanation, or competing explanations or theories. It may also be the case that you find existing theories or explanations unsatisfactory. Instead, you have an alternative explanation or theory, perhaps drawn from your knowledge elsewhere. Regardless, the second step of this assignment is to identify the explanation or theory that you will draw upon for identifying the relationship between the cause(s) and effect. Theory, as discussed in greater detail in unit 2, provides an explanation for why something causes something else.

Having completed your discussion of the theory that you are drawing upon, your final task is to specify the hypothesis(es) that you are going to test. This is usually in a simple form such as:

H₁: There is a relationship between x and y. As the value of x rises, the value of y will rise (i.e., this is known as a positive relationship).

Importantly, it is the theory that provides the explanation or expectation for the hypothesized relationship that can be tested. It is the hypothesis that becomes the foundation for the next steps in research design.

Assignment 2

Concepts to variables to measures

At the conclusion of unit 3 you will be asked to take the next step. The process of turning concepts into variables and identifying measures to represent them is known as operationalization. Thus, this assignment is about operationalizing the concepts identified in your hypothesis. This means taking the key concepts in the hypothesis, x and y above, and turning them into variables with measures. Importantly, many concepts in the study of politics cannot be directly observed and measured. For example, power is a key concept in politics, but how does one measure power? Also, how does one measure democracy? These issues are discussed in more detail within the units and in the details of the assignment itself at the end of unit 3. For now, it is important to know that operationalization should not be done in isolation from your previous work. Central to the utility of the literature review for your work is obtaining information and knowledge about how concepts have been operationalized in the past. Draw on this literature and remember that central to social science is replication and developing intersubjective agreement on measurement. For example, if researchers have come to a general agreement that democracy is best measured by universal suffrage and regular voting, then it makes sense to use their measures. This is not to say that you are bound by the literature. The key to measurement is ensuring that the measures best reflect the concepts drawn from theory, as will be discussed in units 2 and 3.

Assignment 3

Research design and revised assignments 1 and 2

Assignments 1 and 2 are integral components of every research design but the meaning of research design here is somewhat different: it refers to the steps you would have to take to implement the research project. Basically, what would you have to do to collect the data called for in your measures? For example, if power is measured by wealth, where do you go to get data on wealth? Another example would be if you wanted to find out if young people vote the same way as old people. The operationalization stage may have resulted in your defining young people as under twenty five years of age, and old people as over fifty five years of age. Now, you must define how you will collect the data on young and old.

By now, you may be aware that many of the design questions have been partially answered in the first two assignments. Upon completion of both, you will likely have already made decisions about the steps necessary to implement the project. For example, whether it will be a study over time or at a specific moment in time: what or who are your units of observation. This assignment asks to specify the specific design that would be applied. At the same time, you also have the opportunity to go back over Assignment 1 and 2, along with my comments and feedback, to produce a single paper that takes the reader through all of the key steps necessary before a project is implemented. This assignment thus serves not only to expose you to the design requirements and decisions, but also to reinforce all the key steps that must be taken before project is implemented. Although this structure is very formal and consistent with social science as it is applied, it also contains all the requirements vital to a successful application for research funds. In other words, it provides you with the tools and experience to develop a research proposal that in itself is a valuable skill in the workforce today.

Guidelines for submission of assignments

- Time management is an important part of learning. Plan your tasks and readings. Remember that as a function of an independent study course you will have to ensure that you meet the course requirements without the benefit of reminders from both classmates and the instructor. Start early on each assignment.
- Prepare a rough draft of each written assignment. If possible, get a critical outside reader to comment on your style, clarity of expression, grammar, and logic. You may find it useful to remember that a well-

written paper/assignment should be understood by an intelligent reader even if he or she is unfamiliar with the substance of the material.

- Revise your rough draft and type the final copy for submission.
- Remember that mistakes can slip into a final typed copy. Proofread all assignments carefully before submitting.
- Contact your instructor if you have difficulties or if you have problems with comments or with an assignment grade.
- The assignment due dates listed are considered to be deadlines. If you cannot meet a particular due date you must ask your instructor for an extension before the due date.

Assignment due dates

Assignment	Sept.-Dec.	Jan.-Apr.	May-Aug.
1	Oct. 15	Feb. 7	June 7
2	Oct. 30	Feb. 28	June 30
3	Nov. 18	Mar. 18	July 18
Final exam	T.B.A.	T.B.A.	T.B.A.

Note: If the assignment due date falls during the Mid-term Break in February, it will be due on the Monday following the Mid-term Break. If you are unable to submit an assignment on time, contact your instructor well in advance of the due date, for we cannot guarantee that the instructor will accept late assignments.

Examination

The final exam will be written at the University of Manitoba (UM), Fort Garry campus or at an approved off-campus location. **Students needing to write at an off-campus location must declare a location by the specified deadline date** (see off-campus declaration and policy under Student Resources on course homepage). **Students writing at the UM Fort Garry campus do not need to declare an exam location.**

The Registrar's Office is responsible for the [final exam schedules](#) which is available approximately one month after the start of the course.

The term assignments allow you to develop your skills at home at your own pace, bearing in mind the appropriate deadlines. Although the major part of your course grade is determined by how well you do in the written term assignments, the final examination requires you to demonstrate your competence in the course as a whole. The final examination will serve to reinforce the connections between the different units and the skills that they have helped you to develop.

The final examination will consist of two parts. Part One will consist of short-answer questions that will test your understanding of key terms and concepts. The short answer questions normally require a response of a short paragraph, depending on the instructions given on the examination. The short-answer questions will, therefore, focus on your literacy in social science research and on your ability to relate principles to applications and examples.

Part Two of the examination will consist of questions that require an essay answer response. While the format will vary from year to year, you can expect to select from three to five questions and answer two questions in essay format. These essays will focus on the kind of skills which you acquired in units 2 to 4 and which you developed in the assignments. Explicit instructions will be given for each part of the examination and you will also be advised about the specific format of the examination in a timely fashion so that you can prepare properly.

The date for the final examination is scheduled by the Registrar's Office. The examination will be **three hours** in duration and you will be advised of the exact date and time before the end of the term. The examination is worth 30% of your course grade. You are responsible for all of the assigned readings. You are also responsible for the written text and examples provided in the units which comprise this manual.

There is a sample final exam located on the course website.

General guidelines for assignment and exam preparation

A word of caution about the assignments and the final examination

Some students find that they do very well on the assignments, but they do not do nearly as well on the final examination. While your grades on the assignments will give you some idea of how well you are mastering the material, they may not indicate how well you will do on the examination, because the examination is written under very different circumstances. Because the assignments are open book, they do not require the amount of memorization that a closed-book examination requires nor are they limited to a specific time period. Some students have told us that, based on the high marks they received on the assignments, they were overconfident and underestimated the time and effort needed to prepare for the final examination.

Please keep all this in mind as you prepare for the examination. If your course has a sample exam or practice questions, use them to practice for the examination by setting a time limit and not having any books available. Pay careful attention to the description of the type of questions that will be on your final examination. Preparing for multiple choice questions involves a different type of studying than preparing for essay questions. Do not underestimate the stress involved in writing a time-limited examination.

Plagiarism, cheating, and examination impersonation

You should acquaint yourself with the University's policy on plagiarism, cheating, and examination impersonation as detailed in the General Academic Regulations and Policy section of the University of Manitoba *Undergraduate Calendar*. Note: These policies are also located in your *Distance and Online Education Student Handbook* or you may refer to Student Affairs at <http://www.umanitoba.ca/student>.

Distance and Online Education (DE) Student Resources

In your course website there are links for the following:

- Contacting Distance and Online Education Staff
- Distance and Online Student Handbook
- Distance and Online Education Website

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