Course overview: This course provides an introduction to empirical research methods in political science. Central topics include measurement, sampling, surveys, and experiments. The aim of the course is to familiarize students with the conceptual and methodological challenges that arise when researchers attempt to measure political phenomena, assess change over time, or demonstrate a causal relationship between policies and social outcomes. In order to reinforce core ideas and link them to ongoing political debates, students will conduct a series of hands-on research projects involving sampling, questionnaire development, and experimental design.

Prerequisites: This course is intended for political science majors, but non-majors are welcome. Familiarity with statistics and statistical software is helpful but not required. We will be working with data in class throughout the term.

Readings: Students are expected to keep up with each week’s reading. A course reader packet contains each of the selections below. The course reader is available at Village Copier (1181 Amsterdam Ave.; 212-666-4777; villagecopier118@nyc.rr.com).

Assignments: We will have a take-home assignment for each of the four modules (measurement, sampling, surveys, and experiments). Each assignment will count for 10% of the overall grade. There will also be an in-class exam at the end of each module. Each exam will count for 10% of the overall grade. The in-class final exam will count for 20%.

The class will conduct an exit poll of New York City voting locations on November 6. Data collection and analysis will be the basis of the take-home assignment and exam for the survey module.

The course schedule is as follows:

September 5: Introduction and Overview

September 10 and 12: Concepts and Measures


September 17: No class

September 19: Measurement: Which countries are democracies?

Both readings for this week grapple with ongoing debates about how to define and measure democracy for purposes of over-time and cross-sectional comparison.


September 24: Measurement: Has racial prejudice diminished over time?

Schuman, Howard, Charlotte Steeh, and Lawrence Bobo. 1985. Racial Attitudes in American: Trends and Interpretations. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 71-138. Arguing that expressions of racial attitudes vary depending on whether they focus on principle or policy, the authors assess trends in white Americans’ opinions. The findings are interesting but dated; we will use the General Social Survey to update and re-evaluate these trends.

Concerned that survey respondents report low levels of out-group prejudice that do not reflect their true attitudes, researchers have devised other methods for measuring prejudice. But are they valid?


October 1: Unobtrusive measurement

Skeptical of conventional survey measures of prejudice (or curious to see whether survey results coincide with alternative measurement approaches), researchers have devised an array of unobtrusive measurement strategies.


October 3: In-class exam on measurement

October 8 and 10: Sampling and sampling distributions

Textbook readings provide an overview of terms and formulas. Freedman et al. give a lucid description of sampling theory. Babbie illustrates some important variations the use of simple random sampling.


October 15 and 17: Survey samples and sources of bias

Although dated, the Roll and Contril chapter provides a nice illustration of various traditional forms of sampling, including an extended example on stratified sampling. Bates and Harmon remind us of the perils of allowing respondents to self-select into the sample. Couper discusses the rapid transformation of survey data collection.


October 22: In-class exam on sampling

October 24: Survey design

Questionnaire design falls somewhere between art and science. This week’s readings offer advice on how to write survey questions (and response options). Quattrone and
Tversky remind us that logically equivalent but differently framed questions may generate divergent results. Abelson et al. provide an elegant example of applying social psychological theories to the thorny practical problem of overreporting.


October 29: Exit polls

As we gear up to conduct our own survey, these readings offer some suggestions concerning sampling, measurement, and interpretation.


October 31: Research Ethics and Survey Research

Before we venture into the field, we must reflect on the ethics of gathering data from human subjects. Babbie provides an overview of ethical considerations. The CFR lays out the requirements by which Columbia researchers (faculty and students) must abide.


Note: students must complete human subjects training via the portal at https://www.rascal.columbia.edu/

November 5: University holiday
November 6: Election Day – exit poll data collection

November 7: Analysis and interpretation of our exit poll results (and perhaps a word or two about the election itself)

November 12: In-class exam: surveys

November 14: What is an experiment?

The introductory chapters of this textbook define experiments, provide an overview of why they are useful, introduce potential outcomes notation, and illustrate the idea of a randomization distribution. Pay special attention to the three core assumptions that provide the basis for unbiased causal inference.


November 19 and 21: Core assumptions and causal inference

This week’s readings are designed to illustrate the three core assumptions at work (or breaking down).


November 26: Experiments in the lab

Use of laboratory experiments in political science grew rapidly in the wake of the Iyengar et al. study, especially among those who study the effects of the mass media. Mutz and Reeves is a recent example. What are the strengths and limitations of this approach?


November 28: Experiments in the field (participation and representation)

These readings illustrate the use of experimentation to test propositions participation and representation. Gerber et al. test the effects of social norms on the probability that people vote. Butler and Broockman assess the conditions under which officials respond to requests from constituents depending on their putative race and party affiliation.


December 3: Experiments in the field

These readings use randomized interventions to assess the effects of institutional design.


December 5: Beyond experiments?

What are the alternatives to experiments? Jones and Olken provide an illustration of how causal inferences may be extracted from quasi-experiments. Bateson provides a more conventional survey analysis that looks at the correlation between crime victimization and political participation. Neither study uses random assignment – how does that affect the persuasiveness of the results?


December 10: Review

TBD: In-class final exam