Political Science 210: Introduction to Empirical Methods

TA: Jack Garigliano
jack.garigliano@u.northwestern.edu
Office hours: Wednesdays 12pm-1pm
Scott Hall 229

Contract grading system

- Discussion section is *optional*
  - You will receive credit for discussion attendance and participation that counts toward your final grade, but it is not the *only* way to get enough points for an A.
  - Quizzes, memos, and exams also count toward your final grade: If you do enough of these assignments, you may not need to attend all (or any) sections to get an A.
- Discussion section is *flexible*
  - If there are any scheduling conflicts, you can attend a different section (either held by me or a different TA) in any week.
  - No prior warning needed, but make sure you are counted for attendance through the sign-in sheet or letting the TA know.
  - You should still try to register on CAESAR for the section you anticipate attending most often.
- Discussion section location/TA *may change with* (some) *warning*
  - As the quarter progresses and attendance grows smaller, we may merge some sections. Scheduled meeting times will be the same, but location and instructor may change. This could happen as early as Week 3.
  - Keep an eye out for updates on this in the following weeks.
  - If you are considering attending a different section later in the quarter, it may be a good idea to check to see if the section is still held in the same room.

Purpose of discussion section

- Questions, questions, questions
  - Ask about anything from lecture, readings, quizzes, life in general
  - Feel free to follow up in office hours or over email
- Review
  - Highlight key concepts and methods
- Apply
  - Interpret and critique empirical studies
  - Evaluate claims about social events
  - Develop plans for studying research questions

Introductions

- Name (feel free to include pronouns)
- Major (declared or otherwise)
- Level of experience so far:
  - 1: Everything so far has been new
  - 2: You've heard of concepts like independent and dependent variables before
  - 3: You've taken other courses that spent some time reviewing empirical methods
  - 4: You've taken courses dedicated to quantitative (stats) or qualitative analysis
- What are you interested in?
  - Subfield(s) of interest in polisci or elsewhere?
  - Issues you're most interested in studying?
  - Anything you follow closely in the news and current events?

Concepts and operationalization

- When posing research questions, we often ask about relationships between different "things."
- These "things" may include concrete objects (countries, people) or more abstract *concepts* (democracy).
  - In empirical study, concepts need to be measured using concrete objects that usually represent the *presence* (present/absent) or the *strength* (the level) of the concept.
  - Always ask: Is the concept clear? Does the measurement accurately reflect our understanding of the concept? Could the measurement be capturing something else?
- One common way to study a concept is to study its *causes*.

  - A thing whose presence or strength *depends* on something else is a *dependent variable*.
    - Often represented by "Y"
  - A thing that exerts an *independent* effect on something else is an *independent variable*.
    - Often represented by "X"

Causality

A relationship that is *causal* meets several different conditions:

- Is there a relationship between X and Y?
    - Does X *covary* with Y?
        - When X changes, does Y change along with it?
- Timing: Does X occur *before* Y?
    - If not, is *reverse causality* at play? Is Y *causing* X?
    - Or is there a *reciprocal relationship* between X and Y? Do they "cause" each other?
- Are the changes in X and Y *independent* of other factors (to some extent)?
    - If X and Y covary but the relationship is not causal, we might say their relationship is *spurious*
    - Spuriousness might be due to a third *confounding* variable that causes both X and Y.

Also important: What is the *mechanism* (the "pathway") through which X causes Y? What story are you telling? It might be tested directly or assumed in the theory.

Read the following abstract from a recent journal article, then discuss the questions below with a partner:

Abstract: "An individual's level of education is increasingly significant in explaining their political attitudes and behaviour, with higher education proposed as a new political cleavage. However, there is limited evidence on the causal effect of university on political attitudes, due to self-selection into educational pathways. Addressing this gap, this article estimates the change in political values that occurs within individuals who graduate from university by applying longitudinal modelling techniques to data from the 1970 British Cohort Study, overcoming the selection problem by accounting for time-invariant confounding. It provides the first causal estimate of higher education specifically, finding that achieving a degree reduces authoritarianism and racial prejudice and increases economic right-wing attitudes. This has important implications for the study of politics: as populations become more highly educated on average, we should expect continuing aggregate value change towards lower levels of authoritarianism and racial prejudice, with significant consequences for political behaviour."

Scott, R. (2022). Does university make you more liberal? Estimating the within-individual effects of higher education on political values. *Electoral Studies*, 77, 102471.

Questions:

- What puzzle is the article trying to solve? What concepts does it involve?
- How does the author measure the concepts in their study? (if it isn't obvious from the abstract, feel free to guess)
- What is the dependent variable(s) in the author's analysis? The independent variable(s)?
- What theory does the author develop based on their findings?
- Is the author's theory convincing? Are there other confounding variables that might affect the outcome?

Read the following abstract from a recent journal article, then discuss the questions below with a partner:

Abstract: "The underlying mechanisms of the association between education and socio-cultural liberal attitudes have received much attention from scholars within public opinion. Despite sharp increases in the proportion of highly educated in recent decades, the influence of a generational replacement has been widely overlooked in research. The central hypothesis in this article is that generational differences constitute one explanation for the average strength of the education effect on socio-cultural values. Also, the importance of education for forming attitudes could be weaker in generations that grew up when higher education was widespread and the societal climate was more liberal. Results from the 'age-period-cohort' (APC) analysis, using the European Social Survey 2002–2018, confirm that a substantial part of the liberalising education effect is generational in origin and that its strength depends on the generation. They further show that this dependency varies across different European regions. The findings shed new light on the mechanisms and political significance of the education effect."

Lindskog, H., & Oskarson, M. (2023). Generational differences in disguise? A longitudinal study of the liberalising effect of education on socio-cultural attitudes. *West European Politics*, 46(3), 500-525.

Questions:

- What puzzle is the article trying to solve? What concepts does it involve?
- How does the author measure the concepts in their study? (if it isn't obvious from the abstract, feel free to guess)
- What is the dependent variable(s) in the author's analysis? The independent variable(s)?
- What theory does the author develop based on their findings?
- Is the author's theory convincing? Are there other confounding variables that might affect the outcome?

Read the following abstract from a recent journal article, then discuss the questions below with a partner:

Abstract: "Partisanship and policy attitudes are two foundational political dispositions. While scholars recognize both as important, there is a longstanding debate about how these dispositions influence each other. One camp argues that partisanship shapes policy attitudes much more strongly than the reverse, the other claims policy attitudes exert a powerful influence on partisanship. In this paper, I take up this debate and test these claims. I assess whether individuals bring their partisanship in line with their policy orientations with an analysis of 14 ANES and GSS panels. The highly educated have more stable attitudes and are more likely to bring their partisanship and policy attitudes in line with each other. The relationship is weaker among those with only a high school diploma. These results show that policy attitudes exert an underappreciated influence on partisanship. Overall, I find the policy orientations shape partisanship at least as much as the reverse."

Questions:

- What puzzle is the article trying to solve? What concepts does it involve?
- How does the author measure the concepts in their study? (if it isn't obvious from the abstract, feel free to guess)
- What is the dependent variable(s) in the author's analysis? The independent variable(s)?
- What theory does the author develop based on their findings?
- Is the author's theory convincing? Are there other confounding variables that might affect the outcome?