

The University of British Columbia
POLI 110: Investigating Politics
An Introduction to Scientific Political Analysis

Michael Weaver

Winter 2024: Term 1

Instructor

Michael Weaver

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Lecture: M,W 14:00–15:20

Office Hours: Monday @ 15:30

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POLI 110-001: <https://canvas.ubc.ca/courses/146688>

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Course Description

Our society is confronted by many crises: legacies of a global pandemic, climate change, incorporating immigrants, the rise of ethno-nationalist political parties, inter-state war, as well as growing inequality and economic transformation driven by technology. It is little surprise that there is growing concern about the ability of democracies to safely navigate these challenges? How can democratic polities tackle these crises when people are politically divided not only by the values they espouse but also by their beliefs about what is true about the world and how it works? In an age of “fake news” and “alternative facts,” how can we uncover the truths we need to comprehend the nature of the challenges that face us and make informed choices about how to surmount them?

This course introduces students to social *science* as a way for us to employ *reason* to evaluate whether claims about the world are true or untrue. Through this course, we will address the following questions: What distinguishes science as a form of knowledge?; What kinds of questions can we answer using social science?; How can we measure the phenomena that interest us?; How can we find the effects of causes and causes of effects?

We will explore these questions through the work of social scientists that examine key questions animating current events: the upcoming US election, immigration, democratic erosion, ethnic conflict, and gun ownership and violence.

Course Learning Objectives

This course will use lectures, readings, and tutorial discussions to build students' ability to critically evaluate claims about society based on the evidence.

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Explain what makes scientific forms of thinking distinct and what kinds of questions are amenable to scientific inquiry.
- Identify problems (and their solutions) faced when making *descriptive* and *causal* claims about the world.
- Analyze and evaluate the validity of descriptive and causal evidence.
- Critically evaluate evidence used in real-world political arguments found in various forms of media.

Key Dates

1. Homework Assignment #1: September 27
2. Homework Assignment #2: October 18
3. Midterm Exam: October 30
4. Homework Assignment #3: November 22
5. Homework Assignment #4: December 4
6. Final Exam: TBD

Group Project Dates:

- September 27: Identify a Problem and Group Work Contract
- October 4: Solution to Problem/Causal Question

- October 11: Variable and Survey Measures
- October 25: Sources of Error/Bias
- November 1: Finalized Survey Questions
- November 8: Take Survey (on your own)
- November 22: Correlations with Survey Results
- November 29: Correlation as Causation?
- December 6: Final Draft

Required Readings

Readings in this course have been chosen to further explain and give relevant examples of concepts we will cover. All readings are on the Canvas site under the corresponding week on the Modules tab.

Course Schedule

I. Science and Politics

Week 1: Introductions

September 4: Course Introduction / Administrative Details

Week 2: What is the value of science? What is science?

September 9: Science and Politics

September 11: What makes it "science"?

Readings:

- Weber, Max. "Science as Vocation." Selections. (On Canvas)
- Forst, Rainer. "Normativity and Reality: Toward a Critical and Realistic Theory of Politics." (On Canvas)
- Rovelli, Carlo. "[Science Is Not About Certainty](#)," *The New Republic*. **required for tutorial**
- Kimmerer, Robin. *Braiding Sweetgrass*. pp. 39-47, 156-166. (On Canvas) **required for tutorial**

Week 3:

September 16: Unscientific forms of evidence

September 18: Verification vs Falsification; Claims and Justifications

- Mayo, Deborah. *Statistical Inference as Severe Testing*. pp. 1–6, 9–11, 14–16, 19–20. (On Canvas)
- Mayo, Deborah. *Statistical Inference as Severe Testing*. pp. 60–1, 69–70, 75–9, 80–1, 83–5. (On Canvas)
- “Distinguishing between Normative and Empirical Statements” (On Canvas)
- Andrew C. Eggers, Haritz Garro, and Justin Grimmer. “No evidence for systematic voter fraud: A guide to statistical claims about the 2020 election.” *PNAS*. Vol. 118, No. 45.
- Oliver, J. Eric, and Thomas J. Wood. *Enchanted America: How Intuition and Reason Divide Our Politics*. University of Chicago Press, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226578644.001.0001> (chapter 1)

Week 4:

September 23: Types of Empirical Claims

II. Evaluating Descriptive Claims

September 25: Kinds of Descriptive Claims, Concepts

- Callanan, V. J. (2012). Media Consumption, Perceptions of Crime Risk and Fear of Crime: Examining Race/Ethnic Differences. *Sociological Perspectives*, 55(1), 93-115. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sop.2012.>
- Donald J. Black. Crime as Social Control. *American Sociological Review*, 48(1):34–45, 1983
- [Why do Americans always think crime is going up?](#)
- [Election claims about crime](#)

Assignment #1 due September 27

Week 5:

September 30: **No Class: National Day for Truth and Reconciliation**

October 2: Variables and Validity

Readings:

- Little, Andrew T., and Anne Meng. 2024. “Measuring Democratic Backsliding.” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 57(2): 149–61. doi: 10.1017/S104909652300063X.
- Knutsen, Carl Henrik et al. 2024. “Conceptual and Measurement Issues in Assessing Democratic Backsliding.” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 57(2): 162–77. doi: 10.1017/S104909652300077X.
- Hu, Lily. “[Race, Policing, and the Limits of Social Science.](#)” *Boston Review*.

Week 6:

October 7: Measurement Error

October 9: Measurement Error

Readings:

- “Measurement Error” (On Canvas)
- Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba. *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1994. (Selections)
- [Why the Perception That Crime Is Rising Persists](#)
- [Another Cautionary Crime Data Tale](#)
- [Murder Is Likely Falling At The Fastest Pace Ever Recorded In 2024](#)
- Oliver, J. Eric, and Thomas J. Wood. *Enchanted America: How Intuition and Reason Divide Our Politics*. University of Chicago Press, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226578644.001.0001> (chapter 2)

Week 7:

October 14: **No Class: Thanksgiving Day**

October 16: Sampling Error

Assignment #2 due October 18

Readings:

- Ansolabehere, Stephen, Luks, Samantha, and Schaffner, Brian. (2015). The Perils of Cherry Picking Low Frequency Events in Large Sample Surveys. Electoral Studies. 40. 10.1016/j.electstud.2015.07.00
- Jesse T. Richman, Gulshan A. Chattha, David C. Earnest. (2014). Do non-citizens vote in U.S. elections? Electoral Studies. 36. 149–157. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2014.09.001>.

Week 8:

October 21: Sampling Error

III. Evaluating Causal Claims

October 23: What is Causality: Counterfactuals and Potential Outcomes

Readings:

- “Causality: Counterfactuals, Deterministic Claims, and Probabilistic Claims” (On Canvas)

Week 9: Review and Midterm

October 28: Testing causal claims

October 30: **MIDTERM EXAM**

Week 10: Causal Claims

November 4: Correlation

November 6: Confounding

Readings:

- “Causality: Counterfactuals, Deterministic Claims, and Probabilistic Claims” (On Canvas)
- “Regression Toward the Mean: An Introduction with Examples,” available at: <https://fs.blog/2015/07/regression-toward-the-mean/>

Week 11: Correlation and its limits

November 11: **No Class: Remembrance Day**

November 13: **No Class: Midterm Break**

Week 12: From Correlation to Causation (Part 1)

November 18: Confounding

November 20: Experiments

Assignment #3 due November 22

Readings:

- James Druckman, Donald P. Green, James Kuklinski, and Arthur Lupia. Experiments: An Introduction to Core Concepts. In *The Cambridge Handbook of Experimental Political Science*. Cambridge University Press, New York, NY, 2011 (On Canvas)
- Alan Gerber and Donald P. Green. *Field Experiments: Design, Analysis, and Interpretation*. W. W. Norton & Company, New York, NY, 2012. (pp. 21–37; Don't worry about the math.) (On Canvas)

Week 13: From Correlation to Causation (Part 2)

November 25: Conditioning

November 27: Conditioning

Readings:

- Butler and Mayer, pp. 1–11; 15–20; 25–27 (On Canvas)
- Lawless, J., & Fox, R., “He Earns, She Earns (Less): The Wage Gap and Pay Equity in the United States,” chapter 8 in *Women, Men & U.S. Politics: Ten Big Questions*. New York: W.W. Norton, pp.119-135.

Week 14: From Correlation to Causation (Conclusion)

December 2: Research Design

December 4: Research Design

Assignment #4 due December 4

Readings:

- Butler and Mayer, pp. 1–11; 15–20; 25–27 (On Canvas)
- Campbell, Donald and Laurence Ross. The Connecticut Crackdown on Speeding: Time-Series Data in Quasi Experimental Analysis. 1968.

Course Expectations

Lectures

Lecture attendance is required for success in this course, but is not graded. Lectures will be held in person.

Slides will be made available *after* lecture. However, **lecture slides by themselves are in no way meant to replace attending or watching the lecture**. Course assignments and exams are designed with the assumption that students “attend” lecture. When taking note, *do not transcribe the slides*. You can refer back to slides, and you will learn more by restating in your own words and diagrams what you learn from the lecture.

I will end lecture as scheduled (10 minutes before the next course time), but I will stick around to field questions.

Readings

Readings in this course serve a supplementary role. Each week, I will include readings that **build** on the lecture. In addition to the thematic readings that provide further background on key course concepts, there may be short articles related to current events that we can connect to that week’s course material. Sometimes I will address the connection explicitly, other times I will let you make the connection.

Course Communication

For any questions or concerns about the course as a whole, please contact your TA or the course instructor via e-mail or stop by the TA’s or Professor Weaver’s office hours. Any questions about the material covered in lectures may be directed to the course instructor.

Canvas

Please ensure you have access to the course Canvas site and that you have configured Canvas to forward announcements to your email. In this course, the syllabus, readings, key terms, concepts, and questions for homework and exams, assignments, and your grades will all be posted to Canvas. Additionally, all assignments will be submitted through Canvas.

Assignments, Due Dates, and Grades

Students are responsible for and will be assessed on material covered in lecture, tutorial, and readings. Consistent attendance in class is required. Grades will be determined on the basis of the

following:

Item	Number	Percent of Grade
Homework Assignments (5% each)	4	20%
Group Project (9%)	1	10%
Course Survey	1	1%
Midterm Exam (25%)	1	15%
Final Exam (35%)	1	25%
Tutorial Participation	1	10%

Homework Assignments (4 x 5% = 20%)

There will be FOUR Homework assignments. All homework assignments are due at midnight of their due date. They are due on Mondays and Fridays, depending on the assignment, exactly one week after they are distributed. They must be submitted electronically to the Canvas course site. **Your TA may also, if they choose, require you to provide a hard copy of your homework assignment to them.**

The homework assignments are intended to help you work through the material presented in lecture and in course readings by applying key concepts, arguments, and methods to real-world political issues.

For each assignment, you will pick a topic of contemporary political relevance. If you are struggling to come up with a topic, I recommend you address a topic covered some of the article collections on the Vox website¹ (but this is not required). Each set of tagged articles provides background information about a major political or policy issue in the world today. You are welcome to choose different topics for different homework assignments, or to use the same topic throughout.

The following topics are:

- [Politics](#)
- [World Politics](#)
- [2024 Elections](#)
- [Policy](#)
- [Climate](#)
- [Economics](#)
- [Health](#)

¹In the past we used a Canadian news site, but unfortunately there are no freely accessible news sites in Canada with a wide array of topics covered and easy navigation via tags.

Exams (60%)

There are two exams. The exams will test you on material in the lectures, tutorials, and readings for the weeks that they cover (as indicated here):

1. **Midterm Exam: 25%** This midterm will assess material covered in Weeks 1 through 6 and will be worth 25% of your overall mark. The exam will be composed of true/false, short answer (1 paragraph or less), and fill-in-the-blank questions. A list of concepts for which you will be responsible and questions to aid preparation will be made available on Canvas. The exam will be in person, if possible.
2. **Final Exam: 35%** The Final Exam will be a comprehensive exam covering the entire course, but focusing on weeks 9 to 14, and be worth 35% of your overall grade. It will include true/false, short answer (1 paragraph or less), and fill-in-the-blank questions. A list of concepts for which you will be responsible and questions to aid preparation will be made available on Canvas.

Group Project (9%)

To help you gain mastery over these key issues in social science, you will be working a small group to: identify a problem that faces you or your fellow students; suggest a possible solution; develop a testable question that will help you decide whether this solution will work; develop survey questions to help you test this question; field this survey among students in the course; analyze the results of the survey; and discuss what are the strengths and limitations of this analysis in answering your research question.

Each of these topics speak to key course concepts and will help you to practice for individual assignments and the exams. By working as part of a group, you will have the opportunity to check your understanding through discussion with your colleagues.

This project will be completed by groups of 5–6 students in the same tutorials. This is an opportunity to learn how to collaborate with others. At the start of the project, your group will prepare a document that outlines how you will collaborate (communication, files, etc.), how credit for contribution to the group project will be allocated, and what the consequences for failing to contribute will be.

The project will take the form of a memo that you complete in stages. Each time there is a due date, you will revise and add to the memo. Failing to complete these tasks on time will cost you half of your tutorial grade for that week.

The final memo will be graded by the professor. It will also include a group assessment of how credit for the project should be allocated. Each group member will receive the overall project grade multiplied by their credit score (between 0 and 1).

Deadlines

- September 27: Identify a Problem and Group Work Contract

- October 4: Solution to Problem/Causal Question
- October 11: Variable and Survey Measures
- October 25: Sources of Error/Bias
- November 1: Finalized Survey Questions
- November 8: Take Survey (on your own)
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Course Survey (1%)

One way we will practice some of the ideas for this course will be through writing, taking, and analyzing questions for a survey that you all will take. You will work on making and analyzing this survey in small groups in your discussion sections and then take it at some point after the midterm. You will be graded on completion of the survey (1 point for completing it).

Tutorial Participation (10%)

Weekly tutorials led by your teaching assistant will begin in **WEEK 2**. Your grade is based on your participation in the weekly tutorial. Tutorials will address and expand upon the topic that was covered the previous week in lecture. Quality participation depends on having read material from the previous week and participating in group work related to the course survey when it is assigned. These tasks and due dates will be listed on Canvas.

If you are absent, you get a 0 for participation. You will be allowed two unexcused absences from tutorial during the term. Each additional tutorial absence = loss of $(1/n * 100)\%$ from your tutorial attendance grade, where n is the total number of unexcused tutorials.

*****NOTE:** If a **statutory holiday** falls on the regular meeting day of your tutorial section, **you must still attend** tutorial that week on a **different day**. It is **your responsibility** to choose an alternative tutorial to attend and to **provide the TA** teaching that section **your name and student number** when you arrive, so that you receive credit for attendance.******* This is particularly important in Week 9, as tutorials on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday morning will do exam review.

In weeks with group project deadlines, one half of your tutorial grade comes from submitting the group project on time.

General Academic Policies

This is a university course and we have clear, strict rules and expectations regarding deadlines. Late assignments and missed exams have consequences, with clearly defined exceptions to these rules.

Late Assignments: For every 24 hours that pass after the deadline, 5% of the grade is deducted, to a maximum of 30%. Thus, assignments turned in within 24 hours of the deadline have no penalty, and assignments turned in one week or more late have a 30% penalty.

If your assignment is turned in late, the TA no longer is obliged to grade and provide feedback on your assignment within the one-week window after the deadline. Everyone participating in the course (professor, teaching assistants, students) has to plan their course obligations around other constraints. When assignments are turned in late, it may not be

This policy is not negotiable and exemptions can only be granted by following the procedures laid out below.

Missed Exams: The expectation is that you will take exams on the assigned date(s) of the course. If you have a known conflict with the midterm exam for which you would like to request an accommodation (for example, you are an athlete or you know you will be out of town), you must contact Professor Weaver by the second week of the course stating your situation so that a make-up date can be chosen. If you have any other issues that affect your ability to take the exam, see the section on Academic Concessions below.

Academic Concessions Exemptions from these rules about submitting assignments and taking exams are detailed by the UBC Senate. There are two types of consideration:

- **Conflicting Responsibilities:** Students may be exempted from an exam on a specific day and time due to other obligations: childcare, military service, religious observation, competing for varsity team, etc. In most cases, this applies **only to writing an exam**, as homework assignment deadlines are known in advance and several days are provided for their completion.
- **Unforeseen Circumstances:** Emotional, medical, familial, personal events that negatively affect the student's ability to complete an assignment or take an exam. These events must be **unforeseen** or unanticipated, such that students could not have managed their time to ensure submission by the deadline. Completing assignments or studying for an exam in another course is not an "unforeseen circumstance" (the exception here is "exam hardship": having 3 or more **end-of-term** exams in a 24-hour period).

If you have conflicting responsibilities, you should contact the Professor in advance to make a plan.

If you experience an unforeseen even that affects your ability to work you may contact the professor (not your TA) to request a concession. Concessions may be granted AFTER the deadline,

so you do not need to stress out if you do not hear back immediately. For more information on concessions, please click: [here](#).

If your situation is related to an experience of sexual violence, you have the option of contacting UBC's Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Office (SVPRO) (604 822 1588) who can assist you with your academic concession.

If you are applying for a concession (assignment, exam, participation in class) and are an Arts student, review the Faculty of Arts' [academic concession page](#) and then complete Arts Academic Advising's [online academic concession form](#), so that an advisor can evaluate your concession case. If you are a student in a different Faculty, please consult [your Faculty's webpage on academic concession](#), and then contact me where appropriate.

Academic Accommodations for Religious or Spiritual Experiences The University is obligated to comply with the BC Human Rights Code in accommodating students observances of sincerely held religious beliefs. If you would like to reschedule an exam because of a conflict with a religious observance, please contact the professor. To learn more visit [here](#).

Academic Accommodation for Students with Disabilities: UBC is committed to the academic success of students with disabilities. UBC's policy on Academic Accommodations for students with disabilities aims to remove barriers and provide equal access to University services, ensure fair and consistent treatment of all students, and to create a welcoming environment.

Academic accommodations help students with a disability or ongoing medical condition overcome challenges that may affect their academic success. Students requiring academic accommodations must register with the Centre for Accessibility (previously known as Access & Diversity). The Centre will determine that student's eligibility for accommodations in accordance with Policy 73: Academic Accommodation for Students with Disabilities. Academic accommodations are not determined by your instructors, and instructors should not ask you about the nature of your disability or ongoing medical condition, or request copies of your disability documentation. However, your instructor may consult with the Centre for Accessibility should the accommodations affect the essential learning outcomes of a course.

Grade Appeals: Students wishing to appeal a grade must wait *until 48 hours after the grade has been received* to submit an appeal. Appeals must be made in writing and explain clearly where the student believes they should have earned more points. These letters will be sent to the TA. If, after this, the student is still unsatisfied, they can submit a subsequent written appeal to the professor, again explaining why they should have earned more points and responding to the TA's decision and reasoning. Bear in mind, however, that should the TA or professor agree to regrade the assignment, the grade may go up or down.

Academic Integrity and Responsibility

As a member of this class, you are responsible for contributing to the course objectives through your participation in class activities and your work on essays, exams, and other projects. In the process of coming into your own as an independent, responsible participant in the academic community, you are encouraged to seek advice, clarification, and guidance in your learning from your instructor and/or Teaching Assistant. If you decide to seek help beyond the resources of this course, you are responsible for ensuring that this help does not lead you to submit others' work as your own. If an outside tutor or other person helps you, show this policy to your tutor or helper: make sure you both understand the limits of this person's permissible contribution. If you are uncertain, consult your instructor or TA. I also strongly encourage you to read the UBC library's excellent online resources on plagiarism located [here](#). To identify *potential* cases of plagiarism, we will be submitting your assignments through the plagiarism-detection engine, [Turnitin.com](#).

Academic communities depend on their members' honesty and integrity in representing the sources of reasoning, claims, and wordings that appear in their work. Like any other member of the academic community, you will be held responsible for the accurate representation of your sources: the means by which you produced the work you are submitting. If you are found to have misrepresented your sources and to have submitted others' work as your own, penalties may follow. Your case may be forwarded to the Head of the department, who may decide that you should receive zero for the assignment. The Head will report your case to the Dean's Office, where the report will remain on file. The Head may decide, in consultation with your instructor, that a greater penalty is called for, and will forward your case to the Dean's Office. After an interview in the Dean's Office, your case may be forwarded to the President's Advisory Committee on Academic Misconduct. Following a hearing in which you will be asked to account for your actions, the President may apply penalties including zero for the assignment; zero for the course; suspension from the university for a period ranging from 4 to 24 months; a notation on your permanent record. The penalty may be a combination of these.

Like any academic author submitting work for review and evaluation, you are guaranteeing that the work you submit for this course has not already been submitted for credit in another course. Your submitting work from another course, without your instructor's prior agreement, may result in penalties such as those applied to the misrepresentation of sources.

Respectful University Environment

UBC recognizes that "the best possible environment for working, learning and living is one in which respect, civility, diversity, opportunity and inclusion are valued." The full UBC Statement on Respectful Environment for Students, Faculty and Staff can be found [here](#). Students should read this statement carefully and take note of both the protections and the responsibilities that it outlines for all members of the UBC community. Students should also review the [Student Code of Conduct](#)

This course values frank discussion, healthy debate, and the free and respectful exchange of ideas. Students are welcome to voice and defend their views, which may differ from those of other students or of the instructor. However, disrespectful behavior, including bullying and harassment, will not be tolerated. The instructor and teaching assistant will be professional and respectful in

all their exchanges with students, and students will exercise similar professionalism and respect in their interactions with each other, with the teaching assistant, and with the instructor.

If you have any concerns about the class environment, please raise them with the instructor. You also have the options of contacting the Head of the Political Science Department, UBC's [Equity and Inclusion Office](#), or the UBC [Ombudsperson for Students](#).

Equity and Harassment

UBC is committed to equity (including but not limited to gender equity) and fostering a safe learning environment for everyone. All peoples should be able to study, work, and learn in a supportive environment that is free from sexual violence, harassment, and discrimination. UBC's Policy #3 on Discrimination and Harassment defines harassment as: "unwanted and unwelcome attention from a person who knows, or ought to know, that the behaviour is unwelcome. Harassment can range from written or spoken comments to unwanted jokes, gifts, and physical assault, and may be accompanied by threats or promises regarding work or study opportunities and conditions. Harassment can be either a single incident or a series of related incidents." Such behavior is not acceptable and will not be tolerated at UBC. If you or someone you know has encountered sexual violence or harassment, you can find confidential support and resources at the AMS Sexual Assault Support Centre (SASC) and the Equity and Inclusion Office. The SASC is an all-genders service that serves the UBC-Vancouver campus community and is committed to creating a safer campus community, free from sexualized violence. Their work is informed by feminism, anti-oppression and recognition of intersectionality. The Equity and Inclusion Office is committed to fostering a community in which human rights are respected and equity and diversity are integral to university life.

Resources are available at:

Sexual Assault Support Centre (SASC)

249M, Student Union Building, UBC
604-827-5180
sasc@ams.ubc.ca
<http://amssasc.ca>

Equity and Inclusion Office

2306-1874 East Mall (Brock Hall)
604.822.6353
equity@equity.ubc.ca
<http://equity.ubc.ca>

Acknowledgement

UBC's Point Grey Campus is located on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Musqueam people. The land it is situated on has always been a place of learning for the Musqueam people, who for millennia have passed on in their culture, history, and traditions from one generation

to the next on this site.