Course Description

The tools of social science affect both how scholars understand the workings of the judicial system and how lawyers practice law. This course engages students in the empirical study of law and the courts. It provides them with the substantive knowledge, and statistical and analytic skills they need to understand both (1) how social scientists use empirical evidence to make inferences about laws, judges, and legal institutions and (2) how statistical (and other empirical) methods are used in legal practice. Through the course, students will undertake statistical analyses and learn how to present these analyses to nontechnical audiences, such as jurors, employers, and the general public. The course begins with an overview of the social scientific study of law and the courts, and then investigates a series of topics, including how social science and empirical evidence are used to make legal claims and establish legal standards, to provide a context for judicial decisions, and to litigate cases.

This course is a Data Intensive course recommended for Bachelor of Science (BS) students in Political Science and for Social Data Analytics (SoDA). PLSC 309 or STAT 200 are required prerequisites for this course.

All course materials (including this syllabus) will be available on a dedicated Github repo, which can be found at: https://github.com/PrisonRodeo/PLSC476-SP2021-git. Throughout this syllabus, hot links are in Penn State Blue.

Texts

Required:


Other readings as assigned, available on the course github repository.
Recommended (i.e., potentially useful):


Note as well that there are many, many books (and other resources) for learning data analysis and visualization, statistics, and/or R.

The Teaching Assistant

Tyler Suman is the teaching assistant for PLSC 476. He is a Political Science Ph.D. candidate who specializes in international relations and comparative politics, and in statistics and data science. He will serve as a “first line of defense” in the course: He can assist you with course material, software and programming issues, and other matters related to the course work. He can be reached via e-mail at wts5131 [at] psu [dot] edu.

Grading

For this course, grades will be assessed based on two broad categories:

- Four research modules / short papers (15% each)
- Either:
  1. A take-home final examination, or
  2. A course paper / project (40%)

More information regarding examinations, the course project / paper, and the scope and nature of the research modules and final examination will be presented in class and available on the course github repo. The instructor reserves the right to change the distribution of percentages across
course components as necessary. Students unable to complete the final exam at the scheduled times must obtain permission to do so prior to the exam / due date so that alternative arrangements may be made.

While course grades will not include a “class participation” component, classroom engagement and participation is essential to the success of this class.

**Some Other Useful Resources**

The Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR), at the University of Michigan, maintains an extensive archive of data in the social and behavioral sciences. Much of it is accessible via their homepage (http://www.icpsr.umich.edu).

The Comprehensive R Archive Network (CRAN) (http://cran.r-project.org/) is the place to go for downloads, packages, and documentation. Similarly, the Stata™ homepage (http://www.stata.com) is a valuable resource for questions about Stata statistical software.

The Dataverse Project, and in particular the Harvard Dataverse, is a free, open-source repository for data and replication code from published and unpublished empirical work in the natural, physical, social, and behavioral sciences.

**Obligatory Statement on Academic Integrity**

Academic integrity is the pursuit of scholarly activity in an open, honest and responsible manner. Academic integrity is a basic guiding principle for all academic activity at The Pennsylvania State University, and all members of the University community are expected to act in accordance with this principle. Consistent with this expectation, the University’s Code of Conduct states that all students should act with personal integrity, respect other students’ dignity, rights and property, and help create and maintain an environment in which all can succeed through the fruits of their efforts.

Academic integrity includes a commitment by all members of the University community not to engage in or tolerate acts of falsification, misrepresentation or deception. Such acts of dishonesty violate the fundamental ethical principles of the University community and compromise the worth of work completed by others.

In cases of any violation of academic integrity it is the policy of the Department of Political Science to follow procedures established by the College of the Liberal Arts. More information on academic integrity and procedures followed for violation can be found here.
Obligatory Statement on Accommodations for Disabilities

Penn State welcomes students with disabilities into the University’s educational programs. Every Penn State campus has an office for students with disabilities. Student Disability Resources (SDR) website provides contact information for every Penn State campus (here). For further information, please visit the Student Disability Resources website (here).

In order to receive consideration for reasonable accommodations, you must contact the appropriate disability services office at the campus where you are officially enrolled, participate in an intake interview, and provide documentation: See documentation guidelines here. If the documentation supports your request for reasonable accommodations, your campus disability services office will provide you with an accommodation letter. Please share this letter with your instructors and discuss the accommodations with them as early as possible. You must follow this process for every semester that you request accommodations.

Obligatory Statement on Counseling and Psychological Services

Many students at Penn State face personal challenges or have psychological needs that may interfere with their academic progress, social development, or emotional wellbeing. The university offers a variety of confidential services to help you through difficult times, including individual and group counseling, crisis intervention, consultations, online chats, and mental health screenings. These services are provided by staff who welcome all students and embrace a philosophy respectful of clients’ cultural and religious backgrounds, and sensitive to differences in race, ability, gender identity and sexual orientation.

Counseling and Psychological Services at University Park (CAPS) (http://studentaffairs.psu.edu/counseling/): 814-863-0395

Counseling and Psychological Services at Commonwealth Campuses (http://senate.psu.edu/faculty/counseling-services-at-commonwealth-campuses/)

Penn State Crisis Line (24 hours / 7 days/week): 877-229-6400. Crisis Text Line (24 hours / 7 days/week): Text LIONS to 741741.

Obligatory Statement on Educational Equity and Reporting Bias

Penn State takes great pride to foster a diverse and inclusive environment for students, faculty, and staff. Consistent with University Policy AD29, students who believe they have experienced or observed a hate crime, an act of intolerance, discrimination, or harassment that occurs at Penn State are urged to report these incidents as outlined on the University’s Report Bias webpage (http://equity.psu.edu/reportbias/).
Course Schedule

Daily reading assignments are listed for each class session. Note that reading assignments are listed according to the day on which the subject matter will be discussed; they should therefore be read prior to that date.

I. Some Preliminaries

January 19: Course Introduction

- No readings assigned.

January 21: Review of the R Language

- No readings assigned.

January 26: Review: Data Analysis and Statistics

- Review material from PLSC 309 / STAT 200, and/or chapters 2, 3, and 6 of Epstein and Martin (2015).

January 28: Review: Data Visualization

- Epstein and Martin (2015), Chapters 10 and 11 (review quickly).

II. Judges, Courts, and Judicial Institutions

February 2: Overview of Empirical Research on Judicial Politics

- Epstein and Martin (2015), Chapter 1.

February 4: Introduction to Judicial Decision-Making

February 9: No Class - Wellness Day

February 11: Practicum: Finding and Working With Court Data
  • No readings assigned.

February 16: Judicial Behavior: Personal Attributes

February 18: Practicum – Personal Attribute Models
  • No readings assigned.

February 23: Political Ideology and Judicial Behavior

February 25: Practicum – Political Ideology and Judicial Behavior
  • No readings assigned.

March 2: Precedent and Legal Influences

March 4: Practicum – Legal Influences
No readings assigned.

March 9: Digression: So You Want To Go To Law School?
- The LSAC’s Panglossian Summary of Law School Admissions.
- ABA-disclosed “509 reports,” bar passage information, and employment data.
- The xtranormal version.

March 11: No Class – Wellness Day

March 16: Courts and Public Opinion

March 18: Practicum – Courts and Public Opinion
- No readings assigned.

March 23: Courts and the Separation of Powers

March 25: Practicum – Courts and the Separation of Powers
- No readings assigned.

III. Empirical Analysis and Legal Practice

March 30: Legal Education
• Also: Play around with this.

April 1: Practicum – Legal Education

• No readings assigned.

April 6: Law Firm Hiring


April 8: Legal Careers


April 13: Legal Practice – Criminal Law


April 15: Practicum – Criminal Law

• No readings assigned.

April 20: Legal Practice: Civil Litigation

• “Electronic discovery” at Wikipedia (yes, you read that right).
• The EDRM process (poster)

April 22: Practicum – Civil Litigation

• No readings assigned.
April 27: The Law Business


April 29: Catch-Up, Wrap-Up, and Review

- No readings assigned.

May 5: Final Exams / Projects Due