PSCI/INTR 389: Senior Honors Seminar 2025-2026

Thursdays 2:00-4:40 PM

Meliora 284

Syllabus Version 1.0

**Instructor**

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Office hours: upon request

TA: Dot Sawler

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Office hours: 11:30-12:30 Tuesday; additional hours TBD

## Overview

The goal of this class is to teach you how to do original research: that is, how to come up with a question about some aspect of the social sciences, develop a theory that addresses it, and test that theory against the evidence.[1]

During the Fall semester, we will meet regularly in the classroom, where you will acquire a toolbox of research philosophies, approaches, and methodologies (including modern statistical tools for determining cause and effect). During this semester, you will choose a research topic and question, find an advisor in the political science department, read relevant literature, generate hypotheses, begin collecting data, design statistical tests, and at the end of the semester produce a paper that constitutes a first draft of the final thesis (to be completed during the Spring semester).

Along the way, you will read high-quality published articles, learn how to interpret statistical tests and how to design your own, understand pros and cons of various research design techniques, replicate a published article, and learn how to organize and to write a research paper. This course is primarily geared toward teaching students how to write an empirical research paper, although

[1] This process might look a little different for different kinds of research and, as we will discuss in class, is rarely so straightforward.

those with a specific interest in formal theory are encouraged to come talk to me about how we can accommodate your interest.

In the Spring semester, you will be largely on your own, in the sense that class will no longer meet, although you will of course have the support of your advisor, the TA, one another, and me. You will implement your analyses, interpret your results, and write up your paper, shooting as close as possible to a "real-life" (publishable) paper.

Prior instructor permission is required for this class, which is worth four credits towards a degree requirement.

**Communication**

We will use Slack as the default forum for communication and submission of assignments. We will set up a Slack channel on the first day of class. You are encouraged to use it to ask your colleagues for help with your work, let them know about things that might be helpful, and celebrate interesting findings.

I try my best to answer all student communications within a 24-hour turnaround period during the school week. If I have not replied to you within this time period, feel free to follow up with me, as it is possible that I missed your earlier message.

**Disability Accommodation**

If you require accommodations due to the impact of a disability, please contact the Office of Disability Resources. The access coordinators in the Office of Disability Resources can meet with you to discuss the barriers you are experiencing and explain the eligibility process for establishing academic accommodations. You can reach the Office of Disability Resources at: disability@rochester.edu; see also www.rochester.edu/college/disability.

**Academic Honesty**

All assignments and activities associated with this course must be performed in accordance with the University of Rochester's Academic Honesty Policy. More information is available at: www.rochester.edu/college/honesty.

My policy on generative AI is that it is appropriate to use as a tool in some circumstances but not in others. I will make clear from one assignment to another whether, and how, you may use it. When it is permitted, you may use it with caution, but you are fully responsible for the recalling and defending the substantive content of any assignment you turn in. Furthermore, you are responsible for correct attribution of ideas (i.e., citations). Incorrect or missing citations will hurt your grade and may, depending on the circumstances, constitute evidence of academic misconduct.

If you use generative AI in any way, you are required to write a short statement (1-2 sentences) explaining how you used it and may be required to provide information such as why you think it improved your output, what prompts you used, etc. You may not simply outsource most or all of any assignment to generative AI without understanding the output.

## Grading and Assessment

Over the course of the year, you will receive a grade for the fall semester, a grade for the spring semester, and an honors designation for the thesis itself.

The grade weights for the fall are as follows:

50%: Class and reading participation. There will be a series of readings on which you will collaboratively comment using the Perusall platform. You will be evaluated on your participation in these collaborative discussions as well as your attendance and (crucially) your participation in class. You will also get participation credit by actively engaging with your classmates' research ideas and providing constructive feedback.

20%: Replication paper. The first major assignment of the course is a replication paper, which consists of two stages. In the first stage, you will replicate descriptive statistics and major results from an existing article. In the second stage, you will extend the analysis (by improving on the original analysis, adding a new variable, etc.). You are encouraged to explore various datasets and to be creative with how they alter existing empirical setups.

20%: Independent reading. Over the course of the first semester, you will develop a topic for your thesis. This requires acquiring enough knowledge so you know what to ask. Over the first several weeks of the semester, I will work with each of you to design an independent reading program based on sources relevant to your interests. You will be evaluated on your engagement with the literature you select. Further details will follow in class.

10%: Fall paper. At the end of the fall semester, you will hand in a paper that constitutes a definitive plan for the thesis project. This paper will be jointly graded by myself and by your advisor. This will clearly explain your research question, motivate its importance with a review of the relevant literature, and provide an overview of your data (or, as appropriate, a clear plan for obtaining your data).

## Deadlines

All written assignments for class, unless otherwise stated, are due by 5pm on the Tuesday before the class for which they are assigned. Late reading assignments will not be accepted (i.e., the Perusall system will close the assignment). Replication and research assignments should also be submitted on time. Remember that many of these assignments will be peer-reviewed by your colleagues or by me, and lateness will inconvenience your friends who are going to give you feedback and/or the professors and grad student who are advising you!

## Attendance

See "Class reading and participation" above. Attendance is required at all sessions. Please notify me of any known and unavoidable absences (e.g., University-sponsored academic or sporting event) at the beginning of the semester, and any unforeseen circumstances (e.g., death in the family, illness) as soon as possible as they arise. I understand that unforeseen events occur on

occasion, but it is your responsibility to keep me informed. This course moves quickly, and a handful of absences will likely require dropping the class.

**Overview of Spring Semester**

The spring semester is, intentionally, less structured than the fall. You can set a schedule with your advisor that works for both of you. However, you should plan to meet with your advisor every week or every other week, and should rarely go more than two weeks without being in contact with your advisor. You can, of course, also talk to me in the spring, but your advisor should be your main contact point. The TA will also still be available throughout the spring semester to help with any dataset and statistical issues. The deadlines (soft and hard) in the spring are as follows. I will check in with your advisors to ensure these deadlines are met.

• January 23rd: This is the Friday of the first full week of courses. You should have spoken to your advisor sometime this week, and no later than the next week, to construct a plan of action for finishing the thesis within the next three months.

• February 20th: Students are highly encouraged to have finalized their datasets by this point. In our experience from previous years, the consistent criticism even of very good theses is that the students kept changing their data late enough that their advisors did not have time to review the final statistical analyses. You want your paper to go through at least two major rounds of comments with largely the same statistical analysis (or at least the same dataset) to ensure that your paper analyzes the data properly.

• April 14th: Penultimate draft of paper due to advisors. This will provide enough time to incorporate their feedback prior to the final thesis draft due three weeks later.

• May 1st: Final theses due by 5pm via email (to your advisor and me). This deadline cannot be amended. Otherwise, we will not have enough time prior to graduation to assign and process the honors distinctions.

**Grading Standards for Final Thesis**

These apply only to the final thesis, not to the paper due at the end of the fall semester.

Honors: Meets standards for an A-/A undergraduate paper that contains an original research component. The paper should be well-written, clearly organized, with an appropriate research design, and with findings that contribute to knowledge on the topic. We anticipate this grade being awarded to most students, perhaps three in four students, with most of the remainder receiving either High Honors or Highest Honors. We recognize that, on rare occasions, papers will not meet the standard for Honors. When that happens, the paper should receive a grade of "No Honors." Bear in mind that students receiving "No Honors" can still get credit for PSC 393W, but with a course grade no higher than B+.

High Honors: Meets all standards for Honors, plus (a) outstanding writing, organization, and

description of results, (b) high quality execution of empirical tests, where appropriate (criteria include but are not limited to clever research design, significant data collection component, and/or 9thoroughness of statistical tests), and (c) significant contribution to knowledge about the topic. We anticipate this grade being awarded to perhaps one in four students.

Highest Honors: Meets all standards for High Honors, plus with a level of accomplishment truly unusual for an undergraduate. This should be a paper that would be regarded as an excellent paper for a second-year graduate student, bearing in mind that we do not expect undergraduates to have the advantage of two years of graduate training in methods and formal theory. May be a candidate for publication with appropriate revisions. We anticipate this grade being awarded rarely, perhaps once for every 10-15 students.

## Research

### Choosing an Advisor

Each student will choose an advisor for their senior honors project. You are required to meet with your advisor at least three times during the fall semester. The schedule of classes below provides benchmarks for when these meetings should occur. As discussed more below, your advisor will be your main contact person in the spring. The following lists every full-time faculty member in the political science department that is not on leave in either Fall 2025 or Spring 2026 (and who is not running the rest of the honors program), and constitutes the exhaustive list of possible advisors: Scott Abramson, Dan Alexander, Kevin Clarke, John Duggan, Mark Fey, Anderson Frey, Hein Goemans, Gretchen Helmke, James Johnson, Tasos Kalandrakis, Mayya Komisarchik, Bethany Lacina, Alexander Lee, David Primo, Larry Rothenberg, Curt Signorino, Randy Stone, Scott Tyson, and Sidak Yntiso. UR's political science website provides information about their research/teaching interests and office hours. Ideally, the student will have taken a course related to their topic with their advisor, although this not required. Any professor will advise no more than one honors thesis in a given year.

### Division of Labor

You have many contact points in the honors program: me, your advisor, the TA, and your fellow students. In addition to the instruction in class, my and the advisors' role are to provide direction on the paper and to provide feedback on the broad ideas, writing, etc. You must meet with your advisor at least three times during the fall semester, and I will be in touch with them to make sure the relationship is proving productive.

The main role of the TA is to help with data details: creating a dataset, code for running regressions, inputting statistical results into your papers, etc. If you have a question on what statistical technique to use, your advisor or I am probably your best bet, whereas if you have a question on how to implement a statistical technique, please see the TA first. You also have each other to talk to and from whom to receive feedback both during and outside of class. If you have trouble finding data or want to know if a dataset exists (or if the university can help you purchase a dataset), in addition to talking with myself and your advisor, you can also contact UR's social science librarian, Joe Easterly (jpe@rochester.edu), who will be happy to help.

### Readings and Sources

We will use the Perusall platform to host and discuss readings. Most, if not all, required class readings will be posted there. Although there will be no required text outside of these readings, the following books are particularly helpful background readings on methodologies we will discuss in class.

- Angrist, Joshua D. and Jorn-Steffen Pischke. 2009. Mostly Harmless Econometrics: An Empiricists' Companion. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Llaudet, Elena and Kosuke Imai. 2023. Data Analysis for Social Science: A Friendly and Practical Introduction. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Green, Donald P. and Alan S. Gerber. 2012. Field Experiments: Design, Analysis, and Interpretation. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

We will also be using the statistical software R. R is free and open source. You can (and should/must) download it at https://cran.r-project.org/. RStudio is a popular code editor and is also available for free at https://www.rstudio.com/. Two short tutorials you might want to work through are available here:

https://data.princeton.edu/R
https://www.dropbox.com/home/Casey%20Petroff/r_tutorial

Throughout the semester, you will be assigned readings on Perusall; a major part of your participation grade depends on your comments on these readings. Readings will be assigned after the start of the first week of class and will depend on my assessment of your previous methodological backgrounds and interests.