PSCI 4307: Predicting Politics

Course Information

PSCI 4307
Section 4396-001 Spring 2012
MW 2:30-3:45pm, FO 1.202

Contact Information

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Course Description

This course is designed to teach you about how social scientists understand and predict political events. We will examine how decision theory and statistical models are used to predict and explain events like riots, civil wars, intra- and interstate conflict, terrorism, and elections, etc. We will do this by focusing on forecasts of a) regional conflicts such as the Levant (Israel-Palestine-Lebanon), the Indian subcontinent (India-Pakistan), and China (China-Taiwan), b) elections, and c) terrorism.

Why do we want to do this? There is a growing need in the policy, human rights, and foreign policy communities for these types of forecasts. They are used for early warning systems, humanitarian aid allocation, human rights monitoring, foreign policy decision-making, and conflict mediation. Election forecasts are important for similar reasons: they help manage expectations about public policy, taxes, and other political outcomes.

This course is quite technical. This is because it covers both cutting edge methods employed in the social sciences and statistics. I assume no knowledge of statistics beyond SOCS / EPPS 3405 for this course. The rest I will teach you. But you should read, not skip the statistics related material in the articles and materials that you read for this class. I will also lead short tutorials on how to use software to do statistical analysis and forecasting for the kinds of events and political data that we will discuss.

Student Learning Objectives

On completing this course, students will be able to:

• understand and apply commonly used prediction methods to political events;
• discuss and analyze the merits and drawback of commonly used prediction and forecasting methods;
• conduct forecasting and analysis exercises using accepted techniques and validate the forecasts.
• research, write and revise a research paper about political events based on empirical data and current social science theories.

Required texts and materials

The following book has been ordered for this course:

These text is available at the UTD bookstore, Off-Campus Books, as e-books, etc.
You will also be asked to read a wide variety of scholarly research articles, websites and other material related to the topic. These are listed by date in the course calendar below. You will be required to find these via the UTD library or I will provide them (if they are working papers or things that are not easily on the web).
Required readings will be approximately 100 pages per week. You should read carefully the material at least once before class.
Students should also stay abreast of current political events. Current events will figure prominently in class discussions, assignments, as well as examples. I recommend making a habit of reading a daily paper such as the New York Times, LA Times, Washington Post, or the Chicago Tribune. Alternatively you may also wish to read a weekly news magazine such as The Economist, Newsweek, Time, or U.S. News and World Report.

Grading and Course Policies

Grading
There are FOUR major graded components to this course. The majority of them are centered around the course paper at the culmination of the course.

• Course memos (25% of final grade). These are due on the weeks you agree to do them (see below).
• Interim paper components (20% of final grade). Due variously from February 29, 2012 through March 28, 2012.
• Final individual paper (50% of final grade). Due May 2, 2012.
• Class participation (5% of final grade).

There is no extra credit available in this course. Note the grading criteria and plan accordingly for your success.
Grades are based on the standard grading scale: A = 100-90, B = 89-80, C = 79-70, etc., with pluses / minuses at my discretion.
If you have any questions about your grade on an assignment, please wait until 24 hours after receiving your assignment before discussing the grade with the professor. There are no exceptions to this policy.
If you wish to have an assignment re-graded, it must be returned to me within two days of the day it was returned (if I am not available that day, ask the staff of the School of Economic, Political and Policy Sciences to leave it in my box). Assignments to be re-graded must include a memo stating the reason why you believe they assignment should be re-graded. Finally, re-graded assignments can be graded higher, lower, or the same as the initial grade.

Course Memos
Each student will write 4 course memos during the course. Memos should be 5 pages double spaced, in 12pt font. Memos should have three main themes or sections: 1) a summary of the material, 2) a criticism or critical commentary on what is correct or incorrect about the readings and 3) a set of questions for class discussion about the readings. You will be able to select the reading / class when you will write these. I will distribute a list and limit how many of you can write memos for each session so that they are evenly distributed over the term.
The purpose of the class memos is that they serve as 1) the basis for class discussion and 2) that they ensure someone other than the instructor has read the material closely (everyone should read the material!)
Course memos are due by 5pm the day before the class session they will cover. Please submit them to me via e-mail at pbrandt@utdallas.edu. I may circulate relevant parts of the memo to the class as appropriate.

Interim Paper Components
Before writing your course paper there will be several interim deadlines. At each of these deadlines you must submit a component that will be part of your final grade in the course:

Initial Meeting and Topic Page (2.5% of final grade) The first step in writing the term paper is to schedule an appointment with the instructor to review your paper topic. Before beginning your paper, you are REQUIRED to come and talk with me about your paper. At or prior to this meeting, please provide a ONE PAGE research proposal or outline that lays out the following for your paper:
• Main research question you are addressing.
• Hypothesis (or Hypotheses) you wish to evaluate in your paper.
• Data and variables to be used in the analysis.
• Tests and methods that will be used to evaluate the hypotheses.
• Tentative listing of the techniques and models you may use.

You should schedule your meeting with me prior to the 6th week of class, so before about October 1st. Don’t worry about finding data or how it will be analyzed. I can help with that.

This meeting and topic page must be completed before February 29, 2012. You will need to submit the topic page to me before the meeting.

Research and plagiarism tutorial (2.5% of final grade) This is due by March 7, 2012. This will be distributed later in the course.

Annotated bibliography (5% of final grade) This should be a review of the literature search you have done for your paper. Details will be forthcoming later, but it will require you to do primary and scholarly research in a process like the research tutorial. This component is due via e-mail before March 21, 2012.

Rough draft of the paper (10% of final grade) This is a rough draft of your paper. It does not need to be complete, but it should be enough for me to comment on what you are doing and offer feedback on your writing. I would expect that this will be about 80% of your final paper. Due March 28, 2012, by 4pm in class.

Final Individual Papers
Each student will write one term paper. The papers should be 15-20 pages long, double-spaced, 12 pt font, and must be original research (the chance you will be able to “reuse” something should be probability zero.)

Paper topics must be discussed with the instructor in advance of writing the paper. Topics can include, but are not limited to

• Forecasting methods or comparisons for political and social data.
• Conflict forecasts for some of the regions we will cover in this class.
• Analysis of counterfactual, “what if”, or ex post forecasts of past events.
• Analysis of omnibus forecasts such as those that are done of civil wars, failed states, regional conflict, etc.
• Any other related topic you can convince me would make a good term paper about political prediction.

Class Participation
This is a small course, by design. The goal is for this course to be organized as a research seminar that is focused on exploring and and understanding how political events can be forecast. So everyone’s active participation is a must. As such, I will count course participation — discussion, comments, questions, etc. toward your final grade. Note that this is not a “optional” or “extra” — if you fail to participate in the class sessions your grade will suffer.

Late assignments
Late assignments will be penalized. Late memos will lose 5 points per day. Late papers and other components will lose 10 points per day. Assignments submitted via email or eLearning will be dated as received in my inbox or in the on-line course system.
**ELearning**

ELearning is used in this class for the distribution of data, website links, readings, presentations, etc. You can access the course eLearning page at [http://elearning.utdallas.edu](http://elearning.utdallas.edu). Additional information about how to use eLearning is available at this site as well. You will need a UTD net-id to access this site.

ELearning is also how I will communicate with you and administer any class groups. eLearning also includes various discussion tools and interactive elements that I will use as part of the course. You are responsible for announcements made through eLearning. You may forward messages from eLearning to your regular e-mail account. Please select a forwarding address in your mail preferences if you do not regularly check your eLearning mail or UTD email. *My preference on a class this small is to deal with email outside of eLearning.*

**Attendance**

Class attendance is required. I will randomly take attendance throughout the term. You are responsible for any announcements made or information given during class. I may provide copies of lecture notes or slides at my discretion. However these are only an outline of the material, so your attendance is very important if you are to master the material.

**Course conduct and expectations**

The following rules apply in class:

1. Turn off your cell phone. It is VERY distracting to others. “Off” means that it does not ring OR vibrate. (Exceptions to this policy can be made, come to talk to me.)

2. Do not fall asleep. It is rude and distracting. Bring coffee if you need it (I do.)

3. Be polite and courteous to your fellow students.

4. Raise your hand when you want to be recognized to answer or ask a question. If you do not raise your hand I will not recognize you or your answer.

5. You are responsible for things: therefore if you miss something I announced or fail to complete an assignment, my response will be “How is this my problem?”

6. Note that this syllabus is not a contract. It is subject to change at my discretion. While we may be studying the political science, this class is not a democracy.

7. Class starts at 2:30pm, not 2:45pm. Be here on time.

8. Respect my time and I will respect yours. We are both busy.

9. Grade disputes must follow university policies about how to contest a grade. If you contact me to contest a grade I will immediate refer you to the University policy and will follow it to the letter.

10. Problems with *eLearning* are not my problem. You need to note 1) the outages schedule and 2) when assignments are due. If you start an assignment and do not complete it before it is due, then it is your problem, not mine. If you leave a quiz until the last minute it is at your peril, not mine.

11. *You are expected to be pro-active in anticipating and planning for any absences or problems you will have in completing course work.* Make arrangements for possibly missed work prior to the due date is preferable and more likely to be successful than doing it after the due date. In the end: “A failure to plan on your part does not constitute a crisis for me.” Plan for absences and missed work accordingly.
Course Calendar

The dates listed for each topic are approximate and will depend on how quickly we move through material. You should read the material for each date before class. Also note that you will need to check e-Learning periodically for updates, announcements, etc. Readings are listed under the lecture topics below.

18 January: Introduction
- Go over the syllabus
- Get started by looking at some work and websites on political forecasting.
- Talk about what we will do in here.

23 January: Real time forecasting motivations
- Check out the following sites:
  - KEDS / TABARI: [http://eventdata.psu.edu](http://eventdata.psu.edu)
  - International Crisis Group: [http://www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org)
  - Swisspeace / FAST: [http://www.swisspeace.org](http://www.swisspeace.org)
  - Forecasting Principles: [http://www.forecastingprinciples.com](http://www.forecastingprinciples.com)
  - Stratfor: [http://www.stratfor.com](http://www.stratfor.com)
  - Political Instability Task Force: [http://globalpolicy.gmu.edu](http://globalpolicy.gmu.edu)
  - Political Risk Services Group: [http://www.prsgroup.com](http://www.prsgroup.com)

25 January: Overview of forecast methods

30 January: Predicting events
- Bueno de Mesquita, Chapters 1-3.

1 February — No class, instructor out of town

6 February: Predicting events
- Bueno de Mesquita, Chapters 4-7.

8 February: Forecast uncertainty
13 February: Examples of Quantitative Forecasting

- Look at the forecasting papers on the Penn Stata event data site: [http://eventdata.psu.edu](http://eventdata.psu.edu)

15 February: Predicting Elections

- Fair, Chapters 1–4.

20 February: Predicting Human Behavior

- Fair, Chapters 5–8

22 February: Predicting Sports and Economics

- Fair, Chapters 9–12

27 February: Forecast evaluation and opinion evaluation I

- Tetlock, Chapters 1-3

29 February: Forecast evaluation and opinion evaluation II

- Tetlock, Chapters 4-5
- Initial topic meeting must be completed.

5 March: Forecast evaluation and opinion evaluation III

- Tetlock, Chapters 6-8

7 March: Getting data for your own forecasting methods

- I will lecture on this date.
- Research and plagiarism tutorial is due before this date. Any received after 5pm on this date will be considered late.

12 March and 14 March — no class, Spring Break

19 March: Definitions of conflict measures and data

- KEDS/CAMEO codebooks: [http://eventdata.psu.edu/~keds/data.dir/cameo.html](http://eventdata.psu.edu/~keds/data.dir/cameo.html) and [http://eventdata.psu.edu/data.dir/weis.html](http://eventdata.psu.edu/data.dir/weis.html)
- Political Instability Task Force codebook and data: [http://globalpolicy.gmu.edu/pitf/pitfcode.htm](http://globalpolicy.gmu.edu/pitf/pitfcode.htm)
- EUGene and MARGene: [http://www.personal.psu.edu/dsb10/software.htm](http://www.personal.psu.edu/dsb10/software.htm)
- Penn World Tables [http://pwt.econ.upenn.edu/](http://pwt.econ.upenn.edu/)

**21 March: Doing simple forecasts**

• In this class session I will cover how to generate simple forecasts for some of the kinds of events and outcomes we have discussed.

• Annotated bibliographies are due by 5pm on this date.

**26 March: Forecasting failed states / instability**

• Look again at the PITF website: [http://globalpolicy.gmu.edu](http://globalpolicy.gmu.edu)


**28 March: Forecasting failed states / instability / peacekeeping**


**2 April: Forecasting civil wars**


• Rough drafts of papers are due in class. No exceptions.

**4 April: Forecasting civil wars**


**9 April: Forecasting terrorism**


11 April: No class — instructor out of town
16 April: Election Forecasting Check out some election and poll sites (more will be provided later or you can google for them):
• Pollyvote, [pollyvote.forecastingprinciples.com](http://pollyvote.forecastingprinciples.com)
• Helmut Norpoth’s Primary Model, [primarymodel.com](http://primarymodel.com)
• Ray Fair’s model: [fairmodel.econ.yale.edu](http://fairmodel.econ.yale.edu)

18 April: Election Forecasting (Midterm elections)

23 April: Prediction Markets
• Find and read two more, peer-reviewed articles on prediction markets (and they do not need to be about politics).

25 April: TBD
30 April: Using forecasts ethically, or what not to do

2 May: Final paper due, before 4pm in GR 2.802

These descriptions and timelines are subject to change at the discretion of the Professor. This syllabus is also governed by University policies. See [http://go.utdallas.edu/syllabus-policies](http://go.utdallas.edu/syllabus-policies)