

Political Science H596  
**Analyzing Political and Policy Controversies**  
Autumn, 2005

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## **SYLLABUS**

In contemporary political discourse, there are claims and counterclaims made about a wide variety of political questions and policy areas. Some of these claims and assertions are supported by research and evidence, but often advocates cite conflicting evidence or interpret identical evidence differently and reach diametrically opposite conclusions about the topic at hand. For example, advocates of gun control laws say that such laws reduce crime and make citizens safer. Opponents of gun control laws assert the opposite, that gun control laws increase crime and make citizens less safe. Both sides cite empirical data and evidence to support their claims. Another example of a policy controversy concerns the effects of casino gambling. Proponents of casino gambling claim that it helps the local economy. Opponents of casino argue the opposite, that it hurts the local economy. Who is right? Is either side correct?

The chief aim of this course is to make students better able to sort out and evaluate conflicting policy assertions and to become more knowledgeable critics of any claims that are made **based on empirical research**. In order to accomplish this, students must become more aware of the factors that affect the quality of empirical research, factors such as appropriate research designs, reliable and valid measurement strategies, and sound data analysis techniques. Thus, we will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of various research designs and strategies and analyze how well they enable us to make accurate descriptive statements as well as draw valid causal inferences about the relationships among variables. We will discuss many aspects of measurement, our core question being whether we are measuring the right things. With respect to data analysis, we will address the very simple but important question of whether the statistical results actually support the conclusions being presented. All of these topics will be discussed utilizing extensive real world examples.

Students should complete the course better able to critique the political and policy claims made by advocates of particular causes and policies. Students should be able to identify when and how policy assertions are fallacious and also explain how those making fallacious claims could improve their methodology. For students who are earlier in their academic careers, the course may stimulate them to think about undertaking an honors thesis and help them understand the research methods appropriate for some potential thesis topics.

## **Required Texts**

David E. McNabb, *Research Methods for Political Science: Quantitative and Qualitative Methods* (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 2004).

George McKenna and Stanley Feingold, editors, *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Political Issues*, 14<sup>th</sup> edition (Dubuque, Iowa: McGraw-Hill/Dushkin, 2006).

There will also be materials distributed in class.

## **Course Requirements**

1. Midterm exam (25 per cent of grade)
2. Term paper and assignments related to it (50 per cent of grade)
3. Final exam (25 per cent of grade)

## **Disability**

Please let me know whether you need any accommodation because of a disability. I rely on the Office for Disability Services for assistance in verifying the need for accommodation and in developing appropriate responses. If you have not previously contacted the Office for Disability Services, I encourage you to do so.

## **Academic Misconduct**

All of the work you do in this class will of course be your own. Any cases of cheating or plagiarism will be reported to the university Committee on Academic Misconduct and will be handled according to university policy. Plagiarism entails using someone else's words or ideas without proper acknowledgment and citation. If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please see me.

## **Readings**

Each week we will discuss elements of the research process. We will also analyze one chapter each week from the Taking Sides book with the aim of proposing research strategies that would help sort out the competing claims.

Week 1	Introduction
Week 2	Foundations of Political Science Research  Read: McNabb, chapters 1-3 McKenna, chapter 2
Week 3	Overview of the Research Process  Read: McNabb, chapters 4-7 McKenna, chapter 3
Week 4	Measurement  Read: McNabb, chapter 5 McKenna, chapter 4
Week 5	Sampling  Read: McNabb, chapter 6 McKenna, chapter 7
Week 6	Survey Research  Read: McNabb, chapter 11 McKenna, chapter 8
Week 7	Experimental Research  Read: McNabb, chapter 12 McKenna, chapter 9
Week 8	Qualitative Research Methods  Read: McNabb, chapters 23, 24, and 25 McKenna, chapter 15

Weeks 9-10

Basic Statistics and Hypothesis Testing

Read: McNabb, chapters 13-15

McKenna, chapters 16 and 18

Week 11

Student reports