GV319: Experimental Politics

Instructor:
Thomas J. Leeper
Office: CON 4.11
Office hours: By appointment via LfY
Email: t.leeper@lse.ac.uk

Course website:
`https://moodle.lse.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=5709`
Reading list:
`http://readinglists.lse.ac.uk/lists/BA9D65E3-F764-8018-1883-4587DCB78F4F.html`

The purpose of this course is to develop students' ability to critically analyse and evaluate the use of randomized controlled trials (RCTs) or "experiments" to develop evidence-based claims about politics. The course will introduce students to the use of experiments or randomized controlled trials (RCTs) in politics to evaluate policies, programmes, and theories, including the philosophical and statistical foundations of the method, as well as ethical, normative, and practical limitations of experimentation. The course will introduce the art, science, and ethics of experimentation, debate the validity and utility of experiments as a tool of evaluation and as the basis for policymaking, and examine the findings of experimental research in five distinct political and other real-world domains, possibly including:

1. Voter mobilization
2. Campaign messaging
3. Media influence
4. Social media
5. Poverty alleviation
6. Education
7. Policy nudges
8. Judgement and decision-making
9. Wages and taxation
10. Political representation
11. Political conflict
12. Legislatures
13. Public health
14. Small-group deliberation

The specific set of topics discussed in the course will depend on student interest drawn from the above topics (and others discussed on the first day of class).

Prerequisites and Availability

Familiarity with basic algebra required and comfort with basic statistics as covered by GV249 Research Design in Political Science, or an equivalent course in research design or introductory statistics (such as ST102, ST107, ST108, GY140, SA201), is recommended.

Course Availability

This course is available on the BSc in Government, BSc in Government and Economics, BSc in Government and History, BSc in Philosophy, Politics and Economics, BSc in Politics and International Relations, and BSc in Politics and Philosophy.

1 Objectives and Evaluation

After this course, students should be able to:

1. Describe the logic of randomized experimentation for studying causal effects of interventions in comparison to other approaches.
2. Evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, and ethics of experiments as a research design and evaluation method.
3. Analyse the use and utility of experimental methods in real-world cases.
4. Apply the logic of experimental methods to political science research questions.

These objectives will be achieved through in-class and out-of-class solo and group activities, class discussions, and engagement with lecture and reading material. Achievement will be evaluated — and feedback provided on those evaluations — in the manner described next.

1.1 Summative Assessment: Exam and Essay

The assessment for the course comes in two parts:

1. An independent, 2,250-word research essay in the form of either (a) a research design proposal or (b) a case study evaluating the use of randomised experiments in an applied context.

2. A 90-minute exam during ST that will evaluate students' knowledge of course content, including statistical foundations of experimental research, how to draw inferences from randomised experiments, ethical issues, and knowledge of the various applications discussed in the course.

Each part is weighted equally in the final grade (50%).

The individual essay will provide students an opportunity to achieve learning outcomes (3) and (4) in greater depth, by considering either a hypothetical application in the form of a research design paper that outlines the elements of an experimental research project (namely a research question, theoretical contribution, testable hypotheses, description of the proposed data collection and analysis, ethical considerations, and policy implications) or, alternatively, a critical case study on a given application of randomised experiments in an applied setting that analyses the context and use of experiments in a real-world case.

The material covered by the exam will be drawn explicitly and directly from lectures and readings, with class sessions providing both hands-on experience with statistical aspects and discussion of substantive topics. The exam will be designed to assess learning outcomes (1–4) and a formative problem set will provide an opportunity for feedback with respect to learning outcomes (1–2).

The essay is due via Moodle on **16 January 2018**.[1] The essay should comply with LSE and Government Department policies on summative work. All summative work is subject to automatic plagiarism detection checks. Appropriate academic referencing (quotations, parenthetical citations, footnotes or endnotes, and bibliography) is required. LSE Life can provide support on academic writing and referencing.

1.2 Formative Activities and Assessment

Formative assessment consists of in-class discussions, a quantitative problem set (covering material from the first weeks of the course), and a presentation of students' final essay topics near the end of MT (Weeks 9 and 10). Instructor feedback will be provided on the problem set within two weeks. Peer and instructor feedback will be provided on the presentations immediately.

1.3 Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty

Formative and summative coursework must comply with LSE's policies on academic misconduct and plagiarism. Among other things, "All work for classes and seminars (which could include, for example, written assignments, group work, presentations, and any other work, including computer programs) must be the student's own work. Direct quotations from other work must be placed properly within quotation marks or indented and must be cited fully. All paraphrased material must be clearly acknowledged. Infringing this requirement, whether deliberately or not, or passing off the work of others as the student's own work, whether deliberately or not, is plagiarism." See the LSE Calendar for more information.

2 Reading List

Students should purchase or otherwise obtain a copy of the following required textbook:

Glennerster and Takavarasha. 2013. *Running Randomized Evaluations: A Practical Guide.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

The text is available as an ebook or for online viewing via Dawsonera:

`https://www.dawsonera.com/readonline/9781400848447`.

Other required readings are listed below and provided online via ReadingLists@LSE:

`http://readinglists.lse.ac.uk/lists/BA9D65E3-F764-8018-1883-4587DCB78F4F.html`

Other books on experimental methods that students may find useful as a reference include:

– James N. Druckman, Donald P. Green, James H. Kuklinski, and Arthur Lupia. *Cambridge Handbook of Experimental Political Science.* Cambridge University Press, New

---

[1] We will discuss this in Week 1. An alternative to which we could agree, if unanimous among students, would be 16 January 2018.

York, 2011.

– William R. Shadish, Thomas D. Cook, and Donald T. Campbell. *Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs for Generalized Causal Inference.* Houghton-Mifflin, Boston, MA, 2001.

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

– Rebecca B. Morton and Kenneth C. Williams. *Experimental Political Science and the Study of Causality: From Nature to the Lab.* Cambridge University Press, 2010.

– Dawn Langan Teele. *Field Experiments and Their Critics.* Yale University Press, 2014.

– Scott Desposato, editor. *Ethics and Experiments.* Taylor & Francis, 2015.

– Thad Dunning. *Natural Experiments in the Social Sciences.* Cambridge University Press, 2012.

– Guido W. Imbens and Donald B. Rubin. *Causal Inference in Statistics, Social, and Biomedical Sciences.* Cambridge University Press, 2015.

– Stephen L. Morgan and Christopher Winship. *Counterfactuals and Causal Inference: Methods and Principles for Social Research.* Cambridge University Press, New York, 2nd edition, 2015.

– Joshua D. Angrist and Jörn-Steffen Pischke. *Mostly Harmless Econometrics: An Empiricist's Companion.* Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2008.

– Oliver James, Sebastian R. Jilke, and Gregg G. Van Ryzin, editors. *Experiments in Public Management Research.* Cambridge University Press, 2017.

3 Course Outline

The course will meet at the following times and locations:

- Lecture: MT Weeks 1–5,7–11

- Class: MT Weeks 2–5,7–11

- Revision session: ST Week 1

The general schedule for the course is as follows. Details on the readings for each week are provided on the following pages. All readings listed under "See Also" are *suggested* but *not required.*

3.1   Week 1: Introduction to Experiments

– Ch. 1–3 from Glennerster and Takavarasha.

– Bornstein, David. "The Dawn of the Evidence-Based Budget." *The New York Times*, 30 May 2012, `https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/05/30/worthy-of-government-funding-prove-it/`

– Rutter, Tamsin. "The rise of nudge — the unit helping politicians to fathom human behaviour." *The Guardian*, 23 July 2015, `https://www.theguardian.com/public-leaders-network/2015/jul/23/rise-nudge-unit-politicians-human-behaviour`

See Also:

– James N. Druckman, Donald P. Green, James H. Kuklinski, and Arthur Lupia. The growth and development of experimental research in political science. *American Political Science Review*, 100(4):627–635, 2006.

– Peter John. *Field Experiments in Political Science and Public Policy.* Taylor & Francis, 2017.

3.2 Week 2: Statistical Foundations I

– Ch. 4 (only pp. 141–179) and Ch. 5 from Glennerster and Takavarasha.

See Also:

– Paul W. Holland. Statistics and causal inference. *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 81(396):945–960, 1986.

– Diana C. Mutz. *Population-Based Survey Experiments.* Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2011.

3.3 Week 3: Statistical Foundations II

– Ch. 6 and Ch. 8 from Glennerster and Takavarasha.

– Abhijit Banerjee, Shawn Cole, Esther Duflo, and Leigh Linden. Remedying education: Evidence from two randomized experiments in india. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 122(3):1235–64, 2007.

3.4 Week 4: Practical Issues

– Ch. 4 (only pp. 98–140), Ch. 7, and Ch. 9 from Glennerster and Takavarasha.

– Snape, Joel. "The Holborn escalator experiment proves that we value efficiency more than our own health." *The Telegraph*, 18 April 2016, `http://www.telegraph.co.uk/men/thinking-man/the-holborn-escalator-experiment-proves-that-we-value-efficiency/`.

– Goel, Vindu. "Facebook Tinkers With Users' Emotions in News Feed Experiment, Stirring Outcry." *The New York Times*, 29 June 2014, `https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/30/technology/facebook-tinkers-with-users-emotions-in-news-feed-experiment-stirring-outcry.html`.

See Also:

– Dawn Langan Teele. *Field Experiments and Their Critics.* Yale University Press, 2014.

– Nancy Cartwright. *Hunting Causes and Using Them.* Cambridge University Press, 2007.

– Nancy Cartwright and Jeremy Hardie. *Evidence-based Policy: A Practical Guide to Doing it Better.* Oxford University Press, 2012.

– Scott Desposato, editor. *Ethics and Experiments.* Taylor & Francis, 2015.

– William R. Shadish, Thomas D. Cook, and Donald T. Campbell. *Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs for Generalized Causal Inference.* Houghton-Mifflin, Boston, MA, 2001.

3.5   Week 5: The Politics of Evidence

Problem Set Due

– Laura Haynes, Owain Service, Ben Goldacre, and David J. Torgerson. Test, learn, adapt: Developing public policy with randomised controlled trials. Technical report, Cabinet Office Behavioural Insight Team, 2012.

– Gage, Suzi. "Let's help MPs understand the value of randomised controlled trials." *The Guardian*, 13 April 2015, `https://www.theguardian.com/science/sifting-the-evidence/2015/apr/13/lets-help-mps-understand-the-value-of-randomised-controlled-trials`
– Callen, Michael, Adnana Khan, Asim I. Khwaja, Asad Liaqat, and Emily Myers. "These 3 barriers make it hard for policymakers to use the evidence that development researchers produce." *The Washington Post*, 13 August 2017, `https://www.washingtonpost.com/amphtml/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/08/13/these-3-barriers-make-it-hard-for-policymakers-to-use-the-evidence-that-development-researchers-produce/`

See Also:

   – *Evidence & Policy: A Journal of Research, Debate, and Practice*, `http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/tpp/ep`

3.6   Week 6: Reading Week

No lecture or class.

3.7   Week 7: Substantive Topic 1

For Weeks 7–11, topics of discussion will be determined based upon in-class discussion in Weeks 1–2.

Feedback on Problem Set returned.

3.8   Week 8: Substantive Topic 2

- 1-minute "elevator pitch" of proposal topics.
- Students should sign-up for presentation slots.

3.9   Week 9: Substantive Topic 3

Student presentations in-class this week.

3.10   Week 10: Substantive Topic 4

Student presentations in-class this week.

3.11 Week 11: Substantive Topic 5 and Conclusion

– Angus Deaton and Nancy Cartwright. Understanding and misunderstanding randomized and controlled trials. NBER Working Paper 22595, 2016.

See Also:

– Timothy N. Ogden, editor. *Experimental Conversations.* MIT Press, 2017.
– Nancy Cartwright. *Hunting Causes and Using Them.* Cambridge University Press, 2007.
– Nancy Cartwright and Jeremy Hardie. *Evidence-based Policy: A Practical Guide to Doing it Better.* Oxford University Press, 2012.

3.12 ST Revision Session

One-hour session to discuss final questions about ST exam.

4   Relevant Resources

Discussions of experiments in the popular press

- Callen, Michael, Adnana Khan, Asim I. Khwaja, Asad Liaqat, and Emily Myers. "These 3 barriers make it hard for policymakers to use the evidence that development researchers produce." *The Washington Post*, 13 August 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/amphtml/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/08/13/these-3-barriers-make-it-hard-for-policymakers-to-use-the-evidence-that-development-researchers-produce/

- Jauhiainen, Antti and Mäkinen, Joona-Hermanni. "Why Finland's Basic Income Experiment Isn't Working." *The New York Times*, 20 July 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/20/opinion/finland-universal-basic-income.html

- "Policymakers around the world are embracing behavioural science." *The Economist*, 18 May 2017, https://www.economist.com/news/international/21722163-experimental-iterative-data-driven-approach-gaining-ground-policymakers-around

- Soumeri, Stephen B., and Koppel, Ross. "Paying doctors bonuses for better health outcomes makes sense in theory. But it doesn't work." *Vox.com*, 25 January 2017, https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2017/1/25/14375776/pay-for-performance-doctors-bonuses

- Free Exchange. "Economists are prone to fads, and the latest is machine learning." *The Economist*, 24 November 2016, https://www.economist.com/news/finance-and-economics/21710800-big-data-have-led-latest-craze-economic-research-economists-are-prone

- Mullainathan, Sendhil. "Ban the Box? An Effort to Stop Discrimination May Actually Increase It." *The New York Times*, 19 August 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/21/upshot/ban-the-box-an-effort-to-stop-discrimination-may-actually-increase-it.html

- "Can mass media cause change? A randomised control trial finds out." *BBC Media Action Insight Blog*, 14 July 2016, http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/mediaactioninsight/entries/703ec6e0-8e1-4891-b614-752d48c678fc

- Kushner, Jacob. "Can science save development aid?" *Pacific Standard*, 6 July 2016, https://psmag.com/news/can-science-save-development-aid

- "The Holborn escalator experiment proves that we value efficiency more than our own health." *The Telegraph*, 18 April 2016, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/men/thinking-man/the-holborn-escalator-experiment-proves-that-we-value-efficiency/.

- Porter, Eduardo. "Nudge Aren't Enough for Problems like Retirement Savings." *The New York Times*, 23 February 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/24/business/economy/nudges-arent-enough-to-solve-societys-problems.html

- Matthews, Dylan. "Economists tested 7 welfare programs to see if they made people lazy. They didn't." *Vox.com*, 20 November 2015, https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2015/11/20/9764324/welfare-cash-transfer-work

- Whoriskey, Peter. "The science of skipping breakfast: How government nutritionists may have gotten it wrong." *The Washington Post*, 10 August 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/08/10/the-science-of-skipping-breakfast-how-government-nutritionists-may-have-gotten-it-wrong/

- "The rise of nudge — the unit helping politicians to fathom human behaviour." *The Guardian*, 23 July 2015, `https://www.theguardian.com/public-leaders-network/2015/jul/23/rise-nudge-unit-politicians-human-behaviour`.

- Meyer, Michelle N. and Chabris, Christopher F. "Please, Corporations, Experiment on Us." *The New York Times*, 19 June 2015, `https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/21/opinion/sunday/please-corporations-experiment-on-us.html`

- Johnson, Jeremy. "Campaign experiment found to be in violation of Montana law." *The Washington Post*, 13 May 2015, `https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/05/13/campaign-experiment-found-to-be-in-violation-of-montana-law/`

- Gage, Suzi. "Let's help MPs understand the value of randomised controlled trials." *The Guardian*, 13 April 2015, `https://www.theguardian.com/science/sifting-the-evidence/2015/apr/13/lets-help-mps-understand-the-value-of-randomised-controlled-trials`

- Frakt, Austin. "Alcoholics Anonymous and the Challenge of Evidence-Based Medicine." *The New York Times*, 6 April 2015, `https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/07/upshot/alcoholics-anonymous-and-the-challenge-of-evidence-based-medicine.html`

- Mullainathan, Sendhil. "Racial Bias, Even When We Have Good Intentions." *The New York Times*, 3 January 2015, `https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/04/upshot/the-measuring-sticks-of-racial-bias-.html`

- Bernard, Tara Siegel. "A Citizen's Guide to Buying Political Access." *The New York Times*, 18 November 2014, `https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/19/your-money/a-citizens-guide-to-buying-political-access-.html`

- Willis, Derek. "Professors' Research Project Stirs Political Outrage in Montana." *The New York Times*, 28 October 2014, `https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/29/upshot/professors-research-project-stirs-political-outrage-in-montana.html`

- Boseley, Sarah. "Ebola vaccine trials with placebo group would be unethical, scientists say." *The Guardian*, 10 October 2014, `https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/10/ebola-vaccine-placebo-trials-unethical-scientists-say`

- Ensor, Josie. "Dating site OKCupid admits to Facebook-style psychological testing on users." *The Telegraph*, 29 July 2014, `http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/10996866/Dating-site-OKCupid-admits-to-Facebook-style-psychological-testing-on-users.html`

- Matthews, Dylan. "A guaranteed income for every American would eliminate poverty âĂŤ and it wouldn't destroy the economy." *Vox.com*, 23 July 2014, `https://www.vox.com/2014/7/23/5925041/guaranteed-income-basic-poverty-gobry-labor-supply`

- Rosen, Jay. "Facebook's controversial study is business as usual for tech companies but corrosive for universities." *Washington Post*, 3 July 2014, `https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/07/03/dont-blame-facebook-for-screwing-with-your-mood-blame-academia/`.

- "Facebook Tinkers With Users' Emotions in News Feed Experiment, Stirring Outcry." *The New York Times*, 29 June 2014, `https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/30/technology/facebook-tinkers-with-users-emotions-in-news-feed-experiment-stirring-outcry.html`.

- Konnikova, Maria. "I don't want to be right." *The New Yorker*, 16 May 2014, `http://www.newyorker.com/science/maria-konnikova/i-dont-want-to-be-right/amp`

- Issenberg, Sasha. "Dept. of Experiments." *Politico*, 27 February 2014, `http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/02/campaign-science-dept-of-experiments-103671_Page4.html#.WYxvh1WGM4l`

- Free Exchange. "Random harvest." *The Economist*, 14 December 2013, `https://www.economist.com/news/finance-and-economics/21591573-once-treated-scorn-randomised-control-trials-are-coming-age-random-harvest`

- Bennhold, Katrin. "Britain' Ministry of Nudges." *The New York Times*, 7 December 2013, `http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/08/business/international/britains-ministry-of-nudges.html`

- Swinford, Steven. "Environment minister: 'The badgers have moved the goalposts'." *The Telegraph*, 9 October 2013, `http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/earth/environment/10367057/Environment-minister-The-badgers-have-moved-the-goalposts.html`

- Matthews, Dylan. "Teach for America is a deeply divisive program. It also works." *The Washington Post*, 10 September 2013, `https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2013/09/10/teach-for-america-is-a-deeply-divisive-program-it-also-works/`

- Smith, Marc. "Evidence-based education: is it really that straightforward?" *The Guardian*, 2 March 2013, `https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/2013/mar/26/teachers-research-evidence-based-education`

- Issenberg, Sasha. "The Death of a Hunch." *Slate.com*, 22 May 2012, `http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/victory_lab/2012/05/obama_campaign_ads_how_the_analyst_institute_is_helping_him_hone_his_message_.html`

- Henderson, Mark. "Using the tools of science to improve social policy." *The Guardian*, 13 May 2012, `https://www.theguardian.com/society/2012/may/13/scientific-method-test-public-policy`

- Bornstein, David. "The Dawn of the Evidence-Based Budget." *The New York Times*, 30 May 2012, `https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/05/30/worthy-of-government-funding-prove-it/`

- Christian, Brian. "The A/B Test: Inside the Technology That's Changing the Rules of Business." *Wired*, 25 April 2012, `https://www.wired.com/2012/04/ff_abtesting/`

- Free Exchange. "The gain from early intervention." *The Economist*, 24 October 2011, `https://www.economist.com/blogs/freeexchange/2011/10/education`

- Goldacre, Ben. "If you want answers, why not run your own trials?" *The Guardian*, 30 September 2011, `https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/sep/30/run-your-own-scientific-trials`

- Issenberg, Sasha. "Nudge the Vote." *The New York Times Magazine*, 29 October 2010, `http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/31/magazine/31politics-t.html`

- Parker, Ian. "The Poverty Lab." *The New Yorker*, 10 May 2010, `http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/05/17/the-poverty-lab/amp`

- Leonhardt, David. "Sometimes, What's Needed Is a Nudge." *The New York Times*, 16 May 2007, `http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/16/business/16leonhardt.html`

Organisations using RCTs and providing resources for experimental evaluations

- What Works Network (UK Cabinet Office): `https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-works-network`

- Evidence in Governance and Politics: `http://egap.org/`

- Jameel Poverty Action Lab: `https://www.povertyactionlab.org/`

- The World Bank: `http://blogs.worldbank.org/impactevaluations/`

- 3ie (International Initiative for Impact Evaluation): `http://www.3ieimpact.org/`

- Innovations for Poverty Action: `http://www.poverty-action.org/`

- University of California Center for Effective Global Action: `http://cega.berkeley.edu/`

- The Behavioural Insights Team: `http://www.behaviouralinsights.co.uk/`

- (Former) US Government Social and Behavioral Sciences Team: `https://sbst.gov/`

- Mathematica Policy Research: `https://www.mathematica-mpr.com/`

- Laura and John Arnold Foundation: `http://www.arnoldfoundation.org/initiative/evidence-based-policy-innovation/`

- MDRC: `http://www.mdrc.org/`

- Abt Associates: `http://abtassociates.com/`

Clearinghouses of Experimental Evidence

- The Cochrane Collaboration: `http://www.cochrane.org/`

- The Campbell Collaboration: `https://www.campbellcollaboration.org/`

- US Department of Education What Works Clearinghouse: `https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/`

Examples of high-profile experiments

- RAND Corporation Health Insurance Experiment: `https://www.rand.org/health/projects/hie.html`

- Employment Retention and Advancement demonstration: `https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/employment-retention-and-advancement-demonstration-rr727`

- "Project STAR", Tennessee Class Size Experiment: `http://www.jstor.org/stable/1163474`

- High/Scope Perry Preschool Project: `https://highscope.org/perrypreschoolstudy`

- Prospera/Oportunidades (Mexico conditional cash transfer programme): `https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oportunidades`

- Rothamsted agronomic experiments: `http://www.era.rothamsted.ac.uk/`

- "Milgram Experiments" on obedience: `https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milgram_experiment`

- Physicians' Health Study: `http://phs.bwh.harvard.edu/`