GOV 385M Conceptualization and Measurement | Spring 2013

Professor Zachary Elkins
4.120 Batts Hall
zelkins@austin.utexas.edu

Course Description

This course introduces students to the challenges of developing meaningful social science concepts and of identifying and evaluating appropriate measures of these concepts. These are challenges that arise, explicitly or not, in nearly every social science inquiry. Topics include the following. What makes for a “good” concept? How do we determine the defining characteristics of concepts? How can we build measures of concepts and evaluate their reliability and validity? How can we measure concepts comparably across different contexts (both geographic and historical)? The objective of the course is highly pragmatic. Students will develop a familiarity with a varied set of methodological tools that are useful with both qualitative and quantitative data. As such, the course requirements will include applied exercises and analyses. The course will entail both “interpretive” and statistical components, although prior coursework in methodology of any sort is not required or expected.

Course Materials

Online. Information for this course will be posted on the class Blackboard site. There you will find updates to this syllabus, electronic copies of selected readings, instructions for uploading assignments, and regular announcements. If you have any problems with your password or accessing Blackboard, contact ITS. If you can access Blackboard, but cannot access any material from this course, please contact Professor Elkins by email.

Print. The following books are available for purchase at the UT Co-op or from online bookstores at your convenience. All other readings will be available on the course website.


Software. For several units in the course, we will employ various software packages, all of which are available on the apps.austin.utexas.edu server. If you do not already have an account on that server, you should acquire one from ITS.

Requirements and Grading

Discussion of the written material is a central component of the course, and the expectation is that you read carefully and share your reactions to, and questions about, the readings. Your grade will be based on the following components:

1. Reaction papers and problem sets (50%). For most (but not all) weeks you will be responsible for a short assignment related to the week’s theme. Typically, you will be asked to write a short reaction paper (roughly two pages, double spaced), in which you reflect on some aspect(s) of the reading.
For some of these weeks, I will ask that you address a particular topic or question in your reaction paper and for some I will give you a short problem set in lieu of the reaction paper. Unless otherwise noted, the reaction papers are due by 10 PM on the Tuesday prior to class.

(2) Research Paper (50%). You will be expected to produce a short (15 page) research paper on one of the themes of the course. This paper can build on your writing from the weekly assignments. The paper is due Wednesday, May 8 at 5PM.

Policy for Missed Deadlines

Reaction papers. The intent of the reaction papers is for you to reflect upon the readings prior to our discussion of them. Accordingly, late reaction papers will not be accepted.

Late Research Papers and Incompletes. Barring extenuating circumstances, I will not accept any late research papers nor grant any incompletes. I do not want these to hang over your head!

Office Hours

W 8-11 AM in 4.120, Batts Hall. Most weeks I will post a signup sheet on my door in case you would like to reserve a time.

Accommodations

Disabilities. Students with disabilities may request appropriate academic accommodations from the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, Services for Students with Disabilities, 471-6259, http://www.utexas.edu/diversity/ddce/ssd/

Religious Observance. By UT Austin policy, you must notify me of your pending absence at least fourteen days prior to the date of observance of a religious holy day. If you must miss a class, an examination, a work assignment, or a project in order to observe a religious holy day, you will be given an opportunity to complete the missed work within a reasonable time after the absence.

Academic Integrity

Students are expected to abide by University regulations with respect to academic honesty as described herein: http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sjs/acint_student.php.
TOPICS AND READINGS

1. Introduction: The Centrality of Concepts and Measures (some Motivating Exemplars)

2. Concept Formation: General Guidelines

3. Typologies and Classification
RECOMMENDED FOR FURTHER READING:


4. Reliability and Validity: Standard Approaches (with a glimpse at Democracy)


Goertz, Chapter 4.


RECOMMENDED FOR FUTURE READING:


5. Validity and Reliability: Interpretive and Mixed-method Approaches


6. Measurement Across Contexts

Elkins, Zachary and John Sides. “The Vodka is Potent but the Meat is Rotten.” Manuscript.


RECOMMENDED FOR FURTHER READING:


7. Evaluating Measurement Models, Part I: Exploratory Factor Analysis


RECOMMENDED FOR FURTHER READING:

Stevens 1986


8. Evaluating Measurement Models, Part II: Confirmatory Factor Analysis, Item Response Theory (and related methods)


Review the following articles from earlier weeks:


RECOMMENDED FOR FURTHER READING:


9. Scaling, Levels of Measurement, and Index Construction


RECOMMENDED:


10. The Art and Science of Asking Questions


11. Creative Measurement