Political Accountability: Practicum in Reproducible Research Methods

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To register: https://www.eui.eu/DepartmentsAndCentres/academic-catalogue/Course-detail?course_id=SPS-METMG-ACC-19

Second term seminar 2019–20
Tuesday 15:00-17:00, Seminar Room 2

Course site: https://mycourses.eui.eu/d2l/home/6957

Course Description: What are sources of accountability failures in democratic poli-
ties? As an extreme example, how and why do public officials chronically engage in
illegal actions while in office? If voters have other candidates they can select to replace
incumbents who abuse the public trust, why are corruption and political malfeasance so
persistent? Does chronic corruption pervert political representation?

This course reviews some recent literature on these questions with the aim of locating
the research frontier and helping students identify potential topics for further study.

In addition to its substantive content, this course also has a practicum and skill-building
component. Over the term, you will be exposed to all the steps required to complete a
complex collaborative reproducible research project, from thinking up a problem worth
studying to pre-registering your design to collecting and analyzing your data and writing
up and posting your results. You will practice these steps using real (observational)
data about accountability and political corruption collected by the instructor in Italy.
The practicum component of the course will be fast paced, and require you to hand in
bi-weekly assignments.
**Course Prerequisites:** You will only be able to do the work in this course if you are familiar with statistical methods to analyze quantitative data. Thus, students are welcome in the course if they have taken at least one prior course in statistics (covering material through multiple regression) that used either Stata or R. All other skills required this term will be taught by the instructor.

**Course Objectives:** At the completion of this course, you will:

1. Be familiar with some important recent studies of political corruption, electoral fraud, and vote buying.
2. Have experience working with a complex multilevel dataset collected in a European country (Italy).
3. Have practiced many steps required to complete a large-scale reproducible research project.
4. Have experience collaborating with others in a research project.
5. Have developed familiarity with tools such as \LaTeX, Markdown, and GitHub, and be acquainted with sites such as BITSS, OSF, EGAP, Dataverse, and others.
6. Be familiar with the highest standards and practices for many aspects of reproducible research.

**Course Format:** The first hour of each class will be a mixture of lecture and discussion about the assigned substantive reading. The second hour will consist of the practicum. Please bring a laptop to every class.

**Readings:** Readings are divided between substantive and skill-building. I have assigned no more than three substantive readings a week so that you have time to review the skill-focused materials. Almost all the substantive readings are recent, in order to introduce you to the most cutting-edge research and research practices. The practicum readings are typically short, and even when they are not, they are quick reads.

You should read the substantive and practicum materials differently. The substantive readings require the standard reading methods you use in any seminar. First, skim the article to figure out the topic, question, evidence, and methods used. Then read it carefully to assess whether the evidence answers the question posed. Critically assess whether the methods are appropriate, and what else the author could have done to convince you. Finally, consider what other questions the paper raises in your mind that it does not answer.

The practicum materials require a different way of reading. You should first skim an assigned reading for the skills it covers, and then carefully study the sections that are relevant to your own work. Then you should implement the techniques that the reading discusses. If you are reading about how to structure your directories for a research project, take a look at your own directory structure for your most active research project and consider how the reading would suggest you modify it. Then go ahead and restructure...
your directories for that project. The only way to learn the skills that the practicum readings cover is to implement them, thereby developing “muscle memory.” Over the course of the term, try to incorporate as many of the skills we study into your own workflow as possible. Your goal is to make them part of your standard research routines.

**Statistical Software(s):** You may use either Stata or RStudio to do the work in the course. RStudio is the recommended software, and for some assignments (using RMarkdown) is mandatory. For graphics, you are required to work in ggplot2, an R package. Any writing must be done in either RMarkdown or LaTeX.

**Course Website:** We will use a course site in the Brightspace Learning Environment that the EUI is in the process of adopting. All course materials will be available on this site, and you will submit your assignments there. The site is also useful for conversations with other students, or questions for me. To access the site, go to [mycourses.eui.eu](http://mycourses.eui.eu). All enrolled students will automatically be given accounts on the site.

**Collaboration:** Students will work in teams for the term. Teams will be set up during the first class meeting. Team size will depend on the number of students enrolled, but you will probably be paired with one other person. You will remain with the same team-mate for the entire term.

**Requirement(s):** To complete the course for a grade, each team will submit an assignment every other week. These assignments will be available on the Brightspace course site. They will be blind-graded.

**Course Policies:**

- **General (for auditors as well as enrolled students)**
  - Students should come to class meetings each week **already having read** the assigned material.
  - Students should bring written notes to class summarizing each assigned reading and be prepared to discuss every assigned reading. You may be cold called.
  - If you are auditing the course, please inform me so you are given access to the course site.
  - If you experience any problems accessing any of the readings, please let me or Monika know immediately.
  - Students are expected to attend all class meetings except in cases of illness. Please do not attend class if you have a cold or the flu. You will not be penalized if you do not attend class due to illness. If you cannot attend class due to illness and you inform me with sufficient advance notice, I will arrange to have the class video-taped.
- Readings
  - Readings listed on the syllabus are linked to the publication or posted site for easy access. Unpublished materials will be posted the course website.

- Practicum
  - I will make available the dataset that you will use for all assignments. It concerns political corruption in Italy. You will use the same dataset all term.
  - In the statistical analysis that you will do, you will be expected to present descriptive statistics and regressions results. Your work will need to be accurate, complete, and thoughtful.
  - Written materials should be submitted in .pdf format unless otherwise specified.
  - Some assignments require you to submit your computer code (in .do or .R format). Code must be a clean run and must be properly annotated.
  - **If your code does not run, your assignment will be considered incomplete and you may not receive credit for it.** Please make sure to write relative directory paths so that your code will run on my computer with a single line change in the first section of the file indicating the name and location of the working directory.

- Grades and Feedback
  - Materials are to be submitted on time to be given full credit. Please ensure that the timestamp for every submission is within ten minutes of the time due.
  - In addition to awarding you course credit, I will provide feedback that offers more information about your performance in the course.
  - Feedback will also be provided regarding class participation.
SYLLABUS

Week One, January 14: Theoretical Bases of Political Accountability

The substantive readings this week provide some basic theoretical grounds for thinking about accountability in contexts of democratic politics.

Substantive readings:


Recommended:


Practicum component:

- Picking your research question
- Forming your research team
- Setting up your SOP and lab arrangements

Practicum readings:

Lin, W., Green, D., and Coppock, A. Standard operating procedures for Don Green’s lab at Columbia.

Shapiro, J. N. ESOC research production guide, v1.0.

Golden, M. A. Guidelines for authorship, awarding credit, and intellectual property rights.

First homework assignment available. It will require each team to write a collaborative agreement, set up a GitHub repo, and structure its project directories.

Week Two, January 21: Cross-National Patterns in Government Corruption, Rent-Seeking, and Malfeasance

The main determinant of corruption and other forms of political malfeasance is economic development: bad government is significantly worse at lower levels of economic development.
Substantive readings:


Recommended:


Practicum component:

- Overview: why reproducible research matters
- Overview of a collaborative reproducible workflow
- Setting up your project on GitHub

Practicum readings:


Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP). 10 things to know about project workflow.

Familiarize yourself with:

Open Science Framework (OFS). OSF Guides (Best Practices).

First homework assignment due

Week Three, January 28: Can Voters Solve the Accountability Problem?

One possible answer to chronic malfeasance is simply to present information to voters
about it, with the expectation that they will then elect better political representatives at the next election. Is this an effective solution?

**Readings:**


**Practicum component:**

- Designing your (pilot) study
- Setting up an operational project
- Securing funding

**Practicum readings:**


**Familiarize yourself with:**


Note: Professor Macartan Humphreys will visit the EUI to teach Declare Design to all those interested on May 29–30.

**Week Four, February 4: Voter Coordination Problems in Improving Accountability**
One reason voters may experience difficulties “throwing the rascals out” is because to do so requires strategic coordination among voters. This may be difficult to achieve.

Readings:


Practicum component:

- Writing your pre-analysis plan
- Registering your pre-analysis plan at EGAP

Practicum readings:


Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP). 10 things to know about pre-analysis plans.

Recommended:


*Second homework assignment available. It will require each team to examine the dataset provided by the instructor and write a PAP designed to answer a specified research question. You will submit your PAP to (a mock version of) the EGAP pre-registration site.*

**Week Five, February 11: Vote-Buying, Patronage, and Clientelism as Barriers to Accountability**
Co-taught with guest instructor, Professor Lauren Young

Do governments use individual inducements to buy off voters, and thereby foil attempts at improving accountability?

Readings:


Practicum component:


- Forecasting your results
- Setting up your forecasting instrument on Qualtrics

Practicum readings:


Second homework assignment due.

Week Six, February 18: Institutional Barriers to Accountability

Governments sometimes subvert the operation of democratic institutions with electoral fraud, violence, or voter intimidation. In these cases, it is hardly surprising that accountability fails.


Practicum component:
• Ethical obligations to subjects
• Ethical obligations to staff
• Obtaining IRB approval
• Staying safe in the field

Practicum readings:


*Week Seven, February 25: Political Selection as a Barrier to Accountability*

If voters can freely elect their representatives, how do unrepresentative individuals win office?

Readings:


Practicum component:

• Collecting your data
• Managing your data
• Setting up your directory and file structures
• Assembling an operational dataset

Practicum readings:


Third homework assignment available. This will require each team to analyze the dataset and write a report in RMarkdown that presents results. The report will also include graphical presentation of data.

**Week Eight, March 3: Can Partisan Competition Improve Accountability?**

*Readings:*


*Practicum component:*

- Analyzing your data
- Writing intermediate reports for the team
- Using RMarkdown
- Using graphics effectively

*Practicum readings:*


Rudis, B., Ross, N., and Garnier, S. The viridis color palatte.

Third homework assignment due.

**Week Nine, March 10: Elite Competition, Separation of Powers, and Political**
Accountability


Practicum component:

- Writing up results
- Writing an effective abstract
- Adhering to scientific reporting standards
- Writing your policy brief

Practicum readings:


Week Ten, March 17: Summing Up How to Improve Accountability in Developing Democracies

Note: Class rescheduled to March 12, 16:00-18:00.

Readings:


Practicum component:

- Preparing replication code
- Preparing a publicly accessible dataset
- Preparing a codebook

Practicum readings:


Dataverse. Replication dataset guidelines.

*Fourth homework assignment available. This will require each team to prepare its replication code, codebook, and public dataset. It will be due on March 24.*