

Emnerapport GOV360-8 Understanding Political behavior – theory and practice

Semester: Spring 2026

Department: GOV

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Emnets undervisnings- og vurderingsform

The course had two main objectives:

- 1) To introduce students to key debates in the field of political behaviour, combining foundational theoretical approaches and latest research on emerging trends.
- 2) To allow students to engage with the literature and to approach research questions in political behavior using fundamental statistical methods in practical settings with an emphasis on public opinion data.

The course was taught over six seminars, with three different teachers, plus a Teaching Assistant to help out during the data lab sessions. The course was set up so that the first two seminars were a more general introduction to the field of political behavior, focusing on classical works and more recent work challenging the classic accounts. Following this were four thematic seminars focusing on: immigration, gender and sexual orientation, climate change and the environment and foreign policy. The topics were chosen based on the thematic interests of the teachers leading these seminars.

Each seminar was separated into a session on student presentations and discussions of course readings and a session on data analysis to shed light on the topic we were discussing.

Evalueringsmetoder

The course had compulsory attendance (5 out of 6 seminars) as well as an obligatory group task consisting of one research brief based on the assigned readings for a specific seminar as well as a 10-minute presentation of their research briefs in class. The students were randomly assigned to a group. The research briefs were read and evaluated (pass/no pass) by the teachers and the students had to pass in order to hand in the exam.

The assessment method was a research essay of 2500 words. They were given the essay guidelines at the start of the course and could work on the essay throughout the course period. The students chose one of the topics taught in the seminars, created their research question and wrote up a short research paper including original data analysis based on student datasets. They also had to hand in their R script together with their essay. The students were encouraged to get in touch with one of the teachers to get a go on their research question and empirical approach.

Sammendrag av studentene sin evaluering

The student evaluation was done online using SurveyXact, and 12 out of 19 students (17 completed the course) responded and they provided lengthy answers giving us many useful insights. When asked what contributed most to their learning, the seminars as well as course readings get the best evaluation, whereas for the obligatory group work and plenary discussions the students are more torn with more students placing themselves on the extremes: Some learning “a great deal” and others saying they learnt “little” or “very little”.

The dual focus on theory and practice receives quite some attention in the evaluation. The main feedback here is that it was challenging with the in-class data sessions, that it took a lot of time away from discussing the readings, that it didn't align with the coding practice they had learnt in GOV 321 and that it didn't contribute to their learning. At the same time, many of them say that they see the value of combining theory and practice and that they learnt from it. Moreover, they don't evaluate the course as excessively difficult (4 say it was difficult, 6 that it was somewhat difficult).

The students find the course demanding and time consuming, also compared to the other courses that they took in parallel. They point to the requirement of doing original empirical analysis in the research essays as one of the reasons why they ended up spending so much more time on this course.

When asked which sessions they enjoyed the most and the least, they spread out evenly across topics. This is nice in the sense that most of the students had a topic of interest covered in class. When reading their exams, many of the students wrote about immigration, but based on this feedback I think this was more related to what kinds of variables were available to them in the student datasets (many items on immigration, few on sexual minorities and foreign policy) than what their main topical interest was.

Many of the students also point to a mismatch between what they thought the course would be and what it was like. Especially the heavy focus on data work they did not anticipate from the course description, and they encourage us to be much more up front about this. Some also say that they would not have taken the course had it been

clearer that it was so heavy on data work, and that by the time they found out they couldn't swap courses. This perceived mismatch is also evident in the question about whether they would recommend the course to other students, where 25 % (3 students) say no, 42% (5 students) say maybe and 33 % (4 students) say yes.

Emneansvarlig sin evaluering

The course was offered for the first time, and I think all in all the course went well. This evaluation is a summary of the discussions me and the two other teachers have had. We genuinely think it is a good structure of the course, combining discussions of readings with more hands-on data work to combine theory and empirics and to strengthen the students' familiarity with statistical analysis. That said, the experience in seminars was that the data work activities took a lot more time than we had planned for. Also, the competence level of the students varied a lot, and quite some time was lost in tailoring the data work to different knowledge levels. Based on experiences in the first two seminars where we were not able to do the data work we had planned, we chose to change the data sessions so that the students got the correct R codes before class and we concentrated more on discussing the outputs and connecting it to the topic of the day. Moreover, to support the students in their work with the research essay we decided to organize two drop-in lab sessions where the TA already working in the course plus two more junior staff were available for questions regarding the data, coding, analyses etc. This was not planned beforehand and was offered jointly to GOV218 (which I was also course responsible for). While a minority of the students made use of these sessions, those who did report that this was very helpful to them.

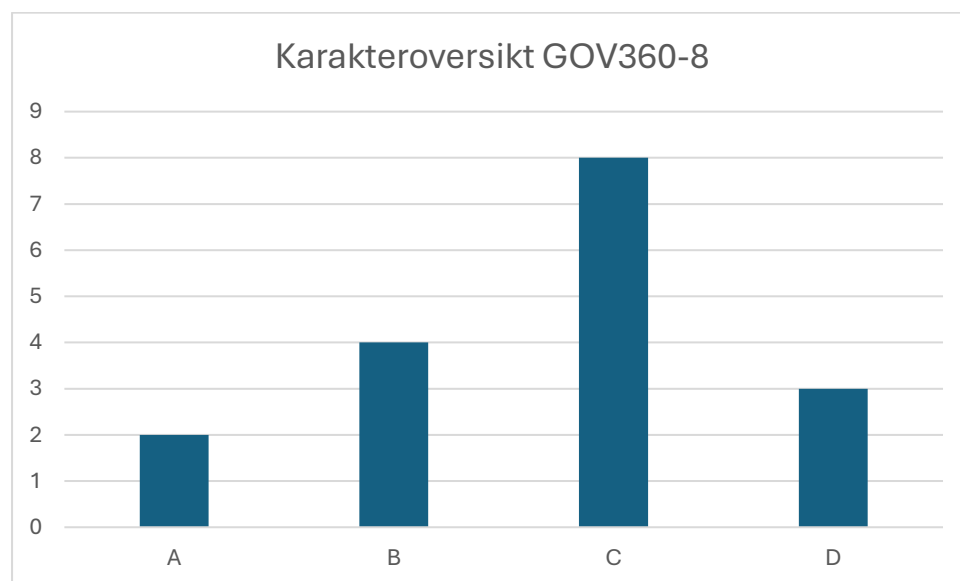
In terms of in-class participation we were in general quite happy with the students. The discussions were on point; the class was quite active and who was most active changed based on the topic. We had the impression that the students appreciated the topical focus, as reflected in their engagement with the in-class discussions. It was also nice to see that students from both MA-programs (GOV and GLGOV) were attracted by this course. The student presentations (obligatory assignment) were good and it worked as a nice way into the topic of the day to have this at the start of the seminar. The main focus here was thematic and not methodological.

A general remark we had was that the course is probably one the ambitious side for 5 ECTS. As it is also taught intensively (blokkurs) there is very limited time, and the combined focus on theory and methods within so few credits is a challenging one. This was also evident in the seminars where we would have wanted more time for class discussions than what we got due to data work, student presentations and connecting the analyses to the readings. We believe some of this can be solved through some restructuring, for example through cleaner theoretical sections and data sections, f.ex.

3 theoretical seminars and 3 data labs. We also think closer contact with the quantitative course taught just prior to this course could be valuable both in terms of preparing scripts that they can read and to be more aware of the students' competence level. Although this will vary, we do not expect students who struggle a lot with quantitative methods to pick this course based on the course objectives. We will continue to develop this course within the frame of 5 ECTS, but if there opens up an opportunity our opinion is that the course would be better as a 10 ECTS course.

The different teachers also worked a bit differently with the data part of the course. Where one used these sessions more to discuss survey analyses more at the design level, for example operationalizations of central concepts and whether they reflect theory well, another teacher focused data lab practices to reproduce results from readings. Although these are different angles to discuss survey analysis, this reflects their research interests of the teachers and we think these different takes complements each other well.

Karakterfordeling



17 students handed in their research essays. Two of the students that had signed up did not have high enough attendance to qualify for handing in the exam. In general, the quality of the essays were good. The ones that fell through did so on the empirical statistics that they had to include as part of the essay.

Mål for neste evalueringsperiode – forbedringstiltak

As this course is expected for the first time, there are several possible things that can be improved and changed.

We agree that we want to keep the dual focus on theory and data work, but we also agree with the students that we need to make some changes. One thing that we consider is to try to have a better structure for theory and data work in the course, for example having separate seminars for theory and practice. We also consider having an introductory lecture to set the tone as the students have very different starting points coming into this course. We also discussed whether we could provide the students with some kind of pre-course videos to refresh basic statistical skills. As I will already be making such videos for MET104 (quant at BA-level) this coming fall I will investigate the possibility of making these available. They will be in Norwegian, though. An argument against this is of course that they have just finished their quantitative training at the MA-level so this should not be necessary.

Also, it seems clear from the student evaluation and the experiences in class that we should work more tightly with GOV321 and the course responsible there to ensure that the coding language that they learn there is the same that we introduce them to in this class. This I hope will dampen some of the frustration that the students had with the data lab.

Another suggestion to meet students' different skills in statistics is to develop in-class assignments that are at two levels of difficulty, so that the students can choose assignment themselves. The challenge with this is that it makes it more difficult to jointly go through scripts together, run analyses and discuss results. But we will investigate this.

A last point that we will follow up is to work with the course description to make it clearer that this is a thematic course but with a big survey methodological component. Although we don't agree with the students that this is not clear from the current description we will make this point even clearer. Hopefully, this will ensure that the students choosing GOV360-8 are motivated and prepared for what they meet in the course.