1 Course Description

2 Grades

3 Schedule

4 Course Policies

5 University Policies

6 Syllabus Changes

POLISCI 400: Social influence Political Behavior

Spring 2026

Last Updated: January 19, 2026

> Note: All times and dates in the syllabus or other course material correspond to Madison's Central Time Zone

Class information

Class Time: TuTh 8:00AM - 9:15AM
Class Location: EDUCATION L196

Course Canvas URL: https://canvas.wisc.edu/courses/495375 (https://canvas.wisc.edu/courses/495375)
Number of Credits: 3
Course Designation & Attributes:
Breadth: Social Science
Level: Elementary
L&S Credit: Counts as Liberal Arts and Science credit in L&S
Instructional mode: In-Person
Requisites: Not open to students who have taken POLI SCI 184 or POLI SCI 404

Instructor information

Instructor: Professor Matthew Pietryka
Preferred Name: *Professor Pietryka* or just *Prof. P*
Pronouns: he/him
Email: `mpietryka@wisc.edu` (mailto:mpietryka@wisc.edu)
Office: North Hall 302
Prof. Pietryka's Student Hours: I will be available to meet in person after most class meetings for quick

conversations. For longer conversations, you can visit my office during drop-in hours (no appointment necessary) on Tuesdays 12:45-1:45PM or you can book an appointment using this link: https://calendly.com/pietryka/office-hours (https://calendly.com/pietryka/office-hours)

1 Course Description

Course Overview

This course examines *social influence*: how our political attitudes and actions are shaped by the people around us. To understand social influence on the topic of politics, much of the course material will cover social influence across a range of topics including emotions, economics, and intergroup relations. The material in the course is divided into three units, each culminating in a unit exam. The first unit emphasizes that people are bad at understanding the world because they do not understand social influence. The second unit covers a range of ways in which our attitudes and behavior are shaped by our social networks. The third unit focuses on the evolutionary and psychological reasons why we are so sensitive to social influence.

Course Learning Outcomes

With this overview in mind, students who succeed in this class will:

1. Analyze the limitations of “common sense” reasoning when explaining complex political and social phenomena. Audience: Undergraduate
2. Understand the fundamental principles of social network analysis, including concepts such as homophily and transitivity. Audience: Undergraduate
3. Examine how political behaviors, ideologies, and emotions spread through social networks via contagion and emergent processes. Audience: Undergraduate
4. Critique traditional individualistic models of political behavior by applying a network-oriented perspective to case studies of elections and social movements. Audience: Undergraduate

How Credit Hours are Met by the Course:

This is a 3-credit course that meets each week for two 75-minute lectures. The course also carries the expectation that students will work on course learning activities for about two hours out of classroom for each credit hour (that is, six additional hours a week).

If you find yourself spending significantly more than 6 hours on out-of-class preparation each week, reach out to Prof. Pietryka during office hours. I’m happy to talk about different reading and study strategies that might help.

Regular and Substantive Student-Instructor Interaction:

Two meetings per week with direct instruction, facilitating discussion of course content, and providing feedback on student work.

Required Textbook, Software, and other Course materials

1. *Everything Is Obvious (Once You Know the Answer): How Common Sense Fails Us*, by Duncan J. Watts, ISBN 978-0307951793.

2. Additional articles, available on Canvas, will be assigned throughout the semester.

Students should do the assigned readings before each class meeting. The instructor will discuss some of the more difficult material from the readings in lecture, but will not discuss all of the readings. Before the exams, students should be sure to understand the main argument expressed in each assigned reading as well as the evidence the author(s) present to support their argument.

2 Grades

Students' grades for the course depend on the scores they earn for three exams, fourteen online reading quizzes, three journal entries, and the Network Analysis Project. Details about each are below.

Students can calculate their cumulative Percentage using the following formula, expressing their scores in percentage points:

Cumulative Percentage =
$.75\times$ Exam percentage
$+.10\times$ Network Analysis Project percentage
$+.15\times$ In-class Activities

Final Grades

At the end of the semester, the final letter grade will be assigned according to the standard table:

Grade	Grading Cutoff (%)
A (Excellent)	93
AB (Intermediate Grade)	88
B (Good)	83
BC (Intermediate Grade)	77
C (Fair)	70
D (Poor)	65
F (Failure)	<65

2.1 Components of the grade

Each assessment is described briefly below. I will provide students with additional guidance for each assessment in class and on Canvas.

Exams

The course features **two midterm exams** and one **cumulative final exam.** The exams will include a mix of multiple choice, short answer, and essay questions. Be sure to bring pencils, sharpeners, and erasers to all exams.

If you cannot take the exam at the scheduled time (e.g., too ill or you might be contagious), please email me *before the exam.* In your email, attach medical documentation excusing you from school for the exam date (or let me know when you will send it if it is not yet available) and let me know when you expect to be well enough to take a make-up exam.

The exams will take place in our usual classroom on the following dates:

Exam	Day	Date	Time	Location
Exam 1	Thursday	02/19	(usual class time)	(usual classroom)
Exam 2	Thursday	03/19	(usual class time)	(usual classroom)
Final Exam	Tuesday	05/05	7:25PM-9:25PM	TBD

WARNING: To take this class, you must be available at those times. If you will not be available during those times, you must contact the instructors **during the first week of instruction** to explain your situation and see if alternative arrangements are possible.

Network Analysis Project

Over the course of a week, **students will complete an analysis of their own real-world social networks**, providing information about the people they interact with, how they met these acquaintances, and which of these acquaintances know each other. The instructor will aggregate these data and provide results to the class.

In-class Activities

To help you gain experience with the course material, we will hold frequent in-class activities. These activities will include group discussions, surveys, and brief writing prompts. These activities will typically be graded on a credit/no credit basis. Since the goal of these activities is to help you learn the material, your grade for each activity will be based on effort rather than mastery of the material.

Though students are expected to attend and participate in each class, I recognize that over the course of the semester you may need to miss one or more classes. To make the class more flexible, I have created the following policies:

- to accommodate cases when you have a *documented excuse:* email me (`mpietryka@wisc.edu`) **before class** to inform me that you will not be there. If available, include the documentation in the email. If the documentation is not yet available, let me know when you expect it to be ready.
- to accommodate cases when you *do not have a documented excuse:* In the Canvas settings, I will drop your two lowest activity grades, which means you can miss up to two activities with no penalty. In these cases, you do not need to provide any documentation or explanation.

3 Schedule

Note: The schedule is tentative and is likely to change as the semester progresses.

Day	Date	Topic	Read
Tue	01/20	Introduction	

Day	Date	Topic	Read
Thur	01/22	Putting the *social* in social science	Watts preface & chapter 1
Tue	01/27	Why it's so tough to study social influence	Watts chapter 2
Thur	01/29	The Frame Problem	Tversky & Kahneman 1974^
Tue	02/03	Micromotives, macrobehavior	Watts chapter 3
Thur	02/05	Social Network Analysis	Grunspan et al. 2017^
Tue	02/10	It's not made by great men	Watts chapter 4
Thur	02/12	Selection Bias	Lifchits et. al 2021^
Tue	02/17	Review for Exam 1	
Thur	02/19	Exam 1	
Tue	02/24	Six degrees of separation	Watts chapter 5 Gladwell 1999^
Thur	02/26	Weak Ties	Meyer et al 2019^ Rajkumar et al. 2022
Tue	03/03	Strong and Weak Ties in Politics	Nickerson 2008^
Thur	03/05	Black Swans	Watts chapters 6-7
Tue	03/10	Better Predictions	Young and Ziemer 2024^
Thur	03/12	Skill, Luck, and Justice	Watts chapters 8-9
Tue	03/17	Defeating Common Sense	Watts chapter 10
Thur	03/19	Review for Exam 2	
Tue	03/24	Exam 2	
Thur	03/26	Social Contagion	Centola 2021^
Tue	03/31	Spring Break (No class)	
Thur	04/02	Spring Break (No class)	
Tue	04/07	Online social networks	Bond et al. 2012^ Matz et al. 2017^
Thur	04/09	Contagion Confounds	Thompson 2009^
Tue	04/14	Social Identity	Tajfel 1970^ Macy et al. 2019^
Thur	04/16	Conformity/Harmonizing	Asch 1955^
Tue	04/21	Altruism	Fehr & Gachter 2002^ Rand et al. 2012^ Woolley et al. 2010^

Day	Date	Topic	Read
Thur	04/23	No Class: MPSA Conference	
Tue	04/28	Conclusions	
Thur	04/30	Review for Exam 3	
Tue	05/05	Final Exam, 7:25PM-9:25PM	

KEY:

Watts = *Everything Is Obvious* by Duncan Watts

^ = posted to Canvas (`Canvas -> Modules -> Readings`)

4 Course Policies

How to ask questions and get help

We encourage you to reach out if you have questions, ideas, or suggestions you'd like to share about the course. The TAs and I will strive to respond to all inquiries within 24 business hours as long as you follow these instructions:

- **Most questions** about the syllabus, assignments, and course material **should be posted to the course Q&A discussion thread** (https://canvas.wisc.edu/courses/495375/discussion_topics/2319499) (`Canvas -> Course Information -> Course Questions and Answers (Q&A)`).
  - Before posting a question, please double-check that the question is not fully answered in a previous discussion thread or on the syllabus.
- **For short questions of a personal nature** (e.g., specifics about your own grade), please email your TA or Prof. P using your UW email account. When emailing Prof. P, please include your section time and TA's name (this info makes it easier to find relevant resources in a big class).
- **For questions that require a response of more than a few sentences** (e.g., help working through a problem set), seek help in your TA's student hours or Prof. P's student hours.
- **Follow up if we missed your question**: We strive to respond to all questions within 24 business hours. We're also imperfect humans, and occasionally things get lost in the shuffle. If you have not received a response within 24 business hours, we encourage you to follow up to ensure we did not miss it.

How we will communicate with you

- When contacting individual students, we will reach out via Canvas Inbox or their UW email.
- When contacting all students, we will use the Announcements feature of the course Canvas.
- To ensure you do not miss an announcement, you can receive email alerts or push notifications each time announcements are posted. To do so, you must configure your Canvas notification settings (https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Student-Guide/How-do-I-manage-notifications-for-a-single-course-as-a-student/ta-p/430).

Student Responsibilities

- You are expected to keep up with the class, engage with the course material, and submit assignments by the due dates.
- Please log on to Canvas at least every other day to check for course updates.
- All work that you submit must be your own, per the UW Academic Misconduct Policy (https://conduct.students.wisc.edu/academic-misconduct).
- To receive credit on submitted work, you must follow the instructions carefully, follow word limits as instructed, and use correct spelling and grammar.
- Please respond to my email or Canvas messages within 24 hours, not counting holidays or weekends.
- Please use your UW email address for all course-related emails.
- When communicating with your fellow classmates, the TAs, or Prof. P, please be respectful and use professional email etiquette (https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/assignments/advice-for-students-writing-a-professional-email/)

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Policy

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools and applications (including, but not limited to Chat-gpt, Copilot, Claude, and Gemini) for course assignments and assessments does not support the learning objectives of this course and is prohibited. Using them in submitted work is a violation of the course's expectations and will be addressed through UW–Madison's academic misconduct policy, specifically UWS 14.03(1)(b) Uses unauthorized materials or fabricated data in any academic exercise.

Though AI is not allowed for submitted work, it can be an effective study tool. The key is to use AI as a means to organize your thoughts and better understand the course concepts rather than a tool to avoid engaging with the course material.

If you are uncertain about appropriate use of AI in this course, please reach out to your TA or Prof. Pietryka **prior to submitting any relevant work**.

5 University Policies

Academic Calendar & Religious Observances

View the full academic calendar (https://secfac.wisc.edu/academic-calendar) in addition to information about religious and election day observances. Students are responsible for notifying instructors within the first two weeks of classes about any need for flexibility due to religious observances (https://policy.wisc.edu/library/UW-880).

Establishment of the academic calendar for the University of Wisconsin–Madison falls within the authority of the faculty as set forth in Faculty Policies and Procedures (https://policy.wisc.edu/library/UW-801#Pol801_1_20). Construction of the academic calendar is subject to various rules and laws prescribed by the Board of Regents, the Faculty Senate, State of Wisconsin and the federal government. Find additional dates and deadlines for students (https://registrar.wisc.edu/dates/) on the Office of the Registrar website.

Academic Integrity

By virtue of enrollment, each student agrees to uphold the high academic standards of the University of Wisconsin–Madison; academic misconduct is behavior that negatively impacts the integrity of the institution. Cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration and helping others commit these previously listed acts are examples of misconduct which may result in disciplinary action. Examples of disciplinary sanctions (https://conduct.students.wisc.edu/academic-misconduct/) include, but are not limited to, failure on the assignment/course, written reprimand, disciplinary probation, suspension or expulsion.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

The University of Wisconsin–Madison supports the right of all enrolled students to a full and equal educational opportunity. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Wisconsin State Statute (36.12) and UW–Madison policy (UW-855) (https://policy.wisc.edu/library/UW-855) require the university to provide reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities to access and participate in its academic programs and educational services. Faculty and students share responsibility in the accommodation process. Students are expected to inform faculty of their need for instructional accommodations during the beginning of the semester, or as soon as possible after being approved for accommodations. Faculty will work either directly with the student or in coordination with the McBurney Disability Resource Center (https://mcburney.wisc.edu/) to provide reasonable instructional and course-related accommodations. Disability information, including instructional accommodations as part of a student's educational record, is confidential and protected under FERPA.

Course Evaluations

Students at the University of Wisconsin–Madison have the opportunity to evaluate their learning experiences and the courses they are enrolled in through course evaluations. Many instructors use a digital course evaluation tool (https://kb.wisc.edu/luwmad/81069) to collect feedback from students. Students typically receive notifications two weeks prior to the end of the semester requesting that they complete course evaluations. Student participation is an integral component of course development, and confidential feedback is important. UW–Madison strongly encourages student participation in course evaluations.

Diversity & Inclusion

Diversity is a source of strength, creativity, and innovation for the University of Wisconsin–Madison. We value the contributions of each person and respect the profound ways their identity, culture, background, experience, status, abilities, and opinion enrich the university community. We commit ourselves to the pursuit of excellence in teaching, research, outreach, and diversity as inextricably linked goals. UW–Madison fulfills its public mission by creating a welcoming and inclusive community for people from every background – people who as students, faculty, and staff serve Wisconsin and the world. (Source: Institutional Statement on Diversity (https://diversity.wisc.edu/institutional-statement-on-diversity/))

Mental Health & Well-Being

Students often experience stressors that can impact both their academic experience and personal well-being. These may include mental health concerns, substance misuse, sexual or relationship violence, family circumstances, campus climate, financial matters, among others.

UW–Madison students are encouraged to learn about and utilize the university's mental health services and/or other resources as needed. Student can visit uhs.wisc.edu (https://www.uhs.wisc.edu/) or call University Health Services at (608) 265-5600 to learn more.

Privacy of Student Records & Use of Audio Recorded Lectures

Lecture materials and recordings for this course are protected intellectual property at UW–Madison. Students enrolled in this course may use the materials and recordings for their personal use related to participation in the course. Students may also take notes solely for their personal use. If a lecture is not already recorded, students are not authorized to record lectures without permission unless they are considered by the university to be a qualified student with a disability who has an approved accommodation that includes recording. [Regent Policy Document 4-1] Students may not copy or have lecture materials and recordings outside of class, including posting on internet sites or selling to commercial entities, with the exception of sharing copies of personal notes as a notetaker through the McBurney Disability Resource Center. Students are otherwise prohibited from providing or selling their personal notes to anyone else or being paid for taking notes by any person or commercial firm without the instructor's express written permission. Unauthorized use of these copyrighted lecture materials and recordings constitutes copyright infringement and may be addressed under the university's policies, UWS Chapters 14 and 17, governing student academic and non-academic misconduct. View more information about FERPA (https://registrar.wisc.edu/ferpa-facstaff/).

Students' Rules, Rights & Responsibilities

View more information about student rules, rights and responsibilities (https://guide.wisc.edu/undergraduate/#rulesrightsandresponsibilitiestext) such as student privacy rights, sharing of academic record information, academic integrity and grievances.

Teaching & Learning Data Transparency

The privacy and security of faculty, staff and students' personal information is a top priority for UW–Madison. The university carefully reviews and vets all campus-supported digital tools used for teaching and learning, including those that support data empowered educational practices (https://teachlearn.wisc.edu/deep/) and proctoring. View more information about teaching and learning data transparency (https://teachlearn.provost.wisc.edu/teaching-and-learning-data-transparency-statement/) at UW–Madison.

6 Syllabus Changes

(This section will include a running list of any revisions made to the the syllabus throughout the semester)