POLS 3220: How To Predict The Future

Fall 2025

Professor:	Joe Ornstein	**Time:**	TTh 12:45–2:00pm
Email:	jornstein@uga.edu	**Place:**	Baldwin 101D
Website:	joeornstein.github.io/how-to-predict-the-future/		

In this class, we learn how to make good predictions, exploring the art and science of forecasting from fields like political science, economics, statistics, and cognitive psychology. Why predict the future? Partly because good forecasts are valuable. Partly because it's fun. But mostly because predictions are how we test whether we truly understand how the world works. During the semester, students will participate in a series of forecasting challenges, testing their ability to make accurate predictions about sociopolitical events.

Course Objectives

Upon successful completion of the course, students will be able to:

- Summarize key concepts from the research on forecasting in psychology, political science, economics, and related fields. See **Readings** for details on how this competency will be assessed.
- Make accurate predictions about sociopolitical events over a medium-term time horizon (1-3 months). See **Forecasting Challenge** for details on how this competency will be assessed.
- Clearly explain the reasoning behind their forecasts, incorporating multiple theoretical perspectives and citing reliable sources. See **Briefings** for details on how this competency will be assessed.
- Apply mathematical and statistical models from social science to a variety of forecasting problems. See **Exams** for details on how this competency will be assessed.

Readings

Every week we will read a chapter from the book *Superforecasting: The Art and Science of Prediction* (Tetlock & Gardner, 2016). On Thursdays, students will take a short reading quiz, in which they will be asked to summarize one or more key concepts from that week's chapter. These quizzes will be graded pass/fail, and there are 13 chapters in total. To meet expectations, quiz responses must be accurate and clear enough that someone who hadn't read the chapter could understand the response.

Forecasting Challenge

There is no better way to learn forecasting than through practice. Throughout the semester, students will be asked to make predictions about 27 sociopolitical events that will occur on or before November 25. Most of these questions will be chosen from student suggestions. At the end of each class period, following our in-class discussion, I will ask you to submit a prediction for one of these questions (in the form of a probability between 0 and 100) plus a brief explanation for how you came up with your prediction.

To meet expectations, your forecasts must be submitted by the deadline (the end of the class period during which we discussed the topic) and include a brief, sensible explanation for why you chose your

probability estimate (50-100 words). Because I will be publicly posting predictions to our class website, I cannot accept late or incomplete work. At the end of the semester, I will measure each participant's prediction accuracy (including my own) using Brier Scores. See the **Grading Rubric** for how prediction accuracy will be translated into a final letter grade.

Briefings

We will devote part of each class session to discussing one of the semester's forecasting challenge questions. To facilitate this discussion, 3-5 students will serve as Discussion Leaders each day. Before class, these students will each write a short paper describing the relevant background and reasoning behind their forecast (750-1,000 words, approximately 3 double-spaced pages). We will read these briefings in class and use them as a jumping off point for our discussion. Email your paper to me as a PDF document by 11am the day we discuss that forecasting question. To receive credit, these briefings must be (1) clearly written, (2) contain no inaccurate information, (3) cite credible sources, (4) approach the forecasting problem from at least two different angles, and (5) provide useful guidance for other students making their own forecasts.

If your briefing does not meet expectations, or you are unable to attend the class session for which you signed up to serve as Discussion Leader, you will not receive credit for that day's assignment, but may sign up for another day as long as there are open slots. Note that even if you are serving as Discussion Leader for that day's question, you must still complete the **Forecasting Challenge** assignment as described in the previous section to receive credit.

Exams

There will be two written exams: one midterm (tentatively scheduled October 2) and one final exam (scheduled by the university during final exam period, December 9 from 12pm-3pm). Both exams will be graded out of 100 points. Exam content will be drawn from my lectures, the slides from which will be publicly available on the course website, and, yes, the final exam will be cumulative.

Grading Rubric

The final letter grade you earn for the semester will be determined based on the number of assignments you complete that meet expectations, your overall prediction accuracy in the forecasting challenge, and your performance on the written exams. The following sections list all the minimum requirements students must meet to earn a given letter grade.

C

To pass the course (C-level grade), you must meet the following expectations:

- Submit at least 18 forecasts
- Pass at least 5 reading quizzes
- Average at least 60 points on the midterm and final exams

To earn a C+, you must also complete 1 Briefing assignment.

B

To earn a B-level grade, you must meet the following expectations:

- Submit at least 22 forecasts (Brier Score < 0.25)
- Pass at least 8 reading quizzes
- Average at least 75 points on the midterm and final exams
- Complete at least 2 Briefing assignments

You can earn a B+ by meeting A-level expectations for one or more of the above bullet points. Your final grade will be a B- if you meet expectations for only 3 out of 4 of the above bullet points.

A

To earn an A-, you must meet the following expectations:

- Submit at least 24 forecasts (Brier Score < 0.22)
- Pass at least 10 reading quizzes
- Average at least 85 points on the midterm and final exams
- Complete at least 3 Briefing assignments.

To earn an A, you must meet all the above expectations and also successful complete a coding assignment during the Machine Learning module in October. More details on that when the time comes.

Office Hours and Email Policy

I will be available for students to drop in and chat every Thursday afternoon from 2-4pm. My office is Baldwin 304C. If you send me an email, please allow me 24 hours to respond. Like many professors, my inbox is pretty overloaded. Also, I have small children, so it's my policy to not check email after 5pm or on weekends.

Course Outline

Date	Module	Topic	Reading Quiz
Aug 14		Syllabus	
Aug 19	I: Uncertainty	Fundamentals of Probability	
Aug 21		Compound Probability	Chapter 1
Aug 26		Brier Scores	
Aug 28		Conditional Probability	Chapter 2
Sep 2		Bayes Rule	
Sep 4		Bell Curves	Chapter 3
Sep 9		Long Tails	
Sep 11	II: The Wisdom of Crowds	Jury Theorems	Chapter 4
Sep 16		Information Aggregation	
Sep 18		Prediction Markets	Chapter 5
Sep 23		Madness of Crowds	
Sep 25		Thinking Like A Crowd	Chapter 6
Sep 30		**Midterm Review**	
Oct 2		**Midterm Exam**	Chapter 7
Oct 7	III. Machine Learning	Linear Models	
Oct 9		Time Series	Chapter 8
Oct 14		Election Forecasting	
Oct 16		Trees & Forests	Chatper 9
Oct 21		Coding Boot Camp (Day 1)	
Oct 23		Coding Boot Camp (Day 2)	Chatper 10
Oct 28	IV. Dynamics	Stocks & Flows	
Oct 30		Positive & Negative Feedback	Chapter 11
Nov 4		Tipping Points	
Nov 6		Chaos Theory	Chapter 12
Nov 11	V. Game Theory	Self-fulfilling Prophecies	
Nov 13		Mixed Strategies	Appendix & Ten Commandments
Nov 18		Credibility	
Nov 20		Signaling	
Nov 25		**Closing Ceremony**	

Academic Honesty

When you joined the University of Georgia community, you agreed to abide by a code of conduct outlined in our academic honesty policy, *A Culture of Honesty*. Because of the unique nature of the assignments in this course, I want to make a few notes here about what I consider to be honest conduct.

You are permitted—encouraged, even—to discuss the forecasting challenges with classmates, friends, family, pets, experts, social media, your professors, and language models like ChatGPT. For reasons we will discuss throughout the semester, consulting a wide range of perspectives is an excellent habit for improving your forecasting skills. You may not, however, ask any of these resources to do your work for you. You must complete all written assignments yourself, and any ideas that are not your own must be

cited so that readers can trace them to their source.

Mental Health and Wellness Resources

- If you or someone you know needs assistance, you are encouraged to contact Student Care and Outreach in the Division of Student Affairs at 706-542-7774 or visit https://sco.uga.edu. They will help you navigate any difficult circumstances you may be facing by connecting you with the appropriate resources or services.
- UGA has several resources for a student seeking mental health services or crisis support.
- If you need help managing stress anxiety, relationships, etc., please visit BeWellUGA for a list of FREE workshops, classes, mentoring, and health coaching led by licensed clinicians and health educators in the University Health Center.
- Additional resources can be accessed through the UGA App.