

POLS 3220: HOW TO PREDICT THE FUTURE

Fall 2026

Professor:	Joe Ornstein	Time:	TTh 1:15–2:35pm
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 **Discussions** 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 Tuesdays, 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 12 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 35 sociopolitical events that will occur on or before November 19. Most of these questions will be chosen from student suggestions. Before each class period, I will ask you to submit a prediction for 1 or 2 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. Following our in-class discussion, you may revise your prediction and submit a final forecast.

To meet expectations, your forecasts must be submitted by the deadline (initial forecasts are due three hours before class and revised forecasts are due by midnight, unless otherwise specified) 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.

Discussions

We will devote part of each class session to discussing that day's forecasting challenge question(s). To facilitate this discussion, 3-5 students will serve as Discussion Leaders for each question. Before class, I suggest that each discussion leader write a short paper describing the relevant background and reasoning behind their forecast, that you can refer to during class discussion.

Successfully completing this assignment requires you to demonstrate a detailed knowledge of the topic, clearly explain the reasoning behind your forecast, and provide useful guidance for other students making their own forecasts. 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 8) and one final exam (scheduled by the university during final exam period, December 3 from 12pm-3pm). Both exams will be graded out of 100 points. Exam content will be drawn from both the readings and lectures (the slides from which will be publicly available on the course website). 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.

- **Exams (100 points).** Your midterm and final exam scores (each graded out of 100) will be averaged together.
- **Forecasting Challenge Participation (70 points).** You earn 1 point for each initial forecast you submit and 1 point for each revised forecast you submit, for up to 70 points across the semester's 35 questions.
- **Reading Quizzes (50 points).** You earn 5 points for every reading quiz passed, up to a maximum of 50 points.
- **Discussion Leader (30 points).** You will serve as Discussion Leader five times over the semester. Each session is scored using a 6-point rubric, for up to 30 points total.

^{*}I describe this scoring system in the third lecture of class; note that I score any missing predictions as if the student had submitted a forecast of 50%.

- **Forecasting Accuracy Bonus (30 points).** At the end of the semester, I will calculate everyone's overall prediction accuracy using [Brier Scores](#). You earn bonus points as follows (each bar is cumulative):
 - **+10 points** if your Brier Score beats a coin flip (i.e., is better than 0.25).
 - **+10 points** if your Brier Score beats the *Wisdom of the Crowd* — the class's median forecast for each question.
 - **+10 points** if your Brier Score beats mine!

Letter Grades

Add up your points across all five categories above and consult the table below for your final letter grade.

Letter Grade	Points
A	245+
A–	230–244
B+	220–229
B	210–219
B–	200–209
C+	185–199
C	170–184
F	below 170

Office Hours and Email Policy

I will be available for students to drop in and chat every Thursday afternoon from 2:45-3:30pm. 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 18		Syllabus	
Aug 20	I: Uncertainty	Fundamentals of Probability	
Aug 25		Compound Probability	Chapter 1
Aug 27		Brier Scores	
Sep 1		Conditional Probability	Chapter 2
Sep 3		Bayes Rule	
Sep 8		Bell Curves	Chapter 3
Sep 10		Long Tails	
Sep 15	II: The Wisdom of Crowds	Jury Theorems	Chapter 4
Sep 17		The Median Voter	
Sep 22		Prediction Markets	Chapter 5
Sep 24		Madness of Crowds	
Sep 29		Extremizing	Chapter 6
Oct 1		Information & Surprise	
Oct 6		Midterm Review	Chapter 7
Oct 8		Midterm Exam	
Oct 13	III: Election Forecasting	The Polls	Chapter 8
Oct 15		Vibe Coding Boot Camp (Day 1)	
Oct 20		The Fundamentals	Chapter 9
Oct 22		Vibe Coding Boot Camp (Day 2)	
Oct 27		Ensemble Models	Chapter 10
Oct 29		Vibe Coding Boot Camp (Day 3)	
Nov 3		Election Day Extravaganza	Chapter 11
Nov 5	IV: Dynamics	Stocks & Flows	
Nov 10		Feedback Loops	Chapter 12
Nov 12		Tipping Points	
Nov 17		Path Dependence	
Nov 19		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 or Claude. 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.