

# Avoiding, and Learning From, Mistakes Made by Junior Scholars Teaching Political Methodology

Clayton Webb, *University of Kansas, USA*

Soren Jordan, *Auburn University, USA*

Political methodology courses are among the most difficult political science courses to teach, and young faculty—who have the least amount of teaching experience—often are asked to teach them.<sup>1</sup> Resources abound for prospective instructors. Oxford University Press (Box-Steffensmeier, Brady, and Collier 2008) and SAGE Publications (Curini and Franzese 2020) curated extensive handbooks on political methodology; many articles have been written to introduce the key features of the subfield and describe its history (Beck 2000; King 1990; Roberts 2018); and several popular textbooks can be used for graduate (e.g., Bailey 2015) and undergraduate (e.g., Kellstedt and Whitten 2018) students. Although these resources offer useful insights into the history and substance of political methodology, they do not provide much in the way of best practices for delivery of the material.

We drew on the political methodology community to generate a list of dos and don'ts for new faculty tasked with teaching courses in political methodology. In fall 2020, we conducted a survey of the membership of the American Political Science Association (APSA) Political Methodology section. We asked participants to rate their early performance as purveyors of political methods, to reflect on the balance of material contained in their previous and current syllabi, to respond to questions about the biggest mistakes they made as young faculty, and to offer the best advice they have for new faculty today.

## THE SURVEY

The survey included a battery of demographic questions, a series of questions about course design, and a few open-ended questions. There were two solicitations. We sent the first solicitation email inviting people to participate on September 1, 2020, and a follow-up email on September 7, 2020. Of the 579 members we contacted, 109 completed the survey. Sample demographics are summarized in figure 1.

Given our goal, experience was paramount. We coded respondents as belonging to one of five categories based on their reported rank. The distribution is depicted in the first vertical bar in figure 1. The sample is surprisingly well

balanced across academic ranks (Webb and Jordan 2021). A majority of survey participants (55%) were among those we would classify as ideal subjects: associate faculty or equivalent (22.02%), full faculty or equivalent (22.02%), and endowed faculty or equivalent (11.01%). Nontenured tenure-track faculty accounted for 21.10% of the sample and nontenure-track faculty and graduate students accounted for 23.85%.

The remaining bars in figure 1 highlight other features of the sample. Respondents were 77.98% male and 77.90% non-Hispanic white or Euro-American. This is slightly less diverse than the general APSA membership (i.e., 62.40% male and 75.25% non-Hispanic white or Euro-American); however, this is to be expected (but not accepted) because political methodology is one of the least diverse APSA sections (American Political Science Association 2020). A majority of respondents (75.23%) teach at institutions in the United States, and a majority reported having taught graduate (54.72%) and undergraduate (59.43%) courses. Although the sample was not as diverse as we would prefer, it reflects the current demographic balance of the subfield, and the participants have the requisite experience to provide valuable feedback.

We asked a series of questions about course design. Speaking from experience, we know that young faculty often try to cover too much material. Survey respondents reported similar mistakes. Less than 10% of respondents believed that they needed to cover more material. We asked participants to reflect on what content had been over- or under-emphasized—data analysis, measurement, programming, statistics, theory, and writing—in an effort to provide guidance on how a syllabus should be balanced.

Responses to our composition questions are shown in figures 2 and 3. There are six panels in each figure, one for each topic. The y-axis depicts the percentage of respondents who chose each response option, ranging from *too much* to the *correct* to *too little* emphasis placed on a topic. For each bar, we can interpret the largest shaded area as the response that was chosen by the preponderance of respondents. These responses are broken down by rank, which is depicted on the x-axis of each plot. The final bar in each plot shows the distribution of responses across all ranks.

Figure 2 shows the results for the graduate methods course content questions. A troubling pattern becomes evident almost immediately: there is almost no light-gray shading in any column across all of the panels. We observed a similar pattern in figure 3. This means that, despite reporting that they attempted to cover too much material in their early methods

does not tell us what to cut. As a result, this first section of the survey was somewhat disappointing.

Our second strategy was to solicit advice the old-fashioned way: by asking. We asked respondents two pairs of open-ended questions: (1) What were the biggest mistakes they made as junior faculty teaching methods to graduate and

*Political methodology courses are among the most difficult political science courses to teach, and young faculty—who have the least amount of teaching experience—often are asked to teach them.*

courses, most respondents believed that they needed to emphasize more of everything. Although this may reveal something interesting about the psyche of methods courses faculty, it does not offer much guidance on course design. It

undergraduate students?, and (2) What advice would they give new faculty tasked with teaching graduate and undergraduate students? The next section describes the responses and outlines the lists of best practices derived from these responses.

Figure 1  
Sample Demographics

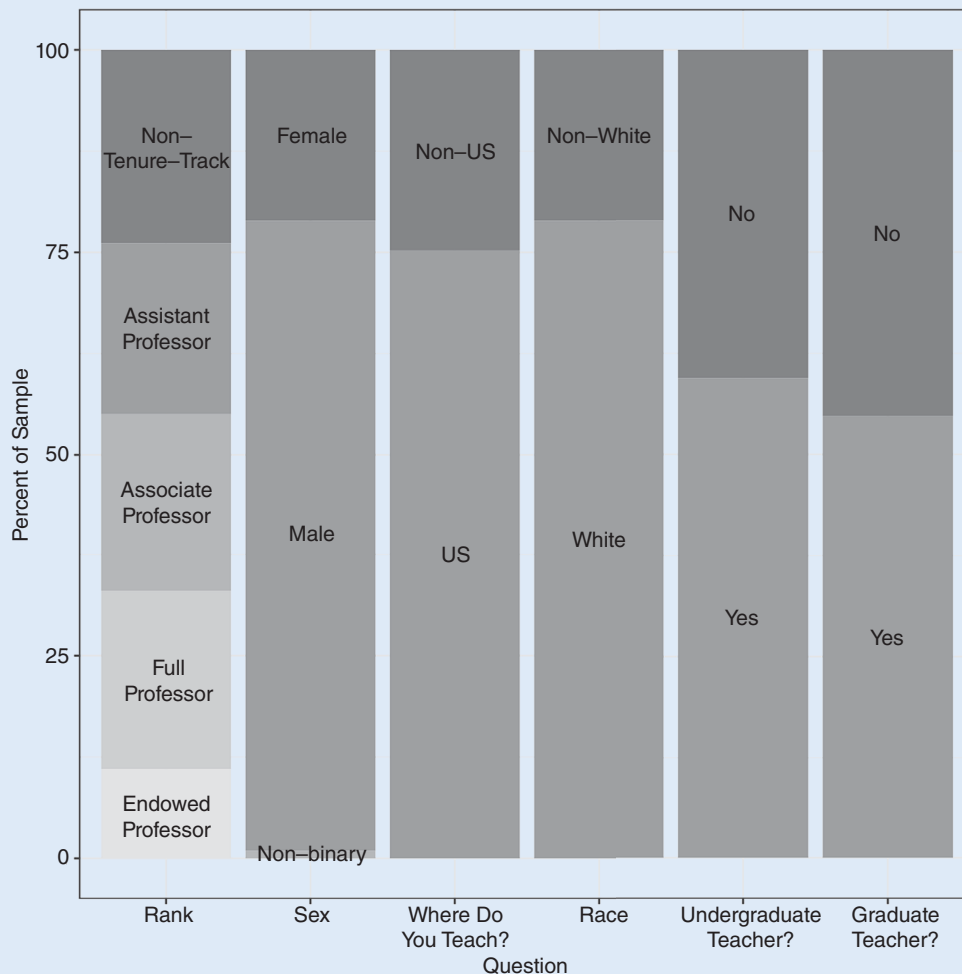
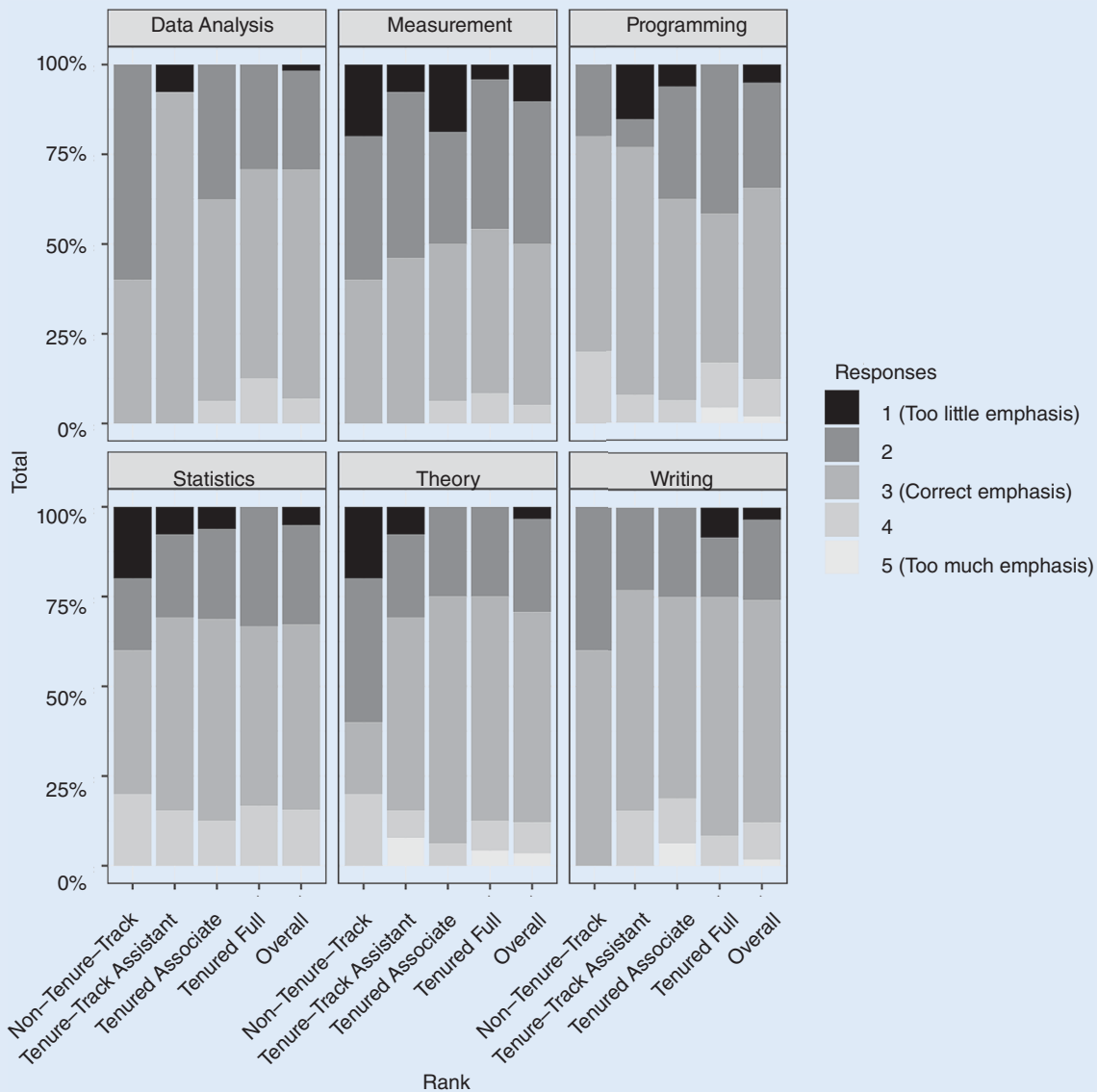


Figure 2  
Balance in Graduate Methods Courses



**THE WISDOM**

We sorted the responses into themes and divided them into categories based on their content.<sup>2</sup> From these lists, we were able to identify which pieces of advice were most common. We divided the content into mistakes to avoid and advice to apply.

**Mistakes to Avoid**

This section discusses common mistakes that young faculty should avoid, including unrealistic expectations and too much material.

*Unrealistic Expectations*

The most common mistake reported was that young faculty set their expectations too high. They develop lectures and

assignments assuming that their students will have a background in mathematics when they do not; they expect students to understand basic programming concepts for languages they have never seen; and they assume that students will naturally adopt the study habits that helped them succeed in their own program. By the time these young faculty members realize their errors, it is too late. This mistake is related to the other common blunder reported by our participants.

*Too Much Material*

As a consequence of their lofty expectations of their students, young methods course faculty often have a penchant for being overly ambitious with their course design. They often try to fit everything they know into their introductory course.

This causes them to assign too much reading as they attempt to cover too many topics and spend an inordinate amount of time developing complex problem sets that require too much effort to produce on the front end, cause students to become

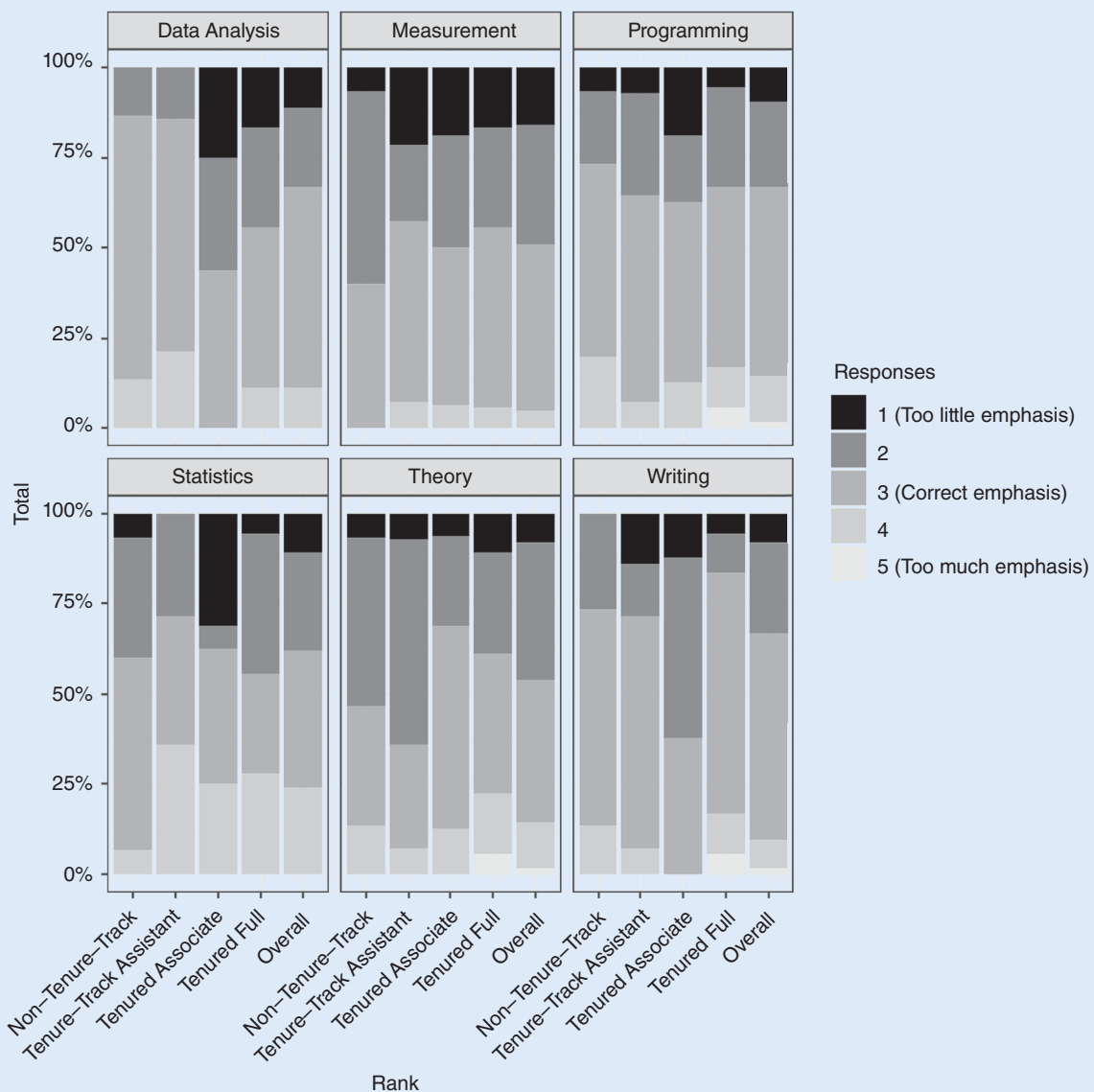
prepared to teach before the semester because they believed the topics should be on the syllabus. This caused the participant to spend too much time preparing a lecture that, ultimately, was not of the same quality as those covering topics for

*The most common mistake reported was that young faculty set their expectations too high.*

frustrated and fatigued, and require too much grading on the back end. As part of this process, one participant noted that they included topics on their early syllabi that they were not

which they were more prepared. Young faculty need to set reasonable expectations not only for their students; they also need to set reasonable expectations for themselves.

**Figure 3**  
**Balance for Undergraduate Methods Courses**



### Advice to Apply

This section discusses the value of asking for advice from colleagues, not neglecting other responsibilities, and borrowing materials from senior faculty members.

#### *Get Advice from Colleagues*

This was the most common piece of advice shared by respondents for young methods faculty. Instructors cannot set reasonable expectations if they do not know what type of students they have. The best way they can prepare to teach a methods course in a new department is to ask the advice of those who previously taught it there. Whereas the natural inclination is to use what has worked in one's own graduate training, it is a good idea to run those ideas by colleagues. For obvious reasons, senior faculty will have a better sense of graduate-student capabilities and needs than someone from another department. At best, young faculty will have the information they need to develop the best course to meet the needs of their students, and their colleagues may be able to provide previous syllabi, problems sets, and other teaching materials instructors can use to reduce their own burden. At worst, young faculty will blunt some of the criticism likely to come their way from senior colleagues if they know that the

*The key to avoiding mistakes is listening to other people in the department.*

new instructors considered their perspectives when they designed their courses.

#### *Do Not Forget Other Responsibilities*

Young faculty have been tasked with teaching methods courses, but they should not spend all their time working on them. Most faculty at universities that have graduate methods programs have a 40-40-20 contract—that is, 40% teaching, 40% research, and 20% service—or something similar. Teaching a graduate methods course is time consuming, particularly in the first few years when new instructors are compiling their materials. If they are not careful, they may find themselves in a situation where they are spending almost all of their time preparing to teach and none on research. This must be avoided. Young methods faculty will not achieve tenure for having the best regression slides. They need to ensure that they are balancing their teaching responsibilities with research and service.

#### *Borrow Materials from Others*

A new instructor is not the first person to teach a research methods course. If it can be avoided, there is no need to “reinvent the wheel.” Senior faculty in their department and/or faculty from the department they are coming from may be willing to share their syllabi and materials if asked. If data examples, slides, and other resources can be borrowed from people with more experience, this will reduce time spent on course preparation. If senior faculty ask for something in

return, it may create an opportunity to collaborate on developing teaching materials. As with any other economic enterprise, pooling efforts and resources produces higher levels of output and utility.

### CONCLUSION

Political methodology is one of the most dynamic subfields in political science. Therefore, it is not surprising that newly minted junior faculty often are those tasked with teaching research methods. Unfortunately, these are the people with the least teaching experience.

This article distills some of the collective wisdom of the discipline to guide young faculty as they begin the work of building their new courses. They should set realistic expectations for their students and try not to cover too much material. Soliciting advice and resources from senior colleagues can help to balance teaching with work and life while they work to improve the delivery of their material. More than anything else, we urge young faculty to remember why they are teaching these courses. The utility of a methods course is not only teaching students the tools they need to conduct their own research projects; it also prepares them for other substantive classes. Young faculty need to prepare their students for

future research, but they also are teaching them how to be educated consumers of political science.

The key to avoiding mistakes is listening to other people in the department. The first priority should always be the needs of students. A young faculty member's new colleagues will have a better sense of what those needs are than they will. They should borrow what they can, develop new material when they must, and try to find ways to improve their methods courses every year. One does not expect the first draft of a manuscript to be flawless, so there is no reason to expect that the first methods course will be perfect. Young faculty are unlikely to ever meet these lofty standards, but if they remain attentive to the input of their students and their colleagues, they can get closer each semester.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the *PS: Political Science & Politics* Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/76STOM>. ■

### NOTES

1. McConaughy (2008) explained why methods courses are so difficult to teach in comparison to other courses: “A methods course requires hundreds of hours of work carefully choreographing lectures, preparing slides, writing handouts, and giving assignments. In contrast, a discussion course on your substantive area of interest probably may require very little preparation. This difference in workload could hardly be more stark.”
2. As in any survey, there was a considerable amount of attrition between the closed-response and the open-response questions: 38 of 109 responded to the

---

---

question about undergraduate teaching mistakes, 43 of 109 offered undergraduate advice, 32 of 109 responded to the question about graduate teaching mistakes, and 33 of 109 offered graduate advice. The length of responses ranged from two words to 358 words; the average was 36 words. Given this relatively small set of text responses, we opted to qualitatively code the categories of advice.

---

## REFERENCES

- American Political Science Association. 2020. "APSA Membership—All Membership Demographic Profile." [www.apsanet.org/RESOURCES/Data-on-the-Profession/Dashboard/Membership](http://www.apsanet.org/RESOURCES/Data-on-the-Profession/Dashboard/Membership).
- Bailey, Michael A. 2015. *Real Stats: Using Econometrics for Political Science and Public Policy*. First edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Beck, Nathaniel L. 2000. "Political Methodology: A Welcoming Discipline." *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 95 (450): 651–54.
- Box-Steffensmeier, Janet M., Henry E. Brady, and David Collier. 2008. *The Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology*, Vol. 10. Oxford Handbooks Online. DOI: [10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199286546.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199286546.001.0001).
- Curini, Luigi, and Robert Franzese. 2020. *The SAGE Handbook of Research Methods in Political Science and International Relations*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.
- Kellstedt, Paul M., and Guy D. Whitten. 2018. *The Fundamentals of Political Science Research*. Third edition. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- King, Gary. 1990. "On Political Methodology." *Political Analysis* 2:1–29.
- McConaughy, Corrine. 2008. "Introducing the Advice to Junior Faculty Column: Advice from Gary King." *The Political Methodologist* 16 (1): 12–15.
- Roberts, Margaret E. 2018. "What Is Political Methodology?" *PS: Political Science & Politics* 51 (3): 597–601.
- Webb, Clayton, and Soren Jordan. 2021. "Replication Data for: Avoiding, and Learning from, Mistakes Made by Junior Scholars Teaching Political Methodology." Harvard Dataverse. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/76STOM>.