Elements in Research Design in Politics

Introduction: This module is designed to enable students to learn the principals and practice of: good research design; rigorous data construction and interpretation; the presentation of research findings; and the appraisal and evaluation of research.

Readings: Selected readings will be made available on the module website. You are strongly encouraged to purchase the following text which is available at the Exeter bookshop:


Assessment: Two practical exercises, (1200 words) 20% each; Research design (4500 words for 30 credits; 2000 words for 15 credits) – 60%. The due dates as follows:

October 27: Practical Exercise #1
November 17: Practical Exercise #2
December 15: Research Design

These essays must be submitted to the SSIS college office by 4pm on the due date. Please consult the CSSIS PGT handbook for details on how to submit and penalties for late work. See https://intranet.exeter.ac.uk/socialsciences/ for details.

Schedule

6 October: Introduction

13 October: Getting Started in the Discipline

Topics: Outlets for research, conferences, journals and books, reputations, citations, and peer review.

Discussion: How do you know what separates good research from bad research? What constitutes “world leading” research?


20 October: The Research Process; from Theory to Evidence

Topics: The scientific method, standards of proof, theories, hypotheses, concepts, variables, relationships, rival hypotheses.

Discussion: What is research for? What is science? What are the justifications for and criticisms of applying that term to the scholarly study of social (including political) phenomena? What is the empirical method? What is a hypothesis? How do scientists establish truth? What is a variable? How is it measured?

Chapter 1: “Thinking Scientifically” in *Elements of Social Scientific Thinking*.


Weingast, Barry R. 1995. “Structuring Your Papers (Caltech Rules)”


*APSA Style Guide* (available at apsanet.org)

27 October: Theories and Hypotheses

Topics: Independent variables, dependent variables, intevening variables

Discussion: What is the role of theory? What is a variable?

Chapter 2: “The Elements of Science” and Chapter 3: “Strategies” in *Elements of Social Scientific Thinking*.


3 November: Measurement: Concepts and Indicators

Topics: From concepts to indicators. How do you know what will prove to be a good indicator, and what are the qualities that make an indicator “good”? Remembering to go back to concepts. Reliability and validity.

Discussion: Think about some of your favorite concepts and indicators before you come to class. Try to define one, in writing, and identify a good indicator or two.


10 November: Making Causal Inferences and Ruling out Rival Explanations

Topics: Causality in social analysis.

Discussion: Can a “good” research design allow one to make causal inferences?

Ch. 6: “Reflections: Back to the Roots” in Elements of Social Scientific Thinking


17 November: Experimental Designs

Topics: Randomization and treatment.

Discussion: Experimental design as an “ideal type” of social science research. Come to class prepared with examples of experimental research in political science.


24 November: Quasi Experimental Designs

Topics: “Real world” experiments.

Discussion: What is the difference between experimental and quasi-experimental? Can a quasi-experimental design be “better” than an experiment? In what ways is a quasi-experiment weaker than an experiment?


1 December: Making Observations: Qualitative Approaches

Topics: large vs. small n studies, case studies.

Discussion: Introduction to thinking about data and data quality. What considerations are involved in choosing and evaluating data? How do you know when data are appropriate for your purposes?


Lieberson, Stanley. 2009. “Small Ns and Big Conclusions: An Examination of the Reasoning in Comparative Studies Based on a Small Number of Cases.” In Gomm, Roger, Martyn Hammersley and Peter Foster (eds.). *Case Study Method*. Sage.


**8 December: Making Observations: Quantitative Approaches**

*Topics:* Why count? Advantages and disadvantages.

*Discussion:* What good are statistics? How are they used? What assumptions are they based on? What are the limitations?


