Seminar: Research Design in Political Science

I. COURSE SUMMARY

This seminar has two purposes: it introduces graduate students to current standards in research design, and requires students to develop their own research design that meets those standards.

Based on consultations with faculty and graduate students, there is consensus that the standards for good research transcend sub-fields. This course is therefore recommended for all graduate students in American Politics, Comparative Politics, and International Relations.

II. REQUIREMENTS

Students are required to write a research prospectus (in the mode of a 15-page description of research that is standard for NSF proposals) that sums up the work done throughout the quarter on their research question as well as their theoretical intuition and their strategy for answering it. Successful assignments will respond to comments and questions raised by the course instructors and participants throughout the quarter. The prospectus will be due Monday, June 13. The prospectus will be evaluated on the appropriateness of the research design, not on the substantive or statistical significance of its results. Before handing in their final assignment, students will have an opportunity to present their prospectus, and defend it, before a group of advanced graduate students.

There will be a set of weekly assignments, with details listed below. Required memos, slides, etc., should be posted on the Canvas website by 6PM on the Monday before each meeting to give your fellow students time to read your work and to prepare comments and questions. The success of the seminar will depend on each student’s preparedness to discuss the assigned readings and to offer comments and feedback on each other’s work, as well as the amount of effort each student invests in advancing his/her own research agenda.
III. BOOKS RECOMMENDED FOR PURCHASE


For students who want to have useful texts in strategic thinking, the following two volumes are useful for their libraries:


IV. STUDENTS WITH DOCUMENTED DISABILITIES

Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Student Disability Resource Center (SDRC) located within the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). SDRC staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the SDRC as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, 723-1067 TTY).

V. WEEKLY MEETINGS AND ASSIGNMENTS

Preparation during Spring break

A. Readings

Students will be expected to complete the readings for week 1 before our first meeting on March 29.

B. Thinking

Students should be doing preliminary thinking about the assignment due in Week 3 which is the foundation for the entire course, as soon as possible, and surely before the course begins.
Part I: Research Question

Week 1 (March 29): Question Selection and Research Design

The purpose of the readings for this week will be to develop criteria for good research questions and research designs.

A. In pursuit of a Research Question

Geddes. Chapter 1 and pp. 27–35.


B. Statistics and Shoe Leather


C. Identification, Unanswerable Questions, and Theory


Week 2 (April 3 and 5): Tutorial with Instructors to Discuss Your Research Questions

There will be no formal class meeting in Week 2. Instead, you will sign up for half-hour consultations in which all three instructors will be present to help you develop your research questions. To make time for everyone, we will hold individual meetings on Sunday, April 3 (1:00–4:00) and Tuesday, April 5 (1:30–4:30). Come to your scheduled meeting with one or more proposed research questions that you think could satisfy Assignment 1 (see below).

In preparation for meeting with the three instructors, students should consult the following readings:


Week 3 (April 12): Presentation of Research Questions [This class may extend to about 5:30]

Assignment 1: Based on discussions from the week 2 tutorial, circulate a memo that …

a. States your research question clearly and concisely;
b. Discusses why existing theories are inadequate to answer your question;
c. Provides an intuition about how you could advance the literature;
d. Suggests a theoretical logic linking the factors you see as consequential to the outcome of interest; and

e. Cites some preliminary evidence to suggest why your hunch might be correct. This evidence may be derived from a case that you know well, or may be a “stylized fact”

Circulate your memo in advance, and present it to other members of the seminar at our meeting on April 12.
Part II: Theory

Week 4 (April 19): Microfoundations and Mechanisms

This week we will focus on causal mechanisms. This can be demonstrated in a game theoretic model, as a psychological syndrome, or in any other flow chart linking treatments to outcomes. The motives of individuals and/or groups should be fully fleshed out, and implications of these motivations, interactions, and decisions should be identified and evaluated theoretically. Arguments should be built up from “primitives.” As guidance for this, the readings for this week offer examples of theories that link primitives to political outcomes.

A. Primer in Game Theory

Those without a background in game theory are encouraged to work through the following two readings:


B. Bargaining Theory


C. PD and other non-cooperative games


D. Coordination Games


E. Capturing the Nub of a Political Transaction (different games for different structures)

Geddes, pp. 40–69.
F. Motivated Reasoning


Week 5 (April 26): Student Presentations of their Theory and Mechanisms

*Assignment 2*: Pick one of the styles of building a theory from primitives and apply it to your research project. Your theory should reflect the relevant actors, goals, strategies, and mechanisms. Your discussion should also identify why the style of formalization that you’ve chosen is appropriate to your case. If game theory is applied, students should specify the game, with pay-offs justified by assumption. Equilibrium solutions need not be worked out, as the core of the assignment is to highlight the actors, the political/strategic structure, and the sequence of moves. At our session on April 26, each student will make a brief presentation of their theory.

Part III: Quantitative Evidence

Week 6 (May 3): Measurement


*Assignment 3*: The course instructors will identify well-known and well-used data-sets in American Politics, Comparative Politics, and International Relations. Each student will be in one group that will review the documentation for their data-set, inspect the distributions of key variables, and come to class prepared to discuss:

a) the overall architecture of the dataset;

b) how key variables are measured and specified, with emphasis on reliability and validity;

c) why data are missing (if any) and how missing data are treated; and

d) an exemplary paper using this dataset and how it has advanced knowledge.
Week 7 (May 10): Experiments and Observational Studies

The seminar will be divided into four groups. Each group will be responsible for reading all the materials in one of the subsequent sections, and preparing a briefing to the entire seminar. The presentation should clearly identify the objective of the empirical work in terms of descriptive or causal inference and then discuss challenges and opportunities for making valid descriptive or causal inferences for each type of research design.

A. Field Experiments


B. Survey Experiments


C. Natural Experiments


D. Observational designs


Abadie, Alberto and Javier Gardeazabal (2003)

**Week 8 (May 17): Presentation of your plan for quantitative analysis**

*Assignment 4:* Prepare a 15-minute presentation describing your plan for quantitative analysis. The presentation should include:

- a) scope conditions (i.e. cases for which your theory is relevant);
- b) measurement strategy (translating concepts into variables);
- c) data sources (whether downloaded from publicly available datasets; use of proxies; reliance on surveys or experiments, etc.);
- d) identification, i.e. whether the set-up of your project permits making a causal inference; and if not, what future project might permit it; and
e) descriptive statistics of some of the key variables you will use to test your theory

**Part IV: Qualitative Evidence**

**Week 9 (May 24): Case Studies, Analytic Narratives, and Qualitative Evidence**

This seminar will focus on the important role of qualitative evidence in providing empirical support for your argument, and in particular, on how the development of an analytic narrative can provide a way to evaluate the micro-foundations of a theoretical account.

**A. The Role of Case Studies in an Explanatory Framework**


**B. Integrating Qualitative and Quantitative Analyses**


**Week 10 (May 31): Presentation of Qualitative Research Plan**
Assignment 5: Write a short section for your future NSF proposal that explains what qualitative data you will employ, and what role this will play in your research. Circulate your plan in advance, and present it briefly during our session on May 31.

Exam Week: Final Presentations to Outside Panel

Each student should prepare a 20-minute presentation of his/her research question, preliminary findings, and research strategy for the future in a presentation to a panel of advanced graduate students qua “outside evaluators” (as if a talk at a professional meeting). Students should then be prepared to answer questions for 25 minutes. Outside evaluators will provide written feedback on the presentations to accompany instructors’ comments on the final research prospectus, due June 13.

Version: February 16, 2016