Seminar: Research Design in Political Science

COURSE LEARNING GOALS

1. This seminar introduces graduate students to current standards in research methods and design.

2. Students learn how to apply these methods to their own research and how to construct an appropriate research design for future work.

3. The class serves as an introduction in how to assess empirical analysis in all fields of political science.

REQUIREMENTS

1. Students are required to submit a 15-page research prospectus, meeting the requirements of a “project description” for NSF grants, by Wednesday, June 14.

2. There will be a set of weekly assignments, with details listed below that will be incorporated into your prospectus

3. Memos, slides and other materials to be used in presentations should be posted on the Canvas website by 12PM on the Monday before each meeting.

4. Students are required to read and be prepared to give comments on the work presented by other class members.

5. 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.

6. Students will be expected to complete the readings for Week 1 before our first meeting on April 4.

7. 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.

EVALUATION

The prospectus will be evaluated on the appropriateness of the research design, not on these substantive or statistical significance of its results. Before handing in your final assignment, students will have an opportunity to present their prospectus, and defend it, before a group of advanced graduate students.

RECOMMENDED FOR PURCHASE


For students who want to have useful texts in strategic thinking, the following two volumes should also be considered for purchase.


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).
Part I: Research Question

Week 1 (April 4): 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


D. A Route towards developing an Answer


Week 2 (April 11): 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 Tuesday, April 11 (9am–12pm and 1-5pm). 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 18): Presentation of Research Questions

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 18.

Part II: Theory

Week 4 (April 25): 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. Games and Strategic Action


Geddes, pp. 40–69.
Recommended reading for those without a background in game theory:


B. *Motivated Reasoning*


C. *Historical, Normative and Ideological Accounts*


Week 5 (May 2): Student Presentations of their Theory and Mechanisms

Assignment 2: Develop a clear theoretical statement about a political process, from which we can derive more or less general expectations about what will happen, both within the context that inspired your research question, but also other contexts as well.

All statements should:
A. Identify scope conditions---to whom the statement applies, when, and why.
B. Be explicit about any assumptions that are necessary to sustain expectations.
C. Clarify the nature of a relationship between strategic or cooperative actors, if appropriate (i.e., what is the nub of the strategic problem they face). Be clear as to who are the actors; what are their preferences; what information they possess; and what are their choices?

There are many forms your statements can take:
- A series of axioms (e.g., Zaller & Feldman) about how people behave politically
- A flow diagram in which a mechanism can be identified for each "link" (e.g., Lodge and Taber's Figure 1.4),
- A game or set of games that identify the parameters yielding different equilibrium outcomes (e.g., Geddes)
- A decision-theoretic model (e.g., Riker & Ordeshook)
- A spatial model which identifies a winning coalition (Shepsle, or Weingast in Bates et al)

Prepare one slide (two max.) to support your presentation in class.

Part III: Quantitative Evidence

Week 6 (May 9): Measurement

Geddes, pp. 69–86 and Appendix A (pp. 225–32).


Assignment 3: Develop a measurement strategy for a key variable in your analysis (using the Lazarsfeld & Barton framework, to the extent it is helpful to you). How might you operationalize your measure? How would your strategy compare to existing measures of similar concepts? In which ways, for example, might the existing measure be misleading? How does your measurement strategy improve on the existing measure?
Week 7 (May 16): 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 and Program Evaluations


B. Survey Experiments


C. Natural Experiments


D. Observational designs


Week 8 (May 23): 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 30): 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. Applying Mixed Methods Designs


B. Incorporating Historical Evidence in Rational Models


C. Incorporating Statistical Models for Qualitative Data


Week 10 (June 6): Situating Your Project in the Political Science Literature

[Tentative: IRB Presentation]

Assignment 5: Write a brief (5 page) memo situating your project in the broader political science literature. If your intuition about the political phenomenon you are studying is correct, what will that mean for our cumulative understanding of the world? Which “established truths” would need to be revisited? How does your project speak to the big, unanswered questions of contemporary political science?

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 14.

Version: March 20, 2017