Teacher responsible

Simon Hix, H307, s.hix@lse.ac.uk
Paul Mitchell, H514, p.l.mitchell@lse.ac.uk

Availability

This course is only available for students on Stream A of the MRes/PhD in Political Science.

Course Content

The aim of the course is to provide members of the MRes/PhD programme with some basic ‘foundations’ for undertaking advanced research in political science. We will learn how to critically evaluate existing research, how to identify an interesting research question, how to develop and implement a method for answering the question, and how to present the results of the research. The course is organised into 3 sections:

1. Lectures and discussions on theory development, inference, case studies, experiments and combining small-n with large –n research (weeks 1-6);
2. Simulation: You become journal referees! MRes students evaluate the research design of quantitative and qualitative articles published in leading journals (weeks 7-8); and
3. Opportunity to present and discuss some of your own early research design ideas (weeks 9-10).

Method of Assessment

There will be no exam. Instead, you will be required to complete two assignments:

1) 33% of the grade – a 2-2,500 word paper, in which you critique the research design of a recent article in a top political science journal (e.g. APSR, BJPS, AJPS, EJPR, CPS etc.). Your choice of article must be approved by SH or PM. Two copies of your paper must be submitted before the end of week 8. You should also attach copies of the original article. Submit to the general office (H318) and get a receipt.

2) 67% of the grade – a 4-5,000 (maximum) word paper, in which you evaluate the existing research in a particular area of political science, AND suggest how the research agenda can be taken forward (i.e. this could be used as a draft of some of the elements of your Research Prospectus). This paper must be submitted at the end of the first week of the summer term. Again, two copies and submit to H318.
Seminars Topics and Schedule

All seminars are on Thursdays 1-3 pm, Room A379 (Third Floor, Main Building).

1. (a) Course set-up and introduction
   (b) Research Questions (SH)
2. Theory Construction (SH)
3. Inference (PM)
4. Case Studies and ‘Small-N’ Research (PM)
5. Mixed Methods (PM)
6. Experiments and Quasi-Experiments (SH)
7. Evaluating Research Articles 1: Qualitative and Comparative
8. Evaluating Research Articles 2: Quantitative
9. Presentations by MRes researchers of their research design
10. Presentations by MRes researchers of their research design

References in the Reading List

There is no set text. But as on-going political science professionals you will probably find it useful to have copies of the first three books listed.


1. Research Questions

Issues
- How do I pick a research question?
- Should I look carefully for a ‘gap’ in existing knowledge, if so how?
- Or can I allow myself to be motivated by my fascination about a particular topic?

Essential Reading
GEDDES chapter 1 (‘Research Design and the Accumulation of Knowledge’) and chapter 2 (‘Big Questions, Little Answers: How the Questions You Choose Affect the Answers You Get’).

KKV chapter 1 (‘The Science in Social Science’)

2. Theory Construction

Issues
- What is a ‘theory’, and why is it necessary? What does it do for us?
- What makes a good theory – explaining everything poorly vs. explaining a few things well
- Different types of theories.

Essential Reading

Goertz, Gary (2008), ‘Concepts, Theories and Numbers...’, in OXFORD HANDBOOK.

Additional Reading
3. Inference

Issues
- Is there a useful distinction between quantitative and qualitative research, or between an inductive and a deductive logic of inquiry?
- Descriptive and explanatory inference, causality and uncertainty.
- ‘The content is the method’. In other words, social science, indeed all science, depends primarily on its rules and methods, not on its ‘subject’ matter.
- What is inference and why is it so important? What is causal inference?
- Does a Case Study really deserve to be called a ‘comparative’ method?
- Problems of Selection Bias. Especially in qualitative (small n) research, the decision as to which cases, observations or countries to include is often crucial, indeed may even determine, the results that we get.

Questions
1) ‘The only reliable method of making gains in knowledge and social progress is through scientific enquiry. Anything else is just chat.’ Discuss.
2) ‘You can’t prove anything with a case-study.’ Examine the advantages and the disadvantages of case-study research.
3) How can we best ensure that our results are not merely an artefact of the cases that we chose?

Essential Reading
KKV, ch. 2-3 - ch. 3. ‘Causality’ and ‘Casual Reasoning’ are difficult topics both in social scientific and philosophical accounts of established knowledge. There is no settled consensus. Ch 3 presents KKV’s counterfactual definition of causality. This is not an easy chapter but it is worth reading carefully. In general, KKV is an excellent text on scientific approaches to social inquiry. Note, however, that we do not present it as a bible or other sacred text. Many political scientists contest aspects of KKV’s book (e.g. the symposium in APSR 89:2, see below).

B&C, ch’s 1, 2 & 13 (‘Sources of Leverage in Causal Inference: Toward an Alternative View of Methodology’).

Additional Reading
Brady, ‘Causation and Explanation in Social Science’, pp.217-71 in OXFORD HANDBOOK.
American Political Science Review 89:2 (June 1995), 454-81. Five other political scientists review different parts of KKV’s book and then KKV respond.

From the philosophical literature see also:
Chalmers (1999), ch. 4 (‘Deriving Theories from the Facts: Induction’)
4. Case Studies and ‘Small-N’ Research

Issues
- The logic of comparative enquiry. In principle anything could be compared with anything. In practice some comparisons are likely to be better than others, in the sense of producing meaningful non-obvious findings.
- Compare what? The need to segment before comparing. The choice of countries: which countries?; how many countries or cases? Most common choices: binary comparisons; comparing ‘similar’ countries; comparing ‘contrasting’ countries; asynchronic comparisons.

Essential Reading


Additional Readings
Gerring, John (2008), ‘Case-Selection for Case Study Analysis: Qualitative and Quantitative Techniques’, in OXFORD HANDBOOK.
Fearon, James and Davis Laitin (2008), ‘Integrating Qualitative and Quantitative Methods’, in OXFORD HANDBOOK.
5. Mixed Methods

The decisions that we make at the research design stage in very general terms (concerning questions and case selection, treatments, type of inference etc) imply different explicit methods.

Essential Reading


Additional Reading


6. Experiments and Quasi-Experiments

Issues
- what is the difference between a ‘field experiment’ and a ‘lab experiment’ in political science?
- what is a ‘quasi-experiment’ in political science?
- what is the nature of causality in experimental research as opposed to standard quantitative methods?
- how can experimental research be combined with large-n probabilistic methods (e.g. OLS regression)?

Essential Reading

Morton, Rebecca & Kenneth C. Williams, ‘Experimentation in Political Science’, in OXFORD HANDBOOK.

Gerber, Alan S. & Donald P. Green, ‘Field Experiments and Natural Experiments’, in OXFORD HANDBOOK.

Additional Reading


7. Evaluating Research 1: Qualitative and Comparative Research

Note that applies to weeks 7-8. At the prior weeks class we will select three articles to be evaluated the following week, and divide you into teams of 3 (i.e. 3x3). Each team will present one article – and critique it from a research design and substantive point of view. We will discuss how to do this. Overheads and/or power point can be used and each team member must present a section of the presentation – ie. no non-presenters! The presentation of a paper should not exceed 15mins.

*** Please note that although each team will present only one article, all of us must read all three articles for each week.

Examples of Qualitative/Quantitative Research (others will be added and we will collectively select the articles for review this year)
Carol Mershon (1996), ‘The Costs of Coalition: Coalition Theories and Italian Governments’, APSR 90:3, pp.534-54. (a case study that uses quantitative data, but nothing more data analytic than percentages!).
Arend Lijphart (1996), ‘The Puzzle of Indian Democracy: A Consociational Interpretation’, APSR 90:2, pp.258-268. [not sure about this one – in one sense the article is crap!]
Ian Lustick, Dan Miodownik and Roy Eidelson (2004), ‘Secessionism In Multicultural States: Does Sharing Power Prevent or Encourage it?, APSR 98:2, 209-230 (addresses small-N / Large-N issues and one of the first examples of agent-based modeling in a big-time, mainstream poli sci journal. Read it in colour!).
8. Evaluating Research 2: Quantitative Research

Issues
- What are the pros and cons of large-n statistical research?
- How applicable are statistical methods in comparative political analysis?
- Things To Avoid! (indeterminate research designs; dependent variables that are not dependent!; measurement error; bias; endogeneity etc)
- E.g. Problems of Endogeneity. This is the problem of ambiguous directions of causality. In other words, since most political research is not genuinely experimental, we usually cannot manipulate or alter our ‘independent’ (explanatory) variables. Our inability to do this leads to the problem of endogeneity, that is, that the values of our explanatory variables are sometimes a consequence, rather than the cause of, our dependent variable

Reading
PETERS chpt 9 (‘Statistical Analysis’).

Examples of Quantitative Research (others will be added and we will collectively select the articles for review this year)
We will probably review three articles each week, in teams of two or three.

9-10. Presentations by the Researchers
A first chance to present the research ideas you have for your PhD.