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Office Hours: by appointment

Political Science 495: Research Design and Methods

Course Overview:

The course is designed to provide students with analytical skills for evaluating and carrying out research about social phenomena, particularly in political ones. Put differently, the course will help students discriminate between good and bad research.

Many aspects of political science pose important questions that, in principle, have a correct answer. Research on campaign finance investigates whether restrictions on spending or raising money affect the quality of representation. Students of electoral laws typically ask whether certain types of rules (e.g., the district magnitude) affect the number and character of parties contesting elections and holding office. International relations scholars ask how and to what extent alliance agreements prevent conflict. Such questions have attracted multiple—often conflicting—answers. Which answer is correct? And, for questions that are yet unexplored, how do we construct research so that we are likely to find the correct answer (or at least avoid reaching a wrong conclusion)?

The skills developed here are critical to conducting original research and thus an important foundation for writing a thesis. A convincing thesis must present original research that persuasively supports a theoretical model. To do that, a scholar must correctly evaluate existing research on the topic – determining a place for an original and valuable contribution. He or she must also work diligently to assure that there is no disjuncture between the theory posed and the empirics conducted (it's harder than you might think!). The empirics conducted must involve not only the appropriate data but an appropriate analysis of it. Finally, the scholar must then provide a compelling interpretation of the results to justify the contribution of the thesis.

After starting out with a couple of “big picture” overview sessions, the syllabus is laid out in somewhat chronological order – chronological in the sense of when you will confront certain challenges during the process of carrying out an original research project. Of course, every project is unique and some challenges never emerge in a serious way while others thrust themselves upon the researcher at an unexpected point. In other words, be prepared for the unexpected!

Readings:

There are two required book in the course.

Kellstedt, Paul M., and Guy D. Whitten. 2013. *The Fundamentals of Political Science Research*, (2nd ed.) New York: Cambridge University Press.

King, Gary, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba. 1994. *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

The Kellstedt and Whitten book has problem sets in it that we will frequently make use of during class. So, please bring it with you.

Occasionally, I will provide you with or direct you to additional readings beyond these two books.

The Team:

I have the good fortune of being assisted by a couple of people this semester. Ms. Elif Ozdemir (eozdemir@wustl.edu) and Mr. Joan Barcelo Soler (joanbarcelosoler@wustl.edu) are graduate students in our Ph.D. program. They will help me prepare lecture materials, develop assignments, and evaluate your work.

Tasks:

You must keep up with the reading assignments, and they are detailed below. Readings and class discussions will often be quite distinct — so, one cannot be substituted for the other. Also, plan ahead because the length of reading assignments varies quite widely across class sessions. I sought to avoid this whenever possible. However, in order to cover the material in the class sessions provided, some imbalances were unavoidable. Readings also vary in their “density”. So, do not leave the readings to the last minute unless you have already gauged their length and the degree of re-reading they will require.

Participation (10% of your final grade)

I strongly encourage you to participate during class. I would like to lecture as little as possible. Of course, you have to be here to participate, and missing one class in this format is the same as missing a week’s worth of classes in any other format. Don't hesitate to ask questions or to offer relevant points of observation. My evaluation of your participation will constitute

Problem Sets and In-Class Exercises (25% of your final grade)

We have several problem sets and in-class activities (and perhaps occasional out-of-class activities) planned for the semester, and your successful completion of these will be essential. Each one will be designed to give you hands-on experience in dealing with some concrete, finite aspect of the research (and publication) process.

Design Critique (25% of your final grade)

You will need to collect four to six articles that all treat the same testable question and critique their research designs. You should select pieces that vary in their designs but reflect the state of study on the question at hand. I expect these articles to come from very well-regarded, refereed journals.

Books and book chapters may be acceptable under rare circumstances. Reading lists must be approved by Wednesday, March 1 (at the absolute latest) and the review is due Wednesday, March 22. Plan to give a 15 minute presentation of your critique and to field questions about it from the your peers, the TAs, and me for approximately 5 to 10 minutes.

Your critique should cover the clarity of the research question(s) posed, the operationalization of concepts, sampling decisions, data gathering techniques, analytical tools, and findings. These topic areas are central to the course and will become clearer to you as the semester progresses. See the elements of a research design listed below for other issues you may wish to consider in your critique.

You might want to look ahead to the research design assignment detailed below as you choose your topic. The research design will require a short literature review, and this assignment could be the forerunner to that review.

Research Design (40% of your final grade)

Select a problem or puzzle that is amenable to empirical investigation and write a formal proposal for studying this question. Choose any topic of interest to you, but it must be “political”. Think ahead. Most, if not all of you, have major research papers as part of your degree requirements, and this assignment should be seen as an opportunity to do the groundwork for such an effort – even as a precursor to your thesis.

In writing your proposal, take care to relate the readings and lectures to your specific project. While not an exhaustive list, be sure to consider the elements below in your design:

- a. Make sure the research question is stated clearly. Define and develop all the concepts involved, including consideration of the values the concepts can take across time and place. Be explicit about the hypothesized relationships among the variables you include.
- b. Briefly review the existing literature, especially in regard to the research designs employed.
- c. Explain very carefully how you will move from conceptual dimensions to concrete indicators — operationalization. Why are these good indicators and what are their possible pitfalls? Discuss their reliability and validity.
- d. What is your unit of analysis and how will you choose your cases? Given this sample, how generalizable will your findings be?
- e. Where will you find the indicators of your concepts? What or who will be your sources and how will you gather your data? Be sure to explore the reliability and validity issues inherent in your data gathering techniques.
- f. Describe how you would anticipate analyzing such data once it is collected.

Remember, this is a formal proposal for research. You will not do the actual data collection nor the data analysis (at least not for this class). However, you will have to show that what you propose would be realistic for a senior thesis. Assume that you will be submitting this proposal to a potential funding agency and that you will be funded to carry out the work. Be thorough and anticipate any criticisms of your proposal knowing that it would be read by a review board of experts in your field.

Proper documentation in the current APSA style is required. The final proposal should not exceed approximately 20 double-spaced pages (1” margins, ≥ 10 pt. font, etc.). A complete, polished draft is due Wednesday, April 26. Again, plan to give a 15 minute presentation of your research design and to field questions about it from the your peers, the TAs, and me for approximately 5 to 10 minutes.

This class is designed to encourage you to work steadily during the course of the semester. To do well 1) keep up with the readings, 2) come to class every day, 3) take good notes, 4) participate in the discussions, 5) seek out assistance at the first sign of difficulty, and 6) start preparing for known due dates as early as possible. If you shirk the regular reading assignments and class attendance or try to cram your work into short time periods, you will probably have a difficult time.

Additional Policies

Please read these additional policies carefully. They will govern various aspects of how the class will function this semester.

One-on-One Consultation. I strongly encourage you to stop by frequently to see me about the course. Just send me an e-mail, and we will find a mutually convenient time to get together. Staying engaged with the course materials and getting informal feedback at regular intervals will have a big impact on your performance on the required assignments.

Due Dates. Due dates are detailed in the syllabus. If you foresee a conflict with some due date, see me immediately to talk about options, if I can offer any. I do not grant last-minute exceptions, and I will penalize any late work severely.

Technology. Turn off your smartphone, tablet, etc. when you enter the room. Put it out of your own sight and out of mine. I am going to allow the use of laptops on a provisional basis. Your laptop should not be connected to the internet during class, and the only application that should be open is one used for note taking. Exceptions will be made as part of in-class exercises. Students who are repeatedly disruptive to my train of thought or to the focus of their fellow students will be administratively dropped from the course. I reserve the right to ban laptops all together should their use become a problem.

Special Accommodations. If you require any, set up a time to meet with me early in the semester so that I can make sure your needs are met.

Academic Integrity. Plagiarism, cheating, misrepresenting one's identity, etc. will not be tolerated. Please review the university's policies in this regard at:
<http://www.wustl.edu/policies/undergraduate-academic-integrity.html>.

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS AND READINGS

WEDNESDAY 1/18 – Political *Science*

KW 1-21

KKV 3-33

WEDNESDAY 1/25 – Effective Research

KW 273-293

*Johnson, Reynolds, Mycoff 584-604

WEDNESDAY 2/1 - Theory Building

KW 24-47

KKV 99-114

WEDNESDAY 2/8 – Descriptive Inference & Causal Inference

KW 51-66

KKV 34-99

WEDNESDAY 2/15 – Overview of Empirical Approaches

*Barakso, Sabet, and Schaffner 83-176

WEDNESDAY 2/22 – More on Large-N Observational Studies

KW 69-90

KKV 168-207

WEDNESDAY 3/1 – Measurement

KW 92-126

KKV 150-168

WEDNESDAY 3/8 – Direct Observation, Interviews, Surveys, and Sampling

*Johnson, Reynolds, and Mycoff 212-267, 294-347

SPRING BREAK

WEDNESDAY 3/22 – Research Design Critiques

WEDNESDAY 3/29 – Probability and Statistical Inference

KW 129-143

KKV 115-149

WEDNESDAY 4/5 – Beyond Regression with Observational Data

*Dunning 39-102

WEDNESDAY 4/12 – Experiments: Laboratory and Field

*Samii 94-105

*McDermott 31-61

*Green and Gerber 95-112

*Rooij, Green, and Gerber 389-95 (skim)

*Hyde 403-424 (skim)
*Grose 355-370 (skim)

WEDNESDAY 4/19 – Quantitative Methods
KW 145-270

WEDNESDAY 4/26 – Research Designs