Methods for Field Research
GOVT 6523, Fall 2009
Mondays 7:30-9:25pm, White Hall B14
http://blackboard.cornell.edu

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Office hours: Wed 2-4 or by appointment

Overview. This graduate seminar introduces students to methods currently used by political scientists to develop and test for observable implications of theoretically-derived arguments using data collected in the field. The course is designed primarily for students working on dissertation proposals or early stages of dissertation field research, but may be helpful for students at other stages as well. A goal is to encourage students to specify a field research strategy that links testable hypotheses with methods of data gathering and analysis before commencing field work. Students, therefore, will develop their own research projects as the semester progresses.

Course Requirements. The requirements of the course are fivefold.

- You are required to attend all class meetings, to come to seminar having read and thought about the assigned material for the week, and to participate actively in class discussions.
- For three of the weeks in which empirical work is presented (class 4-10, 12), you must submit a 1-2 page analysis of one of the empirical papers or books assigned that week. The analysis should, at a minimum, (1) briefly summarize the puzzle, central hypothesis or causal proposition, and the proposed mechanism that links cause to effect; (2) discuss how the author(s) operationalized the dependent and independent variables and assess the quality of evidence used; and (3) offer thoughts about additional empirical tests that might further prove or disprove the author’s core proposition by testing direct observable implications or indirect ones that follow from the logic employed. These papers must be e-mailed to me by Monday at 8:00 a.m. on the days they are assigned.
- Complete all eight research design assignments described below, and be prepared to discuss these ideas in class. Five of these eight assignments consist of 1-2 page written assignments.
- By the third meeting, I will divide the class into research support groups of 3-4 students. Read the five written assignments of the other members of your group as you receive them and e-mail constructive comments to at least two of them for each assignment. Alternatively, groups can choose to meet weekly and discuss each other’s ideas.
- Present to the class a 15 minute summary of your research question, theory and observable implications, and field research strategy.

Your memos and research design assignments will be assessed on the quality of thinking that went into the project, rather than the proposed theory.
Readings. Three books are available for purchase at the Cornell Bookstore, Kraftees, and online. All three are also on reserve in Olin Library. All others readings will be available via the GOVT 652 Blackboard site. The books are:


Weekly meetings and assignments

Class 1. August 31. Introduction


http://www.nd.edu/~apsacp/pdf/APSA-CP20Winter201999.pdf


Class 2. September 7. Theory and Field Research


Assignment #1: First, choose a puzzle (e.g., variation in outcomes across time or space, a Pareto sub-optimality, or a phenomenon that doesn’t “make sense” and you simply “don’t get”) that (a) you think is important; (b) you think our understanding of is inadequate; (c) you have an intuition of how to improve our understanding of; and (d) you believe it is possible to collect data with which to explore your intuition. Describe your puzzle without using jargon. Second, identify and briefly summarize at least one central hypothesis or causal proposition that you think might resolve this puzzle. State the proposition in a clear, testable and falsifiable form. A falsifiable proposition is one that can be shown to be wrong. If you can’t think of any evidence that would convince you that the proposition is wrong, you need to reformulate the proposition. If possible, render the proposition (and its falsifiability!) in a diagram or equation or both. Be clear about the mechanism that links the cause (independent variable(s)) and effect (outcomes you are trying to explain). E-mail me a 1-2 page summary by 8 a.m., September 7; be prepared to briefly describe your puzzle in seminar.

Class 3. September 14. Choosing what to observe

pp. 115-149.

pp. 86-150

pp. 89-129.


pp. 185-205.

pp. 67-72, 205-232.
Assignment #2: First, identify several (or, ideally, as many as possible…) direct observable implications of the proposition that you wish to test and indirect ones that follow from the logic employed. Second, identify the types of data you will need to confirm or disconfirm your hypothesis. What would be ‘ideal’ data to assess your conjectures? Describe as completely as possible the data you will need to gather and how you plan to collect it. Third, identify cases that you will use to test the observable implications of your theory. Think about what cases(s), different from the one that informed your initial intuition, would be most productive to study in greater depth to add confidence that your proposition is correct or incorrect. E-mail me and your group a 1-2 page summary by 8 a.m., September 14.

Class 4. September 21. Ethnography and Participant Observation

pp. 342-386 (Chapter 13)

pp 1-38, 142-168 (Chapters 1, 2, & 6)


All (focus on the field data and methods)

pp. 249-293.

Class 5. September 28. Interviews

pp. 210-250 (Chapter 9).


pp. 1-87, 193-256 (focus on the author’s research strategy)


Further reading

**Assignment #3:** Choose one or more of the cases identified in assignment #2. For that case, develop a research strategy employing participant observation or interview techniques or both to gather data to test observable implications of your theory. Your written research strategy should include: (1) a list of the ‘types’ of respondents (and, if possible, the specific respondents) you will need to observe or speak with; (2) a list of questions that you will need to have answered, either from behavioral observation or through face-to-face interviews; and (3) a discussion of how these data will help you to accept or reject competing theories. E-mail me and your group a 1-2 page summary by 8 a.m., September 28.

**Class 6. October 5. Surveys**


Further reading

No class. October 12. Fall Break.

Class 7. October 19. Sub-national data collection


Assignment #4: Outline a ‘large-n’ dataset that would produce some statistical test of your theory using survey or sub-national data. Develop a research strategy for building this dataset. Describe the hypotheses amenable to quantitative tests and how the data gathered would allow you to assess those hypotheses. If appropriate, outline a strategy to collect those data in the field. E-mail me and your group a 1-2 page summary by 8 a.m., October 19.

Class 8. October 26. Field Experiments


Further reading


Assignment #5 (option a): Write a 2-3 page memo describing a lab or field experiment that could be used to put some aspect of your theory or the mechanisms underlying it to an empirical test. E-mail it to me and your group by 8 a.m., October 26.
Class 9. November 2.  GIS and ‘space’


Assignment #5 (option b): Write a 2-3 page memo describing a spatial dataset that could be used to put some aspect of your theory or the mechanisms underlying it to an empirical test. Consider how such data might be acquired or collected in the field. E-mail it to me and your group by 8 a.m., November 2.

Class 10. November 9.  Student symposium or ‘There and Back Again’

Guests TBA


Further reading

Assignment #6: Pick a country in which you could do field research for your project and write at least 3 pages listing or describing practical and logistical issues that you might face. These might include identifying and entering specific sites, setting up to live and work, acquiring research permissions, funding concerns and preparations to take your family to the field. If possible, identify at least three other scholars who have worked in that country and see if their books or dissertations contain logistical information that might help you cope with these issues. This assignment is for your own reference and is not to be submitted.


http://www.africanstudies.org/?page=guidelines_2005

http://www.aaanet.org/committees/ethics/ethcode.htm

Familiarize yourself with Cornell University’s Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects.
http://www.irb.cornell.edu/
Complete the Training Program for Researchers in the Use of Human Participants.
http://www.irb.cornell.edu/training/

http://www.springerlink.com/content/jt78830st71u7187/fulltext.pdf

http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/12/18/061218fa_fact2


Asher, Thomas. n.d. “Making Sense of Minerva Controversy and the NSCC.”

SSRC page on “the Minerva Controversy”
http://essays.ssrc.org/minerva/


**Assignment #7:** First, complete Cornell’s Training Program for Researchers in the Use of Human Participants and, if appropriate for your project, draft an initial approval request and consent form or script. Second, write 2-3 pages on any ethnical or subject privacy concerns associated with one your previous assignments for this class. This assignment is for your own reference and is not to be submitted.

No class on November 23. To be rescheduled the week of November 30th.

**Class 12. November 30 and rescheduled session (date and time TBD). Project presentations.**


**Assignment #8:** Present a 15 minute summary of your research question, theory and observable implications, and overall field research strategy in class. Students should prepare transparencies, PowerPoint slides, or printed handouts for their presentation.