Political Science 816  
Empirical Methods of Political Inquiry: Qualitative

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Overview
This seminar explores a variety of research strategies available to students of politics, focusing on those that make use of empirical evidence but do not require quantification of data. The seminar is designed as a survey course. It exposes students to a wide range of methodologies but does not provide intensive training in any single approach. My hope is that participants (myself included) will leave the seminar with an expanded sense of the research strategies available to them, a deeper understanding of how to design and carry out qualitative research, a stronger grasp of the logics and priorities that distinguish alternative methodologies, and a sharpened capacity to read and evaluate the diverse scholarship produced in our discipline.

The readings and assignments for this course emphasize three goals. First, students should leave the course with a working knowledge of alternative strategies for qualitative research design, data collection, and data analysis. By comparing these approaches to one another, as well as to relevant quantitative methodologies, we will try to clarify the specific possibilities and problems that each may hold for particular types of projects. Second, this seminar offers an opportunity to discuss general issues related to the meaning, logic, and conduct of social science inquiry. Throughout the course, we will look beyond technical questions of method to underlying questions of methodology – questions related to epistemology, ontology, rhetoric, standpoint, interpretation, ethics, politics, concept and theory development, validity, inference, and so on. My own view is that these topics should concern researchers regardless of their choices among methods. Third, this course includes a significant “how to” component. No seminar discussion or practice exercise can fully prepare dissertators for their research experiences – or relieve them of their anxieties over what to do first (or next). But to put the matter bluntly, technique matters. I hope graduates of this class will enter their dissertations not only able to understand the logic of their chosen methodology, but also able to pursue the concrete steps needed to execute their methodology well. Toward this end, we will devote considerable time to the mundane but pivotal activities that researchers pursue as they put their research plans into practice.

Class Meetings
The course will be structured as a seminar. We will begin each session with open-ended discussion. Afterward, I will present some lecture material and pose some targeted questions for further discussion. For this format to work, you will need to read with a critical eye and think about how the readings relate to your substantive interests. Also, I invite you to think broadly about suitable topics for discussion. At root, this course is about the things social scientists do with their professional lives. Any issue related to this topic strikes me as fair game, and I hope we’ll spend some time addressing questions of professional development, ethics, grant seeking, public presentation, and so on. Finally, I want to stress the need for respectful but critical engagement with one another during seminar discussion. Each of us knows a different substantive area of research, and each of us is at a different point in our efforts to understand methodology. There is nothing wrong with asking simple questions or saying, “I don’t get it.” And it is
important for people to feel that they can take some risks in their seminar comments without risking personal humiliation in front of their classmates. Please do what you can to respond to one another in a constructive way that encourages future participation. On the other hand, please bear in mind that graduate seminars are places where you are expected to question one another’s ideas, state reasons for agreement or disagreement, and help one another learn. Some of my nicest colleagues are my toughest critics, and I am grateful for the kindness and respect they show as they challenge me, disagree with me, and teach me new tricks. Please be kind, but please don’t hesitate to disagree with one another.

Response Postings
During weeks 3 through 11, students in this course will write three brief response papers on assigned readings. You will be assigned to one of three groups, marked A, B, and C on the syllabus. For each of the relevant class meetings, students from one group will be responsible for writing essays and posting them to the class email list. When it is your group’s turn, you will need to post your essay to the list no later than 6pm the day before class. (Group assignments will be handed out in class. The relevant response group is indicated on the heading for each class meeting. You are responsible for keeping up with the dates on which your response essays are due.) Your postings will count toward seminar participation. Response postings should be approximately one page, single-spaced, and should offer critical engagement with the readings. I especially encourage postings that draw methodological readings into dialogue with substantive examples from the weekly reading or from your own subfield of study. The address for the class email list is polisci816-1-f05@lists.wisc.edu.

A few final notes on posting. First, please paste your essay into your email message rather than sending it as an attachment. Second, please bear in mind that the email list is a public academic forum. When posting messages, you should follow the same writing standards that you would expect to encounter in other academic settings. Third, I invite students to respond to postings and/or initiate other course-relevant conversations on the list. If we want, the listserv can function as a site for ongoing discussion between seminars. Finally, if you’d like to get feedback on your posting or discuss the issues you’ve raised, just drop by during office hours. I’m always happy to have one-on-one conversations.

Written Work
Students in this seminar are responsible for two major writing assignments.

The Midterm: The midterm will be a take-home essay exam. I will distribute it in class on Monday, October 24, and it will be due on Wednesday, November 2, at 4pm. One part of the exam will require you to work with a research question you develop in your own field. A second part will require you to evaluate a piece of empirical research that employs a research design covered in the first eight weeks of the course and that bases its primary conclusions on non-quantitative evidence. I recommend that you think about your research question and look around for a suitable article or book prior to the midterm, and I will be happy to assist you in any way I can. (Also, please note that your research question for the midterm must differ from the one we discuss for your “make your own project” project. See below.) The exam will be graded according to fairly conventional criteria, including the quality of the student’s arguments, ideas, writing, and comprehension of course material. But I want to underscore that this is a course exam. You should explicitly engage relevant readings, provide appropriate citations, explain how your approach draws on particular course materials, and clearly state your agreements and disagreements with the authors. Unless prior arrangements have been made, late papers will be penalized one grade level immediately, and then again for each 48 hours after the due date. For example, an “A” paper will be lowered to an “A/B” if turned in after 4:00pm on Wednesday, and then to a “B” after 4:00pm on Friday.

The “Make Your Own Project” Project: This assignment will require steady work throughout the semester. It is due on Thursday, December 8, at 4pm. You may choose one of two options.
The Research Design. Propose a thorough design for a do-able, dissertation-size research project on an important question in your field. Over the course of the semester, you should plan to have at least two one-on-one meetings with me. An early one to discuss your preliminary research question and explain its analytic and political significance, and a second one at mid-semester to discuss your review of relevant literature and your plans for a research design. Your full proposal (15 pages) should include a clear statement of your research question and its significance, a tightly focused review of relevant literature, a detailed description of your research strategy, a discussion of feasibility and ethics, and estimates of the project’s timetable and funding needs. A detailed set of instructions for this assignment will be handed out in class.

The Practicum: For a research question of your own choosing, collect and analyze four relevant “qualitative” observations. Your observations must include at least two different types of data, and at least one of your observations must be based on an in-depth interview or focus group. Prior to any observations, you should plan to have a one-on-one meeting with me to discuss your preliminary research question. For this meeting, you should bring a printed copy of your question, a plan for your four observations, and a preliminary draft of a consent letter soliciting participation. At mid-semester, we should meet again to go over your draft protocol for an interview or focus group. You should give me a copy of your protocol a few days in advance of our meeting so that I can prepare comments. The final report on your practicum should include (a) a statement of your research question and its significance, (b) a substantive analysis of what you’ve found, (c) a comparative evaluation of your methods, and (d) a critical evaluation of your efforts to employ them. In an appendix, you should provide your consent letter, your interview or focus-group protocol, and any transcripts, fieldnotes, or document summary sheets used in your analysis.

Grades
Response Papers Counted toward participation
Project Meetings Counted toward participation
Seminar Participation 10%
Midterm Exam 40%
“Make Your Own Project” Project 50%

Readings
This course has a heavy reading load, so it’s important that you read in a purposive manner. All packet readings are available in the Joel Dean Reading Room; many can be obtained from the UW Library’s electronic databases. The following required books are available for purchase at Underground Textbooks.


I. Commonality and Difference in Social Science

Week 1, Sept. 12
Social Science, Qualitative Research, and Statistical Templates
What Is “Social Science”? How Does One Make a “Scholarly Contribution”?

What Makes Qualitative Research “Scientific”: Views from the Top

The Diversity of Positivist Perspectives on Qualitative Research


Week 2, Sept. 19
Interpretive and Critical Approaches
Interpretive Research

Critical Research
Frances Fox Piven. Forthcoming. “From Public Sociology to Politicized Sociologists.”
Examples: Read Piven & Cloward plus Barnett OR Wedeen
II. Research Designs as Analytic Frameworks

Week 3, Sept. 26: Group A

Cases as a Basis for Concept, Model, and Theory Development


Examples: **Read Two, Skim One**


Week 4, Oct. 3: Group B

Cases as a Basis for Analyzing Causal Mechanisms and Constitutive Relations

Causal Processes and Mechanisms


Constitutive and Relational Analyses


Examples


Week 5, Oct. 10: Group C

Historical Analysis: Timing & Sequence, Process & Narrative, Critique & Praxis

Timing, Sequence, and Causal Inference


Narrative and Process Tracing


Histories of the Present: Critique and Praxis

Week 6, Oct. 17: Group A
**Comparing Cases I: Variables, Correlations, and Logics of Control**

Examples: **Read Two, Skim One**

Week 7, Oct. 24: Group B
**Comparing Cases II: Configurations, Typologies, and Logics of Conjunction**

Examples

Week 8, Oct. 31: Group C
**Comparing Cases III: Time, Space, and Narrative in Comparative Historical Analysis**


Alternative Approaches to Comparing Historical Narratives

III. Varieties of Qualitative Evidence, Processes of Acquiring Them

**Week 9, Nov. 7: Group A**

**Entering the Field: Purposes, Identities, Experiences, and Ethics**

**Research Ethics (and Politics)**
Jim Thomas et al. 1996. Symposium on Ethics and Research in Cyberspace (selected articles). *The Information Society.* 12: 107-17 (Thomas); 119-27 (King); 129-39 (Waskul and Douglass); 175-87 (Allen).

Complete the University’s online Human Subjects Training Module (requires approx. 1 hour)

**Week 10, Nov. 14: Group B**

**Being There: Participant Observation**

**Examples:** Read Two, Skim One
Week 11, Nov. 21: Group C

Say What? Interviews & Focus Groups

In-Depth Interviews.


Focus Groups


Examples: Read Two, Skim One


Week 12, Nov. 28

Reading Residues: Documents and Other Social Artifacts


Examples


IV. Data Analysis, Writing, and the Big Picture

**Week 13, Dec. 5**

**Data Analysis**

Analyzing Patterns, Categories, and Meanings

Analyzing Narratives: Rhetorical and Causal Approaches

Analyzing Discourses

**Week 14, Dec. 12**

Analysis More Broadly Conceived: What are You Really Trying to Do with Your Research?

**Week 15, TBA**

Writing and Doing Social Science in the Dissertation and Beyond