

PS2325F: Research Design in Political Science

Department of Political Science – Western University, Fall 2023
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Course description

This course introduces students to basic concepts and methods of research in the social sciences and, in particular, in political science. Students will learn about how the scientific method of research can be applied to the study of human behaviour, adopting both qualitative or quantitative methods of analysis. In the first part of the course, students will learn about how to identify research questions and conduct literature reviews. In this same section, we will discuss questions related to research ethics and how such concerns can affect the kinds of questions one can ask and how other questions can be answered empirically. Next, we will discuss questions related to argumentation. These include defining clear concepts of interest and proposing strong arguments for building theories that will subsequently be evaluated with data. The following section covers how researchers go about choosing among methods of analysis and how cases are selected to adequately evaluate their research questions. Finally, the course will cover a series of commonly used qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis, including interviews, focus groups, surveys, and experiments.

Required course text

Brancati, D. 2018. *Social Scientific Research*. Sage. (hereafter Brancati)

Course objectives

- Explain the goals, subjects, and orientation of social science research; identify the steps in the scientific method;
- Present the ethical concerns surrounding the use of human subjects; detail the ethical issues regarding publication like transparency, credit stealing and others;
- Introduce criteria for identifying a good research topic; identify ways research can make theoretical and empirical contributions; suggest ways to find inspiration for research;
- Describe the purpose and content of a literature review; discuss how to summarize and synthesize research for a literature review;
- Define concepts and their importance to research; describe the steps involved in building effective concepts;
- Differentiate between deductive and inductive reasoning; define necessary, sufficient, and (neither) necessary and (nor) sufficient conditions; examine different directions through which explanatory factors influence outcomes; identify common mistakes in causal arguments;
- Describe the attributes of qualitative and quantitative research; define hypothesis building, hypothesis testing, causal inference, generalizability, and replicability;

- Develop an objectives-based typology of mixed methods research designs; compare and contrast each of the objectives presented in this typology, namely design, concatenation, gap-filling, triangulation, and interpretation;
- Discuss why and how the number of cases included in a study matters; define and describe random and non-random sampling methods; explain selection bias and the problems that it represents for research;
- Differentiate among types of interview and interview modes; describe the strengths and weaknesses of interviews for theory building and theory testing;
- Discuss the utility of focus groups for hypothesis building and hypothesis testing;
- Identify different types of measures according to their response categories; describe the criteria used to evaluate measurement quality; define random and systematic measurement error and the problems each represent for research;
- Compare and contrast observational and non-observational data; provide criteria with which to evaluate data quality and present techniques for identifying high quality data;
- Identify the different types of surveys used in social science research; provide guidance on designing survey questionnaires; identify types of survey modes and their appropriateness for certain respondents;
- Identify the different types of experiments used in social science research; discuss the strengths and weaknesses of experiments vis-à-vis other research methods; present the criteria commonly used to evaluate the quality of experiments;
- Define the key features of observational studies; present the advantages and disadvantages of observational studies vis-à-vis other research methods; discuss the difficulty of causal inference in observational studies and the techniques available to address it.

Student assessment

Students will be assessed through 6 assignments (each worth 5% of the final grade), a midterm (30%) in class **on October 24**, and a final exam (35%) **during the final exam period (time and day to be determined)**. Assignments will be posted on OWL. No late assignments will be accepted.

Class attendance is mandatory. Attendance will be taken in the first few minutes of class. If you arrive late, you will be automatically marked as absent—it is then your responsibility to notify the TAs or instructor at the end of the lecture. Each student is allowed one unexcused absence, beyond which each additional unexcused absence will be penalized by 1%, up to a total of 5%.

Due dates for assignments

- #1: September 19, 11:55pm;
- #2: October 3, 11:55pm;
- #3: October 24, 11:55pm;
- #4: November 21, 11:55pm;
- #5: November 28, 11:55pm;
- #6: December 5, 11:55pm.

Topics and readings

Week #1 (September 12): Course Introduction

- Review of syllabus and class organization.
- ◇ Chapter 1 *What is Social Science Research?*

Week #2 (September 19): Research Ethics

- ◇ Chapter 2 *Research Ethics*

Week #3 (September 26): Research Questions and Literature reviews

- ◇ Chapter 3 *Identifying a Research Question*
- ◇ Chapter 4 *Conducting a Literature Review*

Week #4 (October 3): Argumentation

- ◇ Chapter 5 *Building Effective Concepts*
- ◇ Chapter 6 *Making Strong Arguments*

Week #5 (October 10): Method Selection and Mixed Methods Research

- ◇ Chapter 7 *Method Selection*
- ◇ Chapter 8 *Mixed Methods Research*

Week #6 (October 17): Case Selection

- ◇ Chapter 9 *Case Selection*

Week #7 (October 24): In-class Midterm Exam

Week #8 (October 31): NO CLASS: Fall break reading week

Week #9 (November 7): Interviews and Focus Groups

- ◇ Chapter 10 *Interviews*
- ◇ Chapter 11 *Focus Groups*

Week #10 (November 14): Quantitative Measures and Data

- ◇ Chapter 15 *Quantitative Measures*
- ◇ Chapter 16 *Quantitative Data*

Week #11 (November 21): Surveys

- ◇ Chapter 18 *Surveys*

Week #12 (November 28): Experiments

- ◇ Chapter 19 *Experiments*

Week #13 (December 5): Observational Studies

- ◇ Chapter 20 *Observational Studies*