Scope and Methods in Political Science
PS 9501a
University of Western Ontario
Fall 2019

Class Information:
Thursday 9:30am-11:30am
SSC 4255

Instructor Information:
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Office: ext. 85164
Office Hours: Thursday 1-3pm or by appointment

Course Description:
The objective of this course is to provide graduate students with an understanding of the fundamental principles that underlie research in political science. By the end of the course students will be able to recognize the value of different approaches, and will be able to critically evaluate the theories, empirical strategies, causal claims and validity of other research. The course will not cover every method or every approach, but by the end of the course each student will be better readers of research and will also have a better understanding of how to conduct an original research project.

Note:
One’s choice of approach, method and analysis can be controversial. Many supporters of specific methods are unsympathetic to others. This course endeavours to present an overview of the various approaches in political science. Thoughtful critiques of all methods will be encouraged. No one method is perfect; in fact, not all methods are equally appropriate, depending on the research question at hand. Students are expected to come into the course with an open mind and be prepared to learn, think, analyze, challenge, and come out with a much greater understanding of how research is conducted by political scientists.
Learning Objectives:

- This course will help you to understand the scientific method, why political science is a “science”, and also why many political scientists object to that characterization.
- By the end of this course, you should be able to identify and assess the positive and negative qualities of major approaches to the study of political problems.
- Through the topics covered, you will gain an appreciation of major issues related to research design.

Course Materials:

Required Books [PDFs may be available online]


Note: Readings not included in these books will be available electronically, either on the course OWL site or through one of the library’s databases. A search for the journal title on the main library site will usually turn up the electronic site.

Assignments:

Participation – 20%
Short Assignments – 40%
  1/ Approach Defense Paper - 20%
  2/ Article Theory and Causal Design Paper – 20%

Article Comparison – 40%
  1/ Proposal – 5%
  2/ Comparison Report – 35%

Participation:

All students are expected to be active participants in the class. This means being prepared by finishing the assigned readings, preparing at least three discussion questions for the week (to be posted on OWL by 5pm Wednesday before each class), and engaging in discussion.

Short Assignments (20% each)

Approach Defense Paper:

Students are expected to choose an approach covered in Week 3 and argue why they believe it is superior to the other approaches discussed that week for addressing their research interests. Students are required to discuss at least two alternative approaches to the one they prefer. This is intended to be a thoughtful reflection on what the student believes are the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches discussed through the lens of the student’s own research interests, drawing upon the course readings. The assignment should be at least 3 and no more than 5 pages in length (double-spaced) and is due on September 26.

Article Theory and Causal Design Paper:
This assignment has two parts.

1. Theory Analysis

Students are expected to find an article in a peer-reviewed, scholarly Political Science journal (for example, Canadian Journal of Political Science; American Political Science Review; American Journal of Political Science; Electoral Studies; International Organization; Journal of Politics; if you are unsure please ask the instructor) and analyze the theory design put forth by the author. As will be discussed in class, theories are made up of hypothesized relationships between components that lead to specific outcomes. Part of critically reading research is being able to understand the underlying theoretical structure.

2. Causality Study

Students must design a comparative study or experiment to identify causality in the theory put forth in the article. If the article already does this, the student is expected to design a different study. (If the article theory design topic is not appropriate, the student should consult with the instructor about an appropriate research question.) The paper should identify the cases or subjects to be studied, the variables that will be isolated and how that will be done, and how causality will be evaluated.

Papers are expected to be at least 3 and no more than 5 pages in length, and to include a diagram that clarifies the theory. Papers are due on October 31.

Article Comparison:

This is the major assignment of the course. The purpose of this assignment is to consider how approaches and methodology can affect research findings. Students are required to choose two academic articles from peer-reviewed publications that address the same research topic. Students must submit a proposal for approval that identifies the research topic and the two articles on November 14. The full assignment is due on December 5 (minimum 15 - maximum 17 pages, double-spaced). The assignment will have two parts. In the first part, students are expected to outline the methodological approaches used by the authors and compare and contrast their findings. In the second part, students are expected to use information learned in the course to consider how the methodology contributed to the similarities or differences in findings.
# Topics and Readings

## September 5
**Introduction**

- **September 12**
  - Is Political Science a science?
    - KKV, ch. 1.
    - Gerring, ch. 1.

- **September 19**
  - Approaches

- **September 26**
  - Research Questions and Theories
    - Approach Defense Paper Due
      - Gerring, chs. 2-4

- **October 3**
  - Description, Conceptualization and Measurement
    - Gerring, chs. 5-7.
    - KKV, chs. 2, 4-5

- **October 10**
  - Causality
    - Gerring, chs. 8, 9, 12
    - KKV, ch. 3

- **October 17**
  - Comparative Method and Experiments
    - KKV, ch. 6.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>October 24</th>
<th>NO CLASS. USE THE TIME TO WORK ON YOUR ARTICLE THEORY AND CAUSAL DESIGN PAPER.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>October 31</td>
<td>Process Tracing and Studying Cases Article Theory and Causal Design Paper Due</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 7</td>
<td>FALL BREAK – NO CLASS</td>
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<td>November 14</td>
<td>Qualitative Observational Data</td>
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<td>November 21</td>
<td>Quantitative Observational Data</td>
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<td>November 28</td>
<td>Ethics</td>
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| December 5 |
| Proposal Workshop |
| Article Comparison Due |

• Students will act as the audience while PhD students present their research proposals and receive prepared feedback from their discussant. Time for open discussion and questions from students will be set aside for each paper.