Course Description and Objectives:

The term ‘qualitative methods’ encompasses a wide variety of empirical research strategies in political science, ranging from historical documentary research to elite interviews and immersive ethnographic work. This course provides graduate students with an overview of the philosophical underpinnings and practical applications of a range of qualitative research practices.

The course aims to develop both theoretical understanding and practical research skills. By the end of the course, you will understand the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of different qualitative research approaches in political science. You will have a strong grasp of alternative logics of concept-formation, and an understanding of models of causation and issues of case selection associated with small-n research. Through reading, discussion, and hands-on assignments, you will learn about – and have an opportunity to apply – a variety of concrete data gathering techniques, including documentary research, interviews, and participant observation; and you will be introduced to practices in qualitative data analysis, including narrative analysis and basic principles of qualitative coding. Finally, you will understand how qualitative and quantitative approaches to political inquiry can be – and are being – brought together in the rapidly evolving practice of multi-method research in political science.

This course is wide ranging, but it is an introduction, and it is not comprehensive. We will discuss most of the commonly used qualitative methods, but others will be treated only in passing, if at all. In addition, the course focuses more on the logic and process of qualitative research, as well as on data collection techniques, than on analytical methods. Subjects that will not be addressed in detail include discourse analysis, set theory, Bayesian analysis, qualitative social media research, and computer-assisted qualitative text analysis (eg., NVivo). Week 12 of the course has been left open so that we can cover an additional subject of students’ choosing.
Course Materials:

Most of the course readings are available electronically through our library system or will be posted on the course OWL site. The one exception to this is the following book, which you can purchase online in paperback and a variety of digital formats (cost – about $20-$35):


In addition, I would strongly encourage you to consider purchasing one or more of the following texts, depending on your methodological interests – we will be reading substantial portions of each of these books in the course, and they are all useful reference volumes:


Format:

This will be a synchronous seminar-style class. We will meet on Wednesdays from 12:30 – 2:30 on Zoom, with a brief break half-way through class. Links to meetings will be posted on OWL. I will record our seminar sessions on Zoom and post them to our OWL site (accessible to class participants only), so that anyone facing a technical challenge or other legitimate problem with connecting synchronously can view the content asynchronously.

Our relatively small class size will give us the opportunity to have a true seminar-style discussion, which will be at the heart of the learning in this course. For this format to work well, you must come prepared having completed all the readings each week. The course is reading-intensive, so make sure that you budget time accordingly.

Each class (except the first one), will start with a brief readings commentary by one of you (see below). I will then present any material that I think requires presentation, and we will follow
with open discussion. In some weeks, guest experts on particular methods will join us for one of our two meeting hours.

Evaluation:

Seminar participation (15%)

You are all expected to be active, thoughtful and analytical participants in class discussion, and to come prepared with questions and insights on the reading material for each week.

Readings commentary (10%)

Each of you will choose a week (except the first week) that particularly interests you. You will:

a. Post two or three thoughtful discussion questions about the readings for that week on the “forums” section of our OWL site no later than Monday night.

b. Kick off our Wednesday seminar with a brief – 10 minutes maximum – oral commentary on the readings. You do not need to provide a written version. Your commentary should NOT be a summary of the readings – there is way too much material in each week for this! Instead, you will identify and briefly discuss two or three insights, concepts, arguments, issues, ideas, concepts, or controversies that you think are central to that week’s material. You can use PowerPoint if you want, but it’s not expected – what’s important is the substance of your commentary.

Methods training exercises (25% each – choose any three)

You will choose any three of the following assignments to complete, depending on your interests and schedule. The written product for each should be roughly 2500 - 3000 words long – I will be flexible with this. Full guidelines for each assignment will be distributed later.

1. Analysis of a concept. Choose a concept that is significant for your own research interests. Drawing on academic literature that uses the concept, as well as on discussions of conceptualization introduced in the readings for Week 2, analyse the structure and validity of the concept as it is currently used in the literature.

2. Methodological review of a work of comparative historical analysis. Choose a well-regarded comparative historical book from a list that I will provide. Write a methodological review, focusing on case selection and causal mechanisms arguments.

3. Interviewing a scholar. Choose a recent single-authored work of political science (article or book) that is based on empirical qualitative research. Conduct a semi-structured Zoom interview of no more than 30 minutes with the author of this work, in which you ask them about their methodological choices and research process. I will secure ethics approval for this assignment for the class, but it will be your responsibility to follow all approved procedures before, during and after the interview. You will use transcription software to transcribe the interview, and you will write a brief review of the
author’s work, drawing on and incorporating what you found out during your interview. You will submit both the transcription and the review.

4. **Observation of a political meeting.** Choose an upcoming online public meeting of a governmental decision-making body (a city council, legislature, special-purpose agency, etc.). Before the meeting, conduct documentary research on the mandate, procedural arrangements, and personnel of the body. Based on relevant academic literature and your documentary research, identify some concrete objectives for your observation and observe the meeting, taking field notes. Write up a brief narrative account and analysis. Submit both the field notes and the narrative account.

5. **Primary document analysis.** Identify a set of primary documents (archival memos and papers, transcripts of meetings by a decision-making body, etc.) that might provide insight into a research question that you are interested in. Read and qualitatively code the documents and write up a narrative analysis.

6. **Multi-method research design.** Choose a research question that interests you and that might be amenable to multi-method treatment. Develop a concise design document for the research, justifying your methodological choices, and discussing how the quantitative and qualitative elements of the research design relate to each other.

**Due dates and submission:**

Each of your three methods training exercises will be submitted on OWL. Each exercise is due two weeks after the relevant methodological material is discussed in our course, as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concept analysis</td>
<td>Feb 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHA book review</td>
<td>Feb 27</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interview with a scholar</td>
<td>Mar 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation of a meeting</td>
<td>Mar 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary document analysis</td>
<td>Apr 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-method design</td>
<td>Apr 14</td>
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**Instructor communication and flexibility:**

I fully understand that this is a difficult time for many students. If you are facing challenges with the material in this course, or if your personal circumstances are interfering with your ability to do your work, please do not hesitate to let me know. If you anticipate problems meeting deadlines, please let me know in advance and we will make reasonable accommodations.
POL 9593 Weekly Schedule

Week 1 (Jan 13): Situating ‘qualitative methods’: Questions, ontologies and the elements of research


- Read up to the start of the chapter outline for the rest of the book.


Week 2 (Jan 20): Concept formation as qualitative reasoning


- Review from Research Design course.


Week 3 (Jan 27): Small-n work and case studies: purposes, causalities, and case selection


- Read pages 17-34 only.


Further reading:


Week 4 (Feb 3): Comparative historical analysis: Foundations and causality


Further reading:

Chapters 2-5 and 7 of *Advances in Comparative-Historical Analysis* are all useful reading for those interested in comparative historical work.

**Week 5 (Feb 10): The design and practice of process tracing**


**Week 6 (Feb 24): Documents and archives: Researching the written record**


- Read Chapters 1 (“Introduction”), 3 (“Fundamentals”), and 7 (“Reading”).


Further reading:

The rest of *Digital Paper* is a very useful read - especially for those who expect to be working heavily with library-based sources, but in fact, for all researchers.

**Week 7 (Mar 3): Interview research**


   - Review from Research Design course.

   - Review from Research Design course.


Further reading:
Additional chapters of Interview Research in Political Science are useful for those who intend to conduct interviews in their research.

Recommended viewing:

Week 8 (Mar 10): Field research: Purposes and challenges

   - Read Chapters 1 (“Field research in political science: practices and principles”) and 11 (“The future of field research in political science”).


Week 9 (Mar 17): Participant observation and ethnography


Further reading:


Recommended viewing:

“Conducting Fieldwork Under COVID Constraints: Interpretive Approaches and Ethnography”. Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research Webinar, July 21, 2020: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BeOBLokYRnE

Week 10 (Mar 24): Approaches to qualitative data analysis

   - Read Chapter 9 (“Midphase Analysis”).

   - Read Ch 10 (“Coding and analyzing data in the field”) – read pp. 332-348 and skim the rest of the chapter.


Further reading:


**Week 11 (Mar 31): Multimethod research**


Further reading:


In addition, those interested in multi-method work should read more of *Multi-Method Social Science*.

**Week 12 (Apr 7): Students’ choice of material (to be determined)**