This course presents basic issues in empirical research in the social sciences. Classes will alternate between discussion of readings on approaches to empirical research and applied weeks, where students will present successive iterations of their own research in-progress. The research design topics I plan to cover will be generating observable implications of theory; case selection; collection of large-n observational and archival data; narrative case study; experiments and natural experiments; elite interviews; and participant observation. This list may be modified in light of students’ research interests.

Instructor

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Office hours: Wednesdays, 10-12

Course Requirements

1. Students must attend every class. A student who misses class must get in touch with me within 24 hours of the start of the missed class period and then complete a make-up assignment. Students who do not follow this procedure will have an unexcused absence.

2. Reading for the week must be completed by all students before class.

3. Additional readings are listed in some weeks under the heading “Reading for the comprehensive exam.” If a student plans to use this course in their comprehensive exams, this additional reading will need to be completed before the examination date.

4. Weekly assignments are noted below. All weekly assignments are due by noon the day before class. There will be a course Dropbox folder where you can post your assignments and access other students’ assignments. Late work will be marked down by one-third of a letter grade per 24 hour period of delay.

5. You must read other students’ assignments in advance of class and be prepared to offer comments and suggestions.

6. A research prospectus that sums up the work done throughout the semester on your research question will be due December 20th. The prospectus should update previous iterations of your project and respond to other students’ questions and criticisms. The prospectus will be
graded on the quality of thinking that went into the project, rather than the strength of the empirical results.

Class schedule

August 31: Introduction to the course

September 7: Labor Day, no class

September 14: Research questions

Assignment (due at noon the day before class):

Choose a research question from a literature within political science that you think is inadequately explained by existing theories. You should have an intuition on how to improve the state of this literature and believe there are (or it is possible to create) quantitative data with which to explore the existing theory/theories and your intuition for improvement.

You will be asked to make a brief in-class presentation of this research question. A written outline should be distributed to the group by noon the day before the class meeting to allow all members of the group to prepare comments, questions and suggestions on each others’ proposals.

September 21: Observable implications and case selection

Reading for the week:


To prepare for class:

In anticipation of class, consider the following questions. You do not need to hand in any written work before class.

- What is the universe of cases to which your theory is applicable?
- Write down as many observable implications of your theory as you can. Think about multiple levels of analysis (e.g., individuals, organizations, governments, countries, etc.) to increase the number of implications you can write down.
• Which observable implications are consistent with your theory but not with other theories relevant to your problem?
• Which case(s) could you use to study your theory in a large-n research design?
• What case(s) would lend themselves to narrative exploration of your theory?

Reading for the comprehensive exam:
Clarke, Kevin A. and David M. Primo. *A Model Discipline*. Oxford University Press.

September 28: Narratives
Collier, David D. 2011. “Understanding Process Tracing.” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 44 (4). [http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1049096511001429](http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1049096511001429)

Reading for the comprehensive exam:

October 5: Fall break, no class
October 12: Linking small-n and large-n observational research

Assignment (due at noon the day before class):

Read about a particular case (or a small set of cases) that instantiate(s) your theory. You should rely on books, articles, archives, newspapers, biographies, etc. Write a five-page memo on how the case(s) is (are) anomalous for reigning theory and suggest what variables might need to be added or substituted to do better than reigning theory. Again, papers should be distributed to the group by noon on the day before class to allow all members of the group to prepare comments, questions and suggestions on each others’ proposals.

Reading for the week:


October 19: Large-n observational research

Assignment (due at noon the day before class):

Search out a data set that would produce some statistical test of your theory or of an observable implication of your theory. Explore descriptive statistics to gauge the plausibility of your amendment to the reigning theory. Focus on statistical and graphical descriptions of the dependent variable and principal independent variables and on analysis of basic correlations. Presentation of regression results is optional, and will only be allowed once these basic descriptive statistics have been fully explored. Prepare a 15-minute presentation describing your statistical exploits to give in seminar. Circulate an outline of your statistical work, including all tables and graphs from your presentation, by noon the day before class.

October 26: Experiments and natural experiments


November 2: Experiments and natural experiments II

*Reading for the week:*


**November 9: Proposals for experimental or quasi-experimental research designs**

Write a five-page research memo describing:

- A lab, survey, or field experiment that could be used to test some aspect of your theory or the mechanisms underlying it.

- Ideas for what might constitute a natural experiment that would test your theory or mechanisms underlying it. Your explanation will identify a “treatment,” a (hypothetical or real) circumstance that might approximate random assignment to that treatment, and explain what outcome you would measure and what kinds of results would be evidence for and against your theory.

**November 16: Observational field methods**

*Reading for the week:*


*Reading for the comprehensive exam:*


**November 23: Thanksgiving break, no class**

**November 30: Fieldwork proposals**

*Assignment (due at noon the day before class):*

Develop a three-page research strategy employing field methods to gather data to test the implications of your theory. Your written research strategy should include three components: (1) a list of the “types” of respondents (and, if possible, specific respondents) you will need to observe or speak with and; (2) a list of questions that you will need to have answered, either from behavioral observation, surveys, interviews, etc. and; (3) a discussion of how this data will help you to accept or reject competing theories.

**December 1: Interpretative methods**

*Reading for the week:*


**December 8: Final presentations**

Prepare a 15-minute presentation of your research question, preliminary findings, and research strategy for the future. This presentation should update previous iterations of your project, responding to other students’ questions and criticisms. You do not need to circulate any material in advance of class.

**December 20: Final research prospectus due by 5pm**