QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS FOR POLITICAL SCIENCE
Political Science 816, Fall 2009
Tuesdays, 5:30–7:30, 422 North Hall

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The new orthodoxy holds that empirical research in political science engages the same basic methodological logic, whether the method is quantitative or qualitative. Yet, in confronting similar methodological issues, quantitative and qualitative researchers gather, manage, and analyze data differently. This course in qualitative empirical research for political science acknowledges the similarities but takes the differences seriously. For this reason, it departs somewhat from the usual seminar format: it does not assume that qualitative research methods can be learned without actual practice. Course participants do not simply read, discuss, plan, and write about qualitative research methods—they regularly apply these methods.

The rationale is obvious. Graduate courses in quantitative empirical research methods partner naturally with courses in statistical analysis. No worthwhile course in statistics assumes that lectures and reading material about statistical inference are adequate preparation for substantial original research that applies statistical methods to analyze data. Lacking such a natural partner, this course includes exercises in the use of qualitative research methods.

The course is organized around five broad topics: formulating a research question, designing research, collecting data, managing and analyzing data, and presenting findings. Research design and data collection are treated at greater length than the other topics. My aims are to introduce participants to a distinguished literature that considers and exemplifies these five topics and to engage participants in practical experience through rudimentary exercises in qualitative methods. Participants will gain the knowledge and skills to begin to apply relevant qualitative empirical methods to produce a high-quality research product from an original research question.

On the course Learn@UW site, you will find three documents that complement this syllabus: a list of exemplary works that apply qualitative research methods, useful links in the political science profession that are specifically related to qualitative research methods, and a list of field examination questions on qualitative research methods in recent years.

RESPONSIBILITIES AND BASIS FOR EVALUATION

In evaluating your performance, I consider your fulfillment of three responsibilities. First, it is your responsibility to attend class meetings prepared to discuss required reading materials and exercises knowledgeably and thoughtfully. If you fairly regularly fail to demonstrate fulfillment of this minimal responsibility, you thereby forfeit the opportunity to earn above a B grade in this course.
At the same time, with the recent emergence of H1N1 influenza A in this country, the University Health Services advises taking special precautions if you experience an influenza-like-illness, that is, a combination of a fever with either a cough or sore throat. If you experience these symptoms, please do not show up in class, but do notify me by e-mail. Consult H1N1 influenza updates on the university home page at [http://flu.wisc.edu](http://flu.wisc.edu) for further information. Consult the course Learn@UW site for news about how we will manage a situation that involves class cancellation.

Second, you are responsible for completing all required exercises and one of three elective exercises to make up 55 percent of your course grade. Written exercises are due in the course website dropbox at 12 midnight on the Monday–Tuesday before the relevant class meeting.

Finally, you are responsible for completing one of the following major assignments, due in the course website dropbox and in hard copy in my mailbox at 12 midnight on December 18–19 and accounting for 45 percent of your course grade. (1) Design a thoughtful, well-crafted proposal to conduct original empirical research that appropriately applies general principles and some qualitative methods treated in this course. (2) Select any five studies in the list of exemplary work in political science using qualitative methods and write a thoughtful, well-crafted paper that uses these works as a basis for devising a common set of methodological standards against which qualitative works on different subjects (and perhaps different fields) of political science may be usefully compared and evaluated. You may not select a study already selected for your December 8 assignment.

Required reading materials consist of all or much of the six books listed below, recommended for purchase, and articles and book chapters accessible electronically by logging on to the course website at Learn@UW.


**SCHEDULE**

September 8  
**What Is a Research Question? What Is Your Research Question?**  
- Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in

For further reading:

Required exercises:
1. In fewer than 250 words of clear and correct prose, explain, as best you can at this point in your intellectual career, the question you are most likely to investigate in your dissertation research. Include relevant context [5 points].
2. Be prepared to discuss a specific example of how any one social scientist arrived at what you think is a good research question she investigated or is investigating in a substantial empirical project. You may already have an example from previous reading material or from discussions with faculty or advanced graduate students.

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

September 15

**Descriptive and Causal Inference**

For further reading:

Elective exercise:
In fewer than 1500 words of clear and correct prose, summarize the relationship between descriptive and explanatory aims in investigating your research question [10 points].
September 22

**Conceptualization and Measurement**


For further reading:


**Required exercise:**

In fewer than 250 words of clear and correct prose, discuss your measures for a concept of importance to your own research [5 points].

September 29

**Natural Experiments**


For further reading:


For discussion:

What opportunities do you know of for a natural experiment in your broad area of intellectual interest?
October 6

**Case Study Method**


For further reading:

October 13

**Case Selection**


For further reading:

For discussion:
Evaluate Tsai’s (2002) case selection.

Elective exercise:
In fewer than 1500 words of clear and correct prose explain how the implications of Dion (1998) and Geddes (1990) regarding selection on the dependent variable can (or cannot) be reconciled [10 points].

October 20

**Process Tracing and Path Dependence**

For further reading:

For discussion:
Is process tracing the superior strategy for producing valid causal claims with qualitative research methods?

**DATA COLLECTION**

October 27

**Macro-Historical Comparison**


November 3

**Analytic Narratives**


November 10

**Interviews and Focus Groups**

For further reading:

Required exercise:
On your own or with one or more fellow students, prepare an interview protocol to investigate some specified research question, and conduct at least two semi-structured interviews each using this protocol. Keep your interview notes for the November 24 exercises. Place in the dropbox your research question and interview protocol. If this exercise is done as teamwork, I encourage you to organize one observed interview each, so that a fellow student can provide feedback on interview style [10 points].

November 17

**Participant Observation and Ethnographic Fieldwork**

For further reading:

November 24

**Data Management and Analysis**

For further reading:

Required exercises:
1. In fewer than 1500 words of clear and correct prose and drawing from your interview notes from the November 10 exercise, write up your preliminary findings without aid of computer software [5 points].
2. Code your interview notes from the November 10 exercise, using qualitative data analysis software. Be prepared to discuss your experience in class [5 points].

December 1

**Fieldwork and Mixed Methods**


For further reading:


Required exercise:
In fewer than 250 words of clear and correct prose, explain why investigation of your research question does (or does not) “require” fieldwork [5 points].

Elective exercise:
In fewer than 1500 words of clear and correct prose, summarize Rohlfing (2007) and discuss the implications of this work for concrete decisions on a mixed-method research strategy. Be prepared to present your report in class [10 points].

December 8

**What Makes A Qualitative Work in Political Science?**

Required exercise:
Choose any one of the works listed below that you have not previously read in college or graduate school. Without referring to published reviews, discuss in fewer than 1500 works of clear and correct prose: why you think it is a highly regarded of qualitative methods in political science, what you think are its important flaws, and how you think it could it be improved. Be prepared to present your report in class [10 points].

-Theda Skocpol, States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

December 15

Presentation of Findings

For further reading:

Required exercise:
Be prepared to present in class your research question, its intellectual context, and your proposed strategy for investigation. You may prepare a handout, but you may not use PowerPoint.