Research Methods in Political Science

Spring 2020, 26:790:491:01; Tuesday, Thursday, 11:30am-12:50pm
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Learning Objectives

- Develop arguments in clear and coherent texts and oral communications
- Read a variety of texts for meaning and informed analysis
- Evaluate information critically
- Produce ideas and texts creatively
- Understand and use methods and forms of inquiry specific to the broad disciplinary category (or categories) within which the course falls
- Understand past and present interrelationships among diverse political, social, cultural, racial, ethnic, and/or gender groups
- Understand and address defining social, political, cultural, and/or intellectual questions in contemporary and/or historical perspective

Course Goals

The class will explore what political science as a discipline is and is not, how truth claims, concepts, and theories are constructed, and how political science research is conducted. This is an intensely hands-on course requiring regular attendance and involving multiple writing and speaking exercises.

Schedule

January 21, 23: Introduction: What do we know? What do we think we know? What is critical thinking? A few thought experiments.
January 28, 30: What is history? What is politics? What is political science?
February 4, 6: How does political science differ from other disciplines? What do political science and policymaking have in common? What forms of political science do political scientists practice? Ontology, epistemology, methodology.
February 11, 13: Empirical evidence, truth claims, facts, and norms; cherry picking; variables and constants.
February 18, 20: What do theories do? Causes, effects; generalizations; predictions; intervening variables; the structure of theories; theories of everything, nothing, and something; ceteris paribus; norms and values. 1st paper due Feb. 18.
March 10, 12: In-class writing and thinking exercises. 3rd paper due March 10.
March 17, 19: Spring Break
March 24, 26: What is description? How to describe.
April 7, 9: What is explanation? How to explain using necessary, sufficient, facilitating conditions. 5th paper due April 7.
April 14, 16: Research approaches: case study, comparison, large N. 6th paper due April 14.
April 21, 23: Theoretical paradigms: structure (realism, Marxism, institutionalism) vs agency (rational choice, constructivism). 7th paper due April 23.
April 28, 30: Theoretical pluralism, hegemony, political correctness, norms, and policy; university/multiversity dynamics, publish or perish; policymaking exercises; perfect societies; radicalism vs piecemeal social engineering.
Requirements and Grades

Each student will formulate a simple abstract causal statement (of the 3-word form, A causes B, where A and B are abstract concepts) and devote all the exercises to its exploration.

Students are expected to write seven papers (six 10-line papers and one 2-page paper) and participate in several writing exercises. Final grades will be based on the one 2-page paper (50%) and the six 10-line papers (50%). In-class participation may result in extra credit.

Each 10-line paper must be exactly 10 lines long (NOT 10 sentences!), with standard margins and 12-point font. The 2-page paper must be exactly 2 pages long, single spaced, with standard margins and 12-point font: no footnotes, no long citations, no bibliography.

Papers must be handed in at the beginning of class. No late papers accepted. No electronic papers accepted (except in emergencies).

Attendance is mandatory. Students will not be able to complete the assignments without attending class.

Assignment Schedule

Each student will formulate a simple abstract causal statement (of the form “A causes B”) and devote all the exercises to its exploration. Follow the below instructions exactly: do not write more or less than what is required.

- 1st paper due February 18: 10 lines. Topic: Formulate a simple abstract causal statement and explain both why it’s normatively important and worth pursuing and why it’s normatively unimportant and not worth pursuing.
- 2nd paper due February 25: 10 lines. Topic: Make an empirical truth claim and provide convincing evidence of both its empirical truth and its empirical falsehood.
- 3rd paper due March 10: up to 10 lines. Topic: Provide two competing definitions of both the cause and the effect in your simple abstract causal statement.
- 4th paper due March 31: 10 lines. Topic: Describe some empirical phenomenon in two different ways.
- 5th paper due April 7: 10 lines. Topic: Provide two competing interpretations of some empirical phenomenon.
- 6th paper due April 14: 10 lines. Topic: Explain the effect in your simple abstract causal statement using necessary, sufficient, and facilitating conditions.
- 7th paper due April 23: 2 pages. On p. 1, argue that your simple abstract causal statement is valid; on p. 2, argue that your simple abstract causal statement is invalid.

Recommended Readings

- Peter Phelan and Peter Reynolds, Argument and Evidence, Routledge.
- Arthur Stinchcombe, Constructing Social Theories, University of Chicago Press.