Frontiers of Political Research: Topics, Trends, Techniques
MA Elective Course, Winter 2020
4 CEU credits, 8 ECTS

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Instructor

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Classes
TBA

Office Hours
Carsten:
NB: Sign up beforehand at http://carstenqschneider.youcanbook.me.

Course Description

The course is an exploration of research frontiers in comparative politics that are opening due to both new social, political, and technological developments and changes in the way the discipline studies both old and new phenomena. New approaches that have emerged in the discipline include the use of novel data (e.g. due to digitization), tools of analysis (e.g. machine learning), and more careful thinking about cause and effects (e.g. a more design-based approach to inference and reflections on the mechanisms behind cause-effect relations). The course then consists of three parts. In the first part, we identify and discuss emerging standards of how to do empirical research in Political Science. The second part focusses on new strategies of generating data for political research. In part three, we assess how old topics are studied with these new standards and new data.
Learning Outcomes
During the course work, students are asked to write position papers, to actively participate during in-class discussions, to prepare a group presentation, and to write a final essay. The position paper is expected to help develop the ability to synthesize the information gathered from the readings, determine a focus point, and to develop a coherent line of argumentation. The emphasis on in-class participation and in-class presentations is meant to foster the skills of expressing informative reflections ‘on the spot’ and to decrease potential fears of speaking in front of others. The final essay aims at improving the ability to generate logical, plausible, and persuasive arguments and to apply the tools studied in class to a topic of own choice.

Learning Activities and Teaching Methods
Teaching methods consist of lectures, seminars, group work, and student presentation. The following teaching activities will take place.

Presence and Participation
Students are expected to be actively present at all lectures and seminars. In case you are unable to attend, you need to inform both instructors via email prior to the meeting you are going to miss. During the seminars you are expected to reflect critically on the mandatory readings and to engage in discussions with your fellow students and the instructor(s). Questions and stimulating interaction during the lectures will be positively evaluated as well. As some might be more shy than others and because our class might be bigger than average, everybody is encouraged to send questions, suggestions, and comments via email to the instructors prior to the meetings. These emails will count towards the participation grade. In general, for the grade the quality of participation prevails over its quantity, but if quantity is zero, quality is zero, too. Feedback on the class performance (including grade) will be provided if and when students sign up for an appointment during the office hours. Unexcused missed classes count with 0 points for participation on that specific day.

Individual presentation
Each student signs up for presenting one of the mandatory readings. In about 15 minutes, the task is to not only capture the essence of the reading, but to also insert it into the debates we will have had at that point in the course. The goal of the student presentation is to stimulate critical reflections in the group and to signal which interpretation of the reading is given by the student.

Group presentation
Each student will have to take part in one 30 minutes presentation in a group of two persons, depending on the number of participants in the course. The presentation needs to be accompanied by a 1-page(!) handout to be distributed to all course participants. Structure, content, and function of this handout will be discussed in the beginning of the course. The presentation needs to be on the topic of the week and should be based on more than the material covered by the mandatory readings. Grade-relevant features of the presentation are: adherence to time limit, meaningful hand-out, coherence between different presenters within group, factually adequate representation of the literature processed, and critical/innovative/interesting/stimulating/thought-provoking own thoughts. Feedback on the presentation (including a grade) will be provided if and when presenters sign up for an appointment during the office hours.
Position papers
Throughout the course you will have to write two position papers. The position papers should briefly summarize the content of the mandatory readings for the particular session and then critically reflect on them relying on previous readings, lectures, and additional material that meaningful relates the topic in question. You can use any session to write their position paper on, except the one for which you give your presentation in class. The position paper must be between 750-800 words and be uploaded to the course’s e-learning website prior to the session in question. Deadline is one minute before the start of the session on which you write the position paper. As their name suggest, position papers are meant to explain what your position on a specific issue is. Therefore, keep mere summaries to a necessary minimum and spend most effort on developing your own thoughts. Papers that do this will receive a better grade than those that limit themselves to correct summaries of the texts read.

Final Essay
Students are asked to write a final essay in which they discuss the pros and cons of using new standards, methods, and data for analyzing an important problem in Political Science of their choice. The final essay must be between 3500 and 3800 words long, reference list excluded.

Auditing
Students who audit the class are expected to be present at all sessions, to do the mandatory readings, and to actively participate in class discussions. Auditing students do not have to submit any written assignment, nor take part in the group presentation.

Assessment

Grade composition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Weight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In-class participation</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small individual presentation</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One group presentation</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two position papers</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Essay</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The grading follows the standard scale adopted by the Department of Political Science:
A: 100-94; A-: 93-87; B+: 86-80; B: 79-73; B-: 72-66; C+: 65-59; F: 58-0

Late submission
In case of late submissions, three grade points from the final grade of the assignment are deducted for every 12 hours of delay. For instance, submitting 15 hours late leads to a deduction of six points.

Word-limit violation
A violation consists in writing more words than the upper limit or less than the lower limit. In case of violations of word limits, one grade point from the final grade of the assignment is deducted for every 5% of word limit violation. For instance, if the lower limit is 3000 and somebody writes 2400 words (= 20% below word limit), four points are deducted.
Use of laptop and electronic devices

The use of laptops and electronic devices in the classroom is not allowed. Students who insist in reading and taking notes in electronic format should come and see me in order to see if or how this request can be accommodated. The use of electronic devices for anything else than strictly course related matters will lead to a participation grade of 0 points for the particular session.
Course outline

Part A – Big topics

This part of the course introduces to the meta-methodological topics currently discussed in Political Science. Along these lines, we address the issue of causality, causal effects, causal mechanisms, validity, transparency, ethics, and big data with its pros and cons. Wherever meaningful, these issues will be addressed both from a qualitative and a quantitative angle.

Week 1: Causality and external validity

One of the most important tendencies in the conduct of quantitative social science research has been a growing attention to causality. Proponents of the *credibility revolution* claim that a central question of any quantitative inquiry should be whether a particular research design permits the making of credible causal claims. Some opponents of this tendency argue that obsession with causality leads political scientists to focus on unimportant questions or conduct studies on non-representative samples. In the first two class meeting we will discuss the main arguments on both sides.

**Mandatory readings:**

**Recommended readings:**

Week 2: Qualitative approaches and causality: QCA, multimethod research, causal mechanisms

Qualitative research is undergoing a revolution in terms of formalization and systematization of its research protocols. Within this broad and still expanding field, we focus on the question of how best to combine cross-case studies (revealing causal effects) with within-case studies that aim at detecting causal mechanisms. We discuss how cross-case methods such as QCA and experiments ought to be combined with follow-up case studies.

**Mandatory readings:**

**Recommended readings:**
- Carsten Q. Schneider and Ingo Rohlfing. Set-theoretic Multimethod Research: The Role of Test Corridors and Conjunctions for Case Selection. *Swiss Political Science Review*, forthcoming
2019. doi: 10.1111/spsr.12382


**Week 3: Transparency, ethics, and planning**

The topics of transparency, research ethics, and planning feature high on the agenda of those who seek to improve social science research. While commonly agreed as desirable goals, there are important limitations and trade-offs in achieving them in specific research situations. We divide the discussion into qualitative and quantitative research approaches.

*Mandatory readings:*

- quantitative:

- qualitative:

*Recommended readings:*


**Week 4: Reflections on big data**

Big data, together with buzz words like machine learning or artificial intelligence heavily influence the discourse on the future of the social sciences. In this week, we do not try to map this broad debate. Instead, the goal is to shed light on some of the challenges and pitfalls that arise with the availability (and pressure to use) of big data. In addition to challenges and pitfalls for social science research, there are also issues to be discussed in terms of social science teaching.

*Mandatory readings:*

- Issues and challenges:

- Teaching:

*Recommended readings:*

6
Part B - New ways to generate data

Whereas in the previous part, we have discussed new theoretical and methodological approaches of analyzing data, in this part we focus on new ways of generating data. Due to new technologies, data is now available that did not exist a decade ago.

Week 5: Experiments and interventions

A tendency complementary to the credibility revolution is a growing role of experimentation in political science. In essence, experimentation allows researchers to generate data on counterfactuals that would not be observable otherwise. Experimentation is useful both for the purpose of testing the impact of public policies and to test the observable implications of theories. We will discuss the merits and drawbacks of experimentation based on a particular experimental study and then discuss more “big-picture” issues based on an edited volume on experiments.

Mandatory readings:

Recommended readings:

Week 6: Text as data

One source of new data are texts. Speeches, party manifestos, newspaper articles, tweets, etc. can be ‘harvested’ in machine-readable format and then subjected to new forms of analyses. We discuss the potentials and limits of these new forms of data and analyses and illustrate them with two examples.

Mandatory readings:

Recommended readings:

Week 7-8: Potpourri of topics to choose from

For these two weeks we offer a wider range of topics and ask participants to choose according to their interests. We will spend one class meeting on each of the chosen topics discussing one
application a new methodology/data source. An (incomplete) list of topics is comprised of the following:

**Administrative data**

**Luminosity as a proxy for economic performance**

**Crowd-sourcing**

**Large non-representative samples**

**Audio data**

**Social networks**

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**Part C – Studying old topics with new data**

**Week 9: Corruption**
Corruption is an old topic in Political Science. One recurrent problem is its evasive nature which makes measurement particularly challenging. New tools for generating (digitalized) data might represent a way forward on this front.

**Mandatory readings:**


**Recommended readings:**

**Week 10: Electoral fraud**
Electoral fraud belongs to the bread and butter discipline of both social scientists and practitioners in non-democratic political regimes. While much circumstantial evidence on specific cases exist, new forms of data generation might help to scale up these efforts of measuring a phenomenon that usually takes place in the dark.
Mandatory readings:

Recommended readings:

Week 11: Censorship

Censorship is still ubiquitous in authoritarian countries though with the emergence of new technologies the forms and objectives of censorship are undergoing rapid changes. In this set of class meetings we will consider how cutting-edge methodologies and data sources can be deployed to learn about the effect of censorship.

Mandatory readings:

Recommended readings:

Week 12: Leftovers and wrap-up

We use the last week of the course to further discuss topics that will have turned out to be of intense interest to most participants during the course. We also use the occasion to reflect more broadly on the possible future(s) of (comparative) political science.

Mandatory readings:

Recommended readings: