Comparative Case Study Research
MA Mandatory Elective Course, Fall 2015
2 CEU credits, 4 ETCS

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Classes
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 13.30-15.10.
Room: FT 809

Office Hours
Instructor
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 15.30-17.10.
Room: FT 903.
NB: Sign up beforehand on the papersheet at the door of FT 903.

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TBA

Course description and learning outcomes
The aims of this course consists in making students familiar with the basic rules of doing case study research that aims at drawing descriptive or causal inference. The definition of "case study research" comprises both comparative and single case studies and it can be situated at the cross-case and at the within-case level. The course will help students to evaluate the methodological merits of those political science publications that use a smaller N comparative approach or a within-case approach and to design their own (comparative) case study research strategy. With its focus on drawing descriptive or causal inference based on systematic (qualitative)
empirical evidence, it is important to point out that this course is not about interpretivist, post-structuralist etc. understandings of doing "qualitative" research. Students interested in these important strands of political science literature are better served by taking the mandatory elective course offered at our department. Furthermore, while throughout the course we will read applied case studies and try to practice specific research tasks, this course does not focus on the hands-on principles and practices of data collection, such as interviewing, archival research, field work etc. Again, other courses offered at the department are catering to these important needs.

During the course work, students are asked to write one take-home written exercise, sit in a closed-book exam, and to actively participate during in-class discussions and group work. The written exercise is expected to help develop the ability to synthesize the information gathered from the mandatory readings, determine a focus point, and to develop a coherent line of argumentation. The exam is meant to improve the ability to generate logical, plausible, and persuasive arguments, to compare and contrast, and to derive theoretical conclusions from comparative empirical observations. The emphasis on in-class participation and group work 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 course proceeds as follows. In the beginning, we introduce some fundamentals of case study research that are relevant regardless of whether one is performing single or comparative case studies. In fact, most of these issues are so fundamental that they are relevant to any kind of empirical social research. In this part, we discuss different research goals (description vs. explanation; theory testing vs. theory developing; types of causes and how they can be inferred; scope conditions; concept formation strategies etc.). We then move on to the discussion of different types of cases and the analytic purposes that their intense study can and cannot serve. We focus on strategies of case selection and then move to comparative case studies. In the next sessions, we move from cross-case to a within-case perspective. Here we discuss the different logics of within-case analysis, with special focus on process tracing. In the last week, we conclude the course with a session on how to graphically visualize findings from qualitative case studies and a wrap-up session.

The course starts in the second half of the Fall term and meets twice a week. Most of the meetings will be a mix between a lecture at the beginning, followed by a seminar-style discussion among students and the instructor.

Course Requirements

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 the instructor(s) via email prior to the meeting you are going to miss. Unexcused missed classes count with 0 points for participation on that specific day. 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). 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 instructor(s), preferably 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. Students who are present but do not actively participate receive the lowest passing grade for participation. Feedback on the class performance (including grade) will be provided if and when students sign up for an appointment during the office hours.
Take-Home Exercise

Each participant will have to submit one take-home exercise. The exercise aims at testing the student’s mastery of the methodological issues addressed in this course, by applying it to the evaluation of published research. The exercise consists of a set of questions that we formulate about an extra reading. The reading and questions will be sent out on the day the exercise starts (November 26, 2015). Deadline for submitting the take-home exercise is November 28, 2015 at noon.

Written Exam

The written exam will take place on the last session of our course (December 10, 2015). The exam is open book and will consist of a critical discussion of a published case study research article. We will provide more than one article to choose from for discussion. We will also provide a loose list of questions that you might want to ask and answer about the methodological aspects of the text. The written exam is similar to the take-home exercise, but because the former takes place at the end of the course, students are expected to apply and thus mastery of all the issues discussed during the entire course.

Table 1: Grade composition

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In-Class Participation</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Take-Home Exercise</td>
<td>40%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Written Exam</td>
<td>40%</td>
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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 the instructor(s) and we can accommodate this request. 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.

Useful books and sources of information

The following books are particularly relevant for this course.


Course outline

Part 1 – Crucial Concepts

In this part, fundamental concepts of case study research are spelled out.

Session 1: Fundamentals I

Sessions 1 and 2 specify what this course is about and what not. Since the term ’case study’ means many different things to different people, it is important to make clear which interpretation under-girds this course. After that, we clarify key terms: unit of analysis vs. unit of observation; causal effect vs. causal mechanism; causes of effects vs. effects of causes; correlation vs. set relation.

Mandatory readings:

Recommended readings:

Session 2: Fundamentals II

Mandatory readings:

Recommended readings:

Session 3: Concept Formation and Measurement I

During sessions 3 and 4, we learn about some core ingredients of sound concept formation and measurement, such as validity vs. reliability; context-sensitive indicators (functional equivalence); concept structures and aggregation rules; etc. We will pay specific attention to the vices and virtues of “mere description” and the logic of typologies. After introducing the fundamental notion of the level of abstraction along which concept formation and measurement moves, we turn to questions of conceptual structure and the related issue of how to aggregate information gathered on a concept.

Mandatory readings:
Recommended readings:


Session 4: Concept Formation and Measurement II

We discuss the virtues and challenges of ‘mere description’ as opposed to aiming for causal inference. Typologies play an important role in case-based research aiming at describing important social phenomena.

Mandatory readings:


Recommended readings:


PART 2 – Cases, Selection, Comparisons

This part of the course is dedicated to identifying different types of cases, strategies for selecting these cases for single and for comparative case studies.

Session 5: Types of Cases and Case Selection I

In sessions 5 and 6, we introduce criteria based on which different types of cases can be defined and, related to this, criteria for selecting cases for case studies.

Mandatory readings:

Recommended readings:


Session 6: Types of Cases and Case Selection II

*How do you select cases? What is selection bias and how can it be avoided?*

Mandatory readings:


Recommended readings:


Question for exercise is sent out. Deadline for submission is the following Wednesday at 23:59.

Session 7: Comparative Case Studies I

*Which forms of comparisons are good for which analytic goal? What are 'Mill’s Methods' (not) good for?*

Mandatory readings:


Recommended readings:


Session 8: Comparative Case Studies II

We discuss strategies to enhance inference in comparative case studies, such as increasing the number of cases; including a temporal dimension, refining the scope conditions, and refining what the unit of analysis is.

7
Mandatory readings:

Recommended readings:

Part 3 – Within-Case Analysis

Almost by definition, case study research does have to involve a strong component of within-case analysis. This, in turn, unavoidably goes hand in hand with the introduction of a temporal dimension into the analysis. The most prominent methodological tool for performing within case evidence is process tracing. We discuss the logic(s) of process tracing and how different tests are used to evaluate process tracing evidence in light of theoretical expectations

Session 9: Within-Case Analysis I

Mandatory readings:

Recommended readings:

Session 10: Within-Case Analysis II

Mandatory readings:

Recommended readings:
Wrap-up

Session 11: Visualizing Arguments and Results

Arguments made in case study research are often complicated. It is all the more important to convey the main messages in a clear manner. Graphical visualizations are a powerful tool.

Mandatory readings:

Recommended readings:

Session 12: Closed-Book Exam

The journal article to be discussed during the exam will be distributed shortly prior to the exam.
References


