Scope and Methods  
(AY 2016-17)

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Central European University

MA Programme  
Fall semester 2016-17 (2 credits)

Class meetings autumn semester (7 Sept-Oct 28)  
Group 1: Friday 11-12:40, FT908  
Group 2: Friday 13:30-15:10, FT908  
(Pre-session and zero-week: see below)

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Course description

This course introduces the students to the fundamentals of empirical research in the social sciences, and gives an overview of the main qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches in actual political science research. The aims of the course are (1) to make students aware of the methodological choices in conducting empirical research in the social sciences in general, and in political science in particular and assist them in making informed decisions with regard to the methodological approaches most appropriate for conducting their own research, (2) to equip them with essential practical skills in research design and methods, (3) to enhance their methodological "literacy", so as to enable a critical reading of published research.

The course is structured in three parts. The first (pre-session and zero-week classes), give the students an overview of the essential features of empirical research in political science and discuss how to elaborate good research puzzles and questions. The second part introduces the main theoretical paradigms ((neo)positivism, critical, interpretivist) that have informed empirical research in the social sciences and the main strategies and methods for data collection and analysis often associated with them (such as case studies and comparatives designs; surveys, interviews and archival research, statistical analysis, thematic analysis etc.). This part offers the students the basic tools necessary for becoming both critical consumers and producers of scientific research on politics. The third part of the course addresses practical concerns related to the process of designing and conducting empirical research in political science. These classes will include Q&A sessions with fellow graduate students who are more advanced in their studies, applied discussions of a few selected MA theses and research/thesis proposals, and a wrap up session in which the students will discuss and seek
solutions for problems encountered in drafting their thesis proposals. The very last sequence of this part takes place in the winter term, when the students will participate in the thesis workshops where they present their thesis proposals and receive feedback from their colleagues and faculty members.

**Course format**
The course will consist of interactive lectures that will introduce the material and discussions in which students will analyse and evaluate various methodological approaches in published research and studies. Most of the sessions will include group activities, and for some of them the students will have to submit short materials before the class.

**Course requirements and assessment**
The assessment will be based on the following:

*Class participation (20%):*
Students are expected to read the mandatory texts assigned for each class and to participate in the class discussions and group activities that will draw on issues presented in the assigned materials. For some sessions, the students will be asked to send a short contribution before the class, which will constitute the basis of some in-class activities.

**Take home assignments (45%)**

3 written assignments - 15% each

**Assignment 1** (1a/1b in the syllabus)
Short research proposal - 500-word- drawing on feedback provided by two colleagues.

**Assignment 2 or 3, and 4 – time to be a researcher!**
Over the course, five assignments will be set that correspond to various methodological approaches and methods of data collection and analysis discussed in the course. Each student will have to select and submit two assignments: either assignment 2 (a/b) OR 3 (a/b) (group assignment) and assignment 4.

Please note that all assignments 2/3 are tailored for group work. Students can opt for doing them individually, although they should be aware that the time investment will be considerably higher.

For each assignment, the groups of students (2-3) will carry out the indicated research and prepare short written materials in accordance with the instructions. The final report should indicate the authorship of its individual components. The assignments will be submitted via the e-learning by a deadline which will be indicated in advance. Late submissions will not be considered.

**Final paper (individual research proposal) (35%)**
Students will submit a research proposal of max. 1500 words by the end of the course (in the winter semester – exact deadline to be specified later). Although this is not a mandatory requirement, students are encouraged to develop this proposal as their thesis proposal. The
proposal should include the following elements
- Introduction: presenting the area/topic of the research and the research question/s
- State of the art/literature review: this part should indicate how the planned research fits into and contributes to existing studies on the chosen topic
- Theoretical argument/hypotheses OR conceptual map: depending on the nature of question/s under research
- Research design: plans for data collection and analysis

More details on various types of research proposals will be provided through class discussions and reading materials.

**Attendance**

Attendance is mandatory for this course. One absence (over the whole 12 sessions) is tolerated without sanction, however the assignment (if one was set) remains due. If a student is absent more than once for justified reasons (illness/accident, death in the family, or other case of force majeure that can be duly documented), s/he should contact the instructor to discuss about how to make up for the missed classes. If a student is absent more than once for unjustified reasons, his/her participation grade will be reduced.

More than three absences will result in failure of the course, except if these absences a) are due to force majeure b) is fully documented (medical certificates etc., whenever possible before the absence, if that is impossible, then as soon as possible afterwards) and agreed by the Head of Department, c) have been made up for as soon as possible by compensatory work.

If a student foresees a situation that might make it impossible for him/her to comply with the course requirements, s/he should contact the instructor to discuss the situation.

Please note that an excused absence (an absence of which you have informed the instructor beforehand) is not the same thing as a justified absence.

**Learning outcomes**

By the end of the course, the students should have acquired
- A critical understanding of the main methodological approaches employed by the empirical research in social sciences
- An understanding of how empirical research is conducted in social sciences
- Practical skills in crafting their thesis proposals, including the formulation of a research question and making the ensuing decisions pertaining to the most appropriate methodological approach for conducting their studies

**Academic honesty**

CEU rules of academic honesty and active participation apply.

**General readings:**

In addition to the requested and recommended readings listed in the course outline below, the following books are recommended as general companions to the course:


Berg, B. L. (2009). *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. Boston: Allyn and
Bacon.
Course Outline

Note: Please note that this is a provisional version of the syllabus that will be completed after the introductory session. Also, the syllabus might be adjusted in the course of the semester depending on the students’ progress and feedback. At all times, you will find the latest version of the syllabus on the e-learning website. In case of doubt, check the date of the syllabus (page 1, just above “course description”).

Details regarding the assignments will be provided as we go along. The assignments are due 24h before the course.

Pre-session:

Wednesday 7 Sept (Groups 1 and 2)
12:30-14:10, FT809

Introduction to the course: structure, logic and requirements; relation to the other methods courses starting in week 7 (qualitative data analysis, case study research, applied statistics).

Introduction to research methods and research design in the social sciences.

Zero-week

Monday 12 Sept (Group 1)
9:20-11:00, FT 809

Tuesday 13 Sept (Group 2)
9:20-11:00, FT809

Research questions and puzzles, their embeddedness in theoretical and epistemological paradigms, and their role in the research process and design; types of research questions.

Literature review and the life-cycle of a research puzzle.

The nature and constraints of scientific research (vs other approaches to knowledge production) – relevance, originality, validity etc.

Assignment 1a: 500 word research proposal and bibliography (individual) (due Thu 22 Sept) (not graded)

Mandatory readings

Additional readings

Week 1

Friday 23 Sept
(Group 1, 11-12:40; Group 2: 13:30-15:10, both FT908)
Main traditions and typical research designs in political science research (normative/empirical; large-N/small N, (post)positivist, critical and interpretive research, etc.).
Quality criteria and their articulation in various research traditions.

Reading smartly; evaluating documents and evidence.

Assignment 1b: improved 800 word proposal (due Thu 29 Sept) (graded)

Mandatory readings

Additional readings

Week 2

Friday 30 Sept

Traditions in normative research.

Uses of theory in empirical social research (1): deductive research strategies; working with constraining concepts; top-down operationalisation.

Assignment 2a: Design a short survey questionnaire or content analytic coding grid.

Mandatory readings

Additional readings

Week 3

Friday 7 Oct

Uses of theory in social research (2): inductive and semi-inductive research strategies; working with sensitising concepts, soft “operationalisation”

Assignment 3a: Design a short interview topic guide or/and observation grid.

Mandatory readings

Additional readings

Week 4
**Friday 14 Oct**
Sampling, data collection and data analysis in large-N (quantitative) research. Generalisation and inference.

Mandatory readings

Additional readings

**Assignment 2b:** Improve your assignment 2a and carry out a mini-data collection and analysis.

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**Week 5**

**Friday 21 Oct**
Case selection, sampling, data collection and data analysis in small-N (qualitative) research. Qualitative generalisation. Primary and secondary data/research.

**Assignment 3b:** Improve your assignment 3a and carry out a mini-data collection and analysis.

Mandatory readings

Additional readings

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**Week 6**

**Friday 28 Oct**
Case selection, sampling, data collection and data analysis in interpretive (qualitative) research. Interpretive and critical research traditions (action research, participatory research, engaged research etc.); reflexivity in social research

Discourse and narrative analysis.

**Assignment 4:** Critical methodological reflection: read and analyse a scientific journal article and identify a number of key components.

Mandatory readings

Additional readings

End of first part of the course
(3 additional sessions to be taken place in the winter semester)
Winter semester
(dates to be fixed later)

Session 9:
Crafting the research/thesis proposal
Components and uses of a research proposal; the evolutive research proposal.

Session 10:
Learning from those who have done it before
Discussion of practical issues related to conducting research with MA students in the 2-nd year and PhD students. The group of our invitees will include people who have pursued different methodological approaches

Session 11:
Wrap-up session devoted to questions and issues still on the table in the perspective of the final proposal for the course (and of the thesis proposal to be written).

Session 12: Thesis workshops to be held in March - TBA