Scope and Methods

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Mandatory for MA2/1 and MA1  
Fall/Winter semester 2014-15  
2 credits

Class meetings:  
Thursday 13:30-15:10

Course description  
This course aims to introduce the students to the logic and instruments of empirical social research and help them acquire essential practical research skills. It is structured in three parts:

Part I gives an overview of the essential features of social research, such as its grounding in robust, controlled and transparent evidence, the search for patterns and causalities, its concern with generalization, the role and place of “theory”, or the importance of a proper operationalization of research questions.

Part II provides an introduction to the logic underlying some of the most important methods for data collection and analysis in political science, such as survey research and statistical analysis, qualitative interviewing, experiments, ethnographic methods, archival and secondary data analysis, and qualitative and quantitative textual analysis. On the one hand, this part aims to convey some basic practical skills, such as how to formulate appropriate research questions that can successfully be addressed by a given method, and how to critically read and appraise research findings reported in academic and non-academic outlets (academic journals, mass media, etc.). Furthermore, it also wants to convey a general understanding of the advantages and limitations of particular research tools and how they are embedded in different logics of inquiry.

Finally, part III of the course looks at practical issues of research process and design. It discusses the most common research designs in political science (case studies, comparative designs) as well as academic writing from various angles (academic genres and conventions, the writing process). Former students and library professionals will join the course to talk about their actual experience and respectively the many options the library has to offer to students.

Course format  
Following a first class that will take place during the pre-session, all MA students will be divided into three groups. All first-year students of the two-year MA program will be in one group. Some sessions in the course will feature lectures, accompanied by a series of mandatory readings, whereas others will be more interactive and take various shapes, such as group work, common discussions of selected readings, and presentations of actual research projects followed by Q&A sessions. Feedback on the assignments will be provided via (A) grades; (B) comments posted on the e-learning sites and/or conveyed in class; and (C) individual consultations with the instructor during regular office hours and tutorial meetings.

The course should be seen as a complement to other methods courses offered by the
Department (statistics, QCA, qualitative methods, case study research, etc.). It aims to convey a sense of both the variety of political science research and its unity across research traditions and paradigmatic controversies.

**Course requirements and assessment**

Attendance is mandatory. Late assignments submitted after the respective class will not be accepted.

**A. Take home assignments (45%)**
Take home assignments (including the one assigned during the pre-session) are to be handed in over the semester via the e-learning site of the course. The questions and deadlines for the assignments will be announced in due course on the e-learning site and also explained as necessary in class. Unless teamwork is explicitly encouraged in the description of the assignment, you must write your assignment entirely on your own: plagiarizing your colleagues’ ideas will be appropriately sanctioned.

**B. In class exercises (20%)**
Apart from these take-home exercises, active class participation is paramount and some applied in-class tasks and quizzes will also be assigned during the semester. These exercises will be announced in due course on the e-learning site and in class.

**C. Final paper (35%)**
The requirements regarding the expected structure and content will be provided via the e-learning site. This paper will be an approximately 1,200 words research proposal requiring creative thinking, concise academic writing and an ability to link theories to empirical research while taking stock of what you learnt in the course. Note that your final paper will be graded 'as it is' and I will not try to guess what you may have meant when you wrote something that is not entirely clear or is not in perfectly polished English. Instead, I will grade what comes through clearly and explicitly from your submitted text. Therefore it is essential that you leave at least one week time to consult the Academic Writing instructors regarding the full draft of your paper before you submit it.

**E-learning site and access to the readings**
We provide easy access to the required readings and some of the recommended further readings via the O: drive of the CEU server. The course has an e-learning site at [http://ceulearning.ceu.hu](http://ceulearning.ceu.hu) that will be enriched with content throughout the semester. The e-learning site is also the only place where you can submit your assignments. Students enrolled in the class will get a password to access the e-learning site of their group during the pre-session before the deadline for the first assignment. For help with using the e-learning site, see [https://docs.moodle.org/22/en/Student_FAQ](https://docs.moodle.org/22/en/Student_FAQ). For specialist help with the site (e.g. if you have uploaded the wrong file), please contact Gabor Acs, [acsg@ceu.edu](mailto:acsg@ceu.edu) directly.

**Learning outcomes**
By the end of the course, the students should have acquired:
- A clear idea of the nature of scientific inquiry and what differentiates it from other types of knowledge production (journalism, popular science, etc.) and other ways of treating "evidence" (court proceedings, police investigations, common sense, etc).
- An understanding of the main methodological approaches to data collection and analysis in political science, how they link to different understandings of causality and the
prospects for objectivity and generalization

- An improved practical sense for the research process, from the exploratory phase to conceptualization, operationalization, observation, data collection, data analysis and write-up
- Practical research skills (library search skills, literature review, formulation and operationalization of research questions, how to write a data analysis, some degree of methodological "literacy" when reading published research)

**General readings**

In addition to the recommended and supplementary readings listed in the course outline below, I recommend the following books as general companions to the course:


COURSE OUTLINE

PART I: THE LOGIC OF SOCIAL RESEARCH

Session 1 (pre-session week, 9 September) Introduction about the science in political science, research proposals and the actual research process, goals and practicalities of the course
- What – if anything – can make the study of politics a respectable science and why it may be worth to study?
- The distinct ways of generating and using evidence in science – empirical studies, positive and normative theory – as opposed to journalism, police investigations, courts, advocacy, applied research and consultancy
- The social foundations for political science as a craft, a scientific discipline, a guild, and a profession. Typical moral hazards, regulatory reforms, and ethical issues today

Take home writing assignment:
Assignment 1 will not be graded but serve as a point of orientation for the instructor regarding what the course should pay particular attention to. Feedback will be provided via the e-learning site.

You have to submit assignment 1 via the e-learning site of your Scope and Methods course by 1 pm, Thursday, 17 September.

Your task is to write a max. 500-word long skeleton for the scholarly content of a research proposal. Start with elaborating a research question and explain its normative or practical relevance. Your research question can relate to any topic within political science, and may or may not relate to issues that you are thinking to address in actual research for your MA thesis or elsewhere. Finish with explaining the steps in the empirical analysis and the type of data that you would consider in answering your research question. In between this introductory and final sections, explain the various possible answers to your research question that are all more or less plausible and how your proposed research will allow us to have a better judgment about which if any of these answers may be correct. Append at the end a bibliography listing the works that you referenced in your 500 words (the bibliography will not count towards your 500 words).

Note that your task is merely to draft a research proposal. You will not be expected to actually do the proposed research either now or later on but be careful in proposing research that appears to be feasible if one has enough time, personnel and money, and has a high likelihood of providing convincing answers to your research question. Moreover, you only have to produce the skeleton of a research proposal that will entirely skip such usually required formalities of a real research proposal as the abstract, the proposed budget, time frame, expected outcomes (a.k.a. “deliverables”), list of collaborators, and so forth, and will only have to focus on scholarly substance. Since you only have a maximum word budget of 500 (excluding the bibliography), you will have to make even usually required sections of a research proposal extremely brief, e.g. situate the problem in the previous scholarly literature only very briefly, skip any literature review, and only justify the theoretical and practical relevance of your research question if it may not be totally obvious to your expected readers. Discuss what you plan to use as empirical measures of the concepts appearing in your theory only if your ideas regarding measurement are critical for either the originality or the feasibility of the study. Allocate most of your word budget to discussing the research question, the theory, expectations about possible answers to your research question, your testable hypotheses (if any), key concepts, research design, methodology and data as clearly as possible within your word budget, highlighting how they are interconnected and instrumental for answering your
research question in a compelling way.
While writing research proposals and similar documents (i.e. grant proposals, project outlines, action plans) is one of the most common activities expected in the various professions that an MA in Political Science should prepare you for, there is unfortunately little in the way of paper-length written works discussing how good proposals for scholarly research should look like. However, you will find a few recommend readings on the e-learning site for this course that you can consult before writing up your assignment.

**Recommended further readings:**


Session 2 (17 September) Theory and social research

- What is theory?
- Aspects of theory
- Direction of theorizing
- Range and levels of theory
- Three major approaches to social science

Mandatory readings:

Recommended further reading:

In-class exercise: Think of the research proposal skeleton that you just submitted for assignment one. The task will be to think about what theory would be most suited for the research you proposed. You must consider what paradigm is most appropriate for your research plans. Is your approach deductive or inductive? What are your basic concepts that you would employ? What level of theory do you think your proposal would fit? What type of explanation do you seek? Please take a few minutes and be ready to present your research plans to your colleagues.

Take home writing assignment: None.
Session 3 (24 September) Identifying good research questions. The reasons for separating normative and positive proposals and the difficulty of doing so

- From research ideas to research questions and problem articulations
- Finding literature: library catalogues, bibliographic databases, review articles, experts
- Evaluating and keeping track of the literature
- Operationalization: from research questions to observation
- Choosing observation instruments
- Logical thinking, arguments and evidence
- Debate about the mandatory reading (serves as an example of a literature review)

Mandatory readings:

Recommended further reading:


In-class exercise: We will form two groups to debate an issue in class. As there will be no preparation/practice time in class, you should have your points planned in advance of the class. The task of the groups will be to debate whether the evidence presented by the Lijphart (1997) reading provides satisfactory support for making voting mandatory in national elections. One group will have to argue for, and the other against mandatory voting using the ideas and research findings discussed in the Lijphart article and any further thoughts you may have about the matter. (Note that we are not looking for a ‘correct answer’ in this debate but try understand different types of arguments and how empirical evidence and value premises both contribute to them. You need to prepare at home for playing either role.)

Take home writing assignment: None.
Session 4 (1 October) Theory, hypotheses, operationalization. Causality and its tests.

Critical reading, note taking

- Hypotheses
- Scope (or antecedent) conditions
- Key variables
- Model
- Data, tests, and their adequacy given what the theory is

Mandatory reading:

Recommended further readings:

In-class exercise: We will discuss the key points of the three chapters that you read from Putnam’s 1993 book, so you might want to prepare reading memos. The lecture slides for last week give a couple of ideas and identify further sources that can help you in making effective reading notes. Your notes should effectively serve as a swiftly searchable reminder for the key points of the reading and what you yourself thought about it. As a rough guide, do not make your notes longer than 500 words – you should focus in selecting important points over less important ones.

Take home writing assignment: None.
PART II: THE DIVERSITY OF METHODS

Session 5 (8 October):
Quantitative research in the service of understanding patterns. Large N studies at the macro and micro level and cross-level interactions. Writing meaningful questionnaire items and doing surveys on the cheap

- Describing patterns, trends etc. with quantitative data:
- What to do when we have no theory to start with?
- The strengths of survey research; sampling methods
- How can we draw causal inferences from nonexperimental data (and can we do that at all)?

Mandatory readings:


Recommended further readings:


In-class exercise: None

Take home writing assignment: Assignment 2. (max 500 words): Each of our mandatory readings shows a great example of things that can go wrong in quantitative research and we will discuss how our study designs can anticipate and avoid these problems. In your take-home assignment, you will have to identify at least three things that are arguably in need of improvement and at least two things that are attractive in the King and Maria (2008) study; an alternative explanation for Iyengar et al.’s (2010) main finding regarding cross-national differences in the size of the knowledge gap between people with different levels of political interest; and explain why Gray and Wuffle’s (2005) central claim is hilarious. (I.e. The Gray and Wuffle (2005) article is a parody of quantitative analyses and the authors do not seriously mean what their article suggests. Instead, they intend to show that the standard tools of quantitative research can be used to support plainly ridiculous conclusions that no sane person should be prepared to accept. What you have to think through is why the central ‘claim’ of their article remains such a laughable proposition in spite of all the evidence presented in their article.)
Session 6 (15 October):
Experiments as a disputed model for scientific research. Control groups and randomization of stimuli. Internal and external validity. Sampling decisions in primary data collection. Quasi, natural, field, survey-embedded, and thought experiments

Mandatory readings:

In-class exercise: None

Recommended further readings:


Take home writing assignment: Assignment 3 (max 500 words): improve the design of the experiment described in the reading by Ulbig. Assume that you can use a research budget up to 10,000 USD. You do not have to provide a breakdown of how you spend this budget, the sum is there merely to suggest that there are some limits to what you can plan but not quite as strict as the ones Ulbig herself faced. Keep Ulbig’s research question, hypotheses, and sample of experimental subjects unchanged and only improve the design of the experiment in terms of internal validity, i.e. our confidence that the experiment will really show what it is meant to examine. The Shadish et al. (2002) reading will give you plenty of ideas about why and how you could achieve this, so make sure that you read that text carefully before writing your assignment and apply its ideas creatively.
**Session 7 (22 October):**

Text, speech, discourse. Methods, techniques and operationalization in content analysis

**Mandatory reading:**


**Recommended further readings:**


**In-class exercise:** We will form competing groups in class. Each group will have to propose a political research question which can be addressed with text analysis and present the research design (question, data, sampling, variables) to the class. You should take inspiration from our readings but do not create a copycat of an application they discussed already. Make your dependent variable something related to the content of a certain body of text. Describe what variation on the dependent variable you expect to occur in your data and how your content coding will reflect that variation. Propose at least three independent variables that your study expects to influence your dependent variable. Your independent variables may regard, for instance, some other characteristics of the text in question, some characteristics of the authors or their expected audience, or the context in which the text was produced and/or published. Describe in some detail how, in order to help answering the research question, you would choose the corpus (the text samples) for the analysis. Note that your time and budget may only allow you to search and code a tiny little fraction of all relevant text in the period that you study, and discuss how you would choose your sample. Be careful: what you chose as your dependent and independent variables may well influence what the ideal sampling decisions are.

**Take home writing assignment:** none.
Session 8 (29 October): Qualitative research in the service of understanding mechanisms. Working with archival material, case studies, interviews, process tracing

Mandatory readings:

Recommended further readings:

In-class exercise: None

Take home writing assignment: Assignment 4 (Max. 500 words). Identify the research questions, the theories, and hypotheses (if any) in the studies reported in the mandatory readings and discuss whether and how their analysis really address these. Then add a paragraph describing an additional analysis that you think would be useful to provide further evidence on the research question of the authors of each reading. (Note that you are not expected to say what additional questions they could have explored but to suggest an additional analysis that could have probed the same question(s) in some other ways.)
PART III: RESEARCH IN PRACTICE

Session 9 (5 November): Practical issues in research design:
Recent experiences of MA thesis writing
Working and searching in the library

Some former MA students will join us for a discussion of the actual experience of writing an MA thesis at CEU and you will have an opportunity to ask them any question that you have about the topic.

A CEU librarian will join us for this session to explore library search techniques and productivity enhancing tools available for you via the on- and offline facilities in our library.

Mandatory reading: none.

Recommended further readings:
There is not that much written specifically about writing MA theses for some useful tips see:
For an overview of the field see:

Recommended further readings (using literature):

Take home writing assignment: none.

In-class exercise: none.
Session 10 (12 November): What makes for good theories, concepts, definitions, measures and tests? Making rigorous analysis relevant. A revision and extension of what we learnt

Mandatory reading:

Recommended further readings:

In-class exercise: none.

Take home writing assignment: Final Assignment (1,200 words). Submit your final proposal (following individual consultations with the course instructors and the Academic Writing Center). On expectations regarding the final proposal, see the e-learning site.