Methods of Political Research
Carleton College, Fall 2007

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Office Hours: W 1:45-3:45pm
Th 12:00-2:00pm

Description:

This course is intended to introduce students to the “science” side of political science. Over the course of the term, you will learn how to think like social scientists while developing various skills required by the discipline: how to chose and frame appropriate questions, how to undertake original research (complete with data collection and analysis), and how to present your findings to colleagues in a customary fashion. You will also analyze the work of other scholars (and of your peers in this class), think critically about the strengths and weaknesses of various methodological approaches and the application of the scientific method to the study of politics, and how to apply these various insights to your own work.

Although the topic of research methodology may strike some students as dull or excessively technical, debates about methodology are among the MOST contentious and heated in the discipline. Political science is known as a “borrowing discipline” that has, at various points in time, been strongly influenced by the methods used in history, economics, law, philosophy, sociology, psychology, and anthropology. Consequently, there is no single “correct” way of doing research or generating knowledge about the political world. Instead, political scientists – including the faculty here at Carleton – employ a diverse, eclectic mix of methodologies in their work. Some lament this state of affairs as a haphazard and inefficient mess while others celebrate the freedom to pursue interesting questions by whatever means seem most appropriate.

This class is NOT intended to promote any particular methodological approach as being inherently superior; rather, the point of the class is to expose you to several of the most common (and analytically useful) tools that social scientists use to make inferences about the world while sensitizing you to their respective strengths and weaknesses. There is no one-size-fits-all research method; successful political scientists take care to match their research project and question with the method that is most suited to delivering the kinds of answers they seek. By the end of the class, you should be better able to identify which methodological tools are appropriate for your own research and to justify your choice to others.

Course Structure:

The course is divided into two sections. In the first, we will examine a central debate in the philosophy of science about how we observe and understand the social world. In this section, we will discuss the “truth producing” value of social science inquiry, the nature of social causation, and our ability to examine social phenomena objectively. This section culminates in a short paper.
The second section introduces you to some of the most common methods of data analysis that any good social scientist should have in his or her “toolkit.” We will begin this section by considering various quantitative methods before shifting to a discussion of qualitative methods; we will end the section by evaluating possible mixed-method research designs that bridge the quantitative-qualitative divide.

The course will be organized around a regular pattern: Monday and Wednesday classes will involve some combination of lecture and discussion; lectures will introduce new topics or themes for the week, while we will orient our discussions around close readings of articles that illustrate a particular method or principle. Friday classes will involve hands-on “workshops” in which you get to practice and then discuss the discrete steps involved in conducting your major research project. The course will end with a two-day “mini conference” in which you will present and discuss your work in front of your colleagues.

**Required Texts:**

There are four required books for the class; these are available for purchase at the Carleton bookstore.

- Phillip Pollock, *The Essentials of Political Analysis*, 2nd ed. (TEPA)
- Phillip Pollok, *A Stata Companion to Political Analysis* (SCPA) *
- Alexander George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*

In addition to these texts, we will also read selected articles from leading scholarly journals; these will be available through the course Moodle page.

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* Over the summer, Carleton made a campus-wide switch from SPSS to Stata as its primary statistical package. In this course, we will use Stata, though you are free to use either package (SPSS is still available on lab computers). If you choose to employ SPSS, the TA and I will be available to advise you individually.

**Course Assignments:**

Your grade in this course will be based on the following assignments:

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<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Points</th>
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<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy of science paper</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research proposal</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshop assignments</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final research project</td>
<td>300</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1000</strong></td>
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Points to grade conversion:

- A 940+
- A- 939-900
- B 899-870
- B+ 869-830
- C 769-730
- C+ 729-700
- D 699-670
- D+ 669-630
- D- 629-600
- E 599-0
Participation
Your participation grade will be based on your degree of preparation for and engagement with the discussions in Wednesday and Friday classes. Regular (punctual) attendance, timely submission of workshop assignments, and active involvement in the final “mini conference” will also influence your participation.

Philosophy of science paper
At the end of the first section, you will turn in a 4-6 page (double-spaced) paper responding to a question given in class. This paper will ask you to formulate an argument and support your argument with material drawn from readings, lectures, and class discussions.

Research Proposal
Midway through the course, you will submit a 4-6 page (double-spaced) research proposal that describes your final project, including the central question and hypotheses, relevant theoretical literatures and concepts, and the most appropriate research design for exploring this topic.

Workshop Assignments
These six short assignments (approximately one per week) will break down the steps involved in carrying out the larger research project while giving you opportunities to practice some of the tools and techniques involved in data analysis. Don’t think of these assignments as busy work! Any good researcher goes through these same steps – and if you take them seriously, your final research project will be MUCH more manageable since you will be able to cut-and-paste some of your earlier work into your final paper.

Each workshop paper will be graded with a ✓, ✓+, or ✓–
- A ✓ indicates that your work is satisfactory and about at the average level of your peers. Earning six “checks” will give you a baseline of 160 points (80%).
- Each ✓+ you get will earn you six additional points above the baseline; each ✓– will lower your score by six points.
- On any given workshop assignment, no more than 1/3 of the class will earn a ✓+, and late submissions are never eligible.

The point of this scoring system is to “reduce the stakes” of each assignment and to allow you to try out new ideas and techniques without facing a stiff grade penalty. Use these assignments to build and refine your ideas/methods for your final paper.

Final Research Project
All students will conduct an independent research project over the term which must involve substantial analysis of empirical data. Though we will learn both quantitative and qualitative techniques in this class, the final project for the class will almost always involve quantitative analysis of data – not because such techniques are better, but simply because qualitative techniques are often more time-intensive and difficult to execute well within the given time constraints of a ten-week term.

The project will culminate in a class presentation (worth 75 points) and a poster that encapsulates your research and main findings (worth 225 points).

There is no final exam in this course.
**Course Policies:**

**Policy on Late Work:**
Late work will be penalized by 1/3 grade per day (e.g., from a B+ to a B) unless documentation of extenuating circumstances is provided. Late workshop papers will automatically receive a ✓ - after three days (including weekends).

**Policy on attendance and preparation:**
Attendance is required, and you are expected to complete the assigned readings before coming to class. However, if you need to miss class for some reason, it is your responsibility to get notes from your fellow classmates and, if needed, come to office hours to go over any questions that you may have.

**Policy on plagiarism and academic dishonesty:**
Both are serious offenses. Anyone caught cheating will automatically receive a zero for the assignment. To avoid any semblance of impropriety, please take pains to cite your sources correctly. You are also strongly encouraged to keep any outlines or rough drafts of your papers to document the evolution of your work. For more information on Carleton’s policy on academic honesty, please consult [http://apps.carleton.edu/campus/dos/handbook/academic_regs/?policy_id=21359](http://apps.carleton.edu/campus/dos/handbook/academic_regs/?policy_id=21359)

**Policy on special needs:**
If you require special accommodation due to a documented physical or learning disability, please come see me during the first week of class to discuss how I might best assist you in meeting the objectives and requirements of this course.

**Schedule of Readings:**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Readings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mon, 9/10</td>
<td>Introduction &amp; overview</td>
<td>TEPA, Introduction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wed, 9/12</td>
<td>Ontology &amp; epistemology</td>
<td>Marsh and Stoker, Introduction, ch. 1-3</td>
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<td>Fri, 9/14</td>
<td>Causality &amp; Hypotheses</td>
<td>Marsh and Stoker, ch. 4-6, 8</td>
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<td>Week 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mon, 9/17</td>
<td>Conceptualization &amp; measurement</td>
<td>TEPA, ch. 1-2 (pp. 7-37) &amp; ch. 3 Harff and Gurr, “Toward Empirical Theory of Genocides and Politicides: Identification and Measurement of Cases since 1945.” (Moodle)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wed, 9/19</td>
<td>Experimental logic and research design</td>
<td>TEPA, ch. 2 (pp. 37-47), ch. 4 Jordan and Sanchez, “Traditional versus Technology-Aided Instruction: The Effects of Visual Stimulus in the Classroom.” (Moodle)</td>
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<td>Fri, 9/21</td>
<td>WORKSHOP: Crafting effective research</td>
<td>Johnson and Reynolds, Political Science Research Methods, ch. 1 (Moodle)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>questions</td>
<td>Assignment #1 due in class !</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week</td>
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<td>Activity</td>
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<td>Week 3</td>
<td>Mon, 9/24</td>
<td>Sampling</td>
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<td>Wed, 9/26</td>
<td>Univariate &amp; bivariate analysis</td>
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<td>Fri, 9/28</td>
<td>WORKSHOP: Data structure, codebooks, and data sets</td>
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<td>Week 4</td>
<td>Mon, 10/1</td>
<td>Bivariate regression</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Wed, 10/3</td>
<td>Regression with dummy variables</td>
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<td>Fri, 10/5</td>
<td>WORKSHOP: data analysis I</td>
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<td>Week 5</td>
<td>Mon, 10/8</td>
<td>Multiple regression</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Wed, 10/10</td>
<td>Regression pathologies and diagnostics</td>
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<td>Fri, 10/12</td>
<td>WORKSHOP: data analysis II</td>
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<td>Week 6</td>
<td>Mon, 10/15</td>
<td>*** No class – enjoy Fall Break! ***</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Wed, 10/17</td>
<td>Logistic regression</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Fri, 10/19</td>
<td>WORKSHOP: data analysis III</td>
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| Week 7  | Mon, 10/22 | Small-N/qualitative methods | Marsh and Stoker, ch. 9  
George and Bennett, ch. 1, 3, 4 |
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<tr>
<td>Wed, 10/24</td>
<td>Comparative case studies</td>
<td>George and Bennett, ch. 8-10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fri, 10/26</td>
<td>WORKSHOP: case studies &amp; process tracing</td>
<td>No reading</td>
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**Assignment #4 due in class!**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week 8</th>
<th>Mon, 10/29</th>
<th>Content/Discourse Analysis</th>
<th>Larson, “Problems of Content Analysis in Foreign-Policy Research: Notes from the Study of the Origins of the Cold War Belief Systems.” (Moodle)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wed, 10/31</td>
<td>Boolean Analysis</td>
<td>Chan, “Explaining War Termination: A Boolean Analysis of Causes.” (Moodle)</td>
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**Assignment #5 due in class!**

| Week 9  | Mon, 11/5 | Mixed-method designs | Marsh and Stoker, ch. 11  
George and Bennett, ch. 2 |
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<tr>
<td>Fri, 11/9</td>
<td>WORKSHOP: bridging the quantitative-qualitative divide</td>
<td>Mayer and Sigelman, “Zog for Albania, Edward for Estonia, and Monarchs for all the Rest? The Royal Road to Prosperity, Democracy, and World Peace.” (Moodle)</td>
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</table>

**Assignment #6 due in class!**

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<tr>
<th>Week 10</th>
<th>Mon, 11/12</th>
<th>Poster presentations</th>
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<tr>
<td>Wed, 11/14</td>
<td>Poster presentations</td>
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</table>
Estimated Number of Pages of Reading Per Day
(light-colored data points indicate days that assignments are due)
List of Workshop Assignments:

Assignment 1: Asking Good Research Questions

The single hardest step in your research will be the first one: formulating a good research question. This assignment will get you thinking about the types of questions one can ask fruitfully in political science.

Read the Johnson & Reynolds article (on Moodle), which outlines seven different research programs in political science. After reading this chapter:

- Identify the broad research question that motivates the scholars working in each area. You will generate seven questions. In some instances, the core question will be quite evident; in others, you will have to give the matter more thought.

- In a short paper (one page or less), list the seven questions and indicate which research area has, in your opinion, made the most progress in addressing its core question. Briefly comment on the possible reasons why the program or area that you identified has advanced further than the others.

- Reflect on the political science courses that you have taken and consider the topics/issues that interested you the most. Formulate two broad questions (in the style of those you generated for the above research areas) that relate to these past courses and that you personally find interesting or compelling.

- Finally, in a response of one page or less, list these two questions and your thoughts about what it would take to develop a plausible, persuasive answer to them (e.g., what kinds of evidence might you want?). As part of your answer, you should examine the descriptions of the course datasets to see if any of them can be of use in answering your questions.

You should not exceed two pages for this assignment.

Assignment 2: Introduction to Datasets

In this assignment, you will dig a bit deeper into a dataset of your choice and (re)familiarize yourself with how to work with them.

- Read through the descriptions of the course datasets. Which (if any) seem potentially useful for answering the research questions you developed in the first assignment? As part of this investigation, you should look more closely at the codebooks to get a sense of the variables included in that dataset. If none of the provided datasets seem interesting or relevant for your purposes, you are welcome to look to outside sources of data for this assignment,
provided you give a clear citation as to where your data come from.

• Once you have selected a dataset, write a short paper of no more than two pages responding to the following questions:
  1. Who collected the data?
  2. What is the unit of analysis (e.g., what does each case represent)?
  3. How many cases are there in the dataset?
  4. What was the sampling method?
  5. For how many variables were data collected in each case?
  6. What variables does the dataset contain that are of particular interest to you as either dependent or independent variables?
  7. Evaluate the usefulness of the data for your research goals. Can this data help to answer the question(s) you posed in workshop #1?

If your software skills are a bit rusty, you should consult the Stata companion book (SCPA), especially the “Getting Started” and “Introduction to Stata” chapters.

Assignment 3: Locating Literature

Research never occurs in a vacuum; good researchers always do their due diligence and track down existing research to determine what others have said about the questions of interest, to identify alternative theories or approaches to understanding a given topic, and to locate their own work in an existing community of scholarship and debate. This assignment asks you to go through some of these steps through a literature search:

• Locate the J-Stor database on the library web site. Conduct several searches on topics related to the questions of interest to you (ones you posed in workshop #1 or became interested in as you explored the data) by entering keywords in the full-text search. Make sure that the ‘Political Science Journals’ box is checked. If your topic involves certain geographical areas, or economic issues you may want to select more journal categories. Comb the resulting list of articles for three or four that seem particularly relevant and read AT LEAST the abstracts, introductions and conclusions of these articles. When you’ve found a topic that seems especially interesting and accessible to you, save or print copies of the articles you’ve found. You may need to adjust your search criteria (just putting ‘War’ or ‘Voting’ in the full-text search box will, of course, generate too many responses).

• Locate the Web of Science database on the library web site. Do a ‘full’ search of the Social Science Citation Index for the articles you have selected from J-Stor. [note that SSCI may not go back as far as J-Stor]. Record how many times each of the J-Stor articles you found has been cited. Next, see if you can find one of the citing articles. You may be able to find it on J-Stor (if it is older) or it might be available on one of the other databases our library subscribes to (like Proquest) or you may have to venture into the library if it is from a recent journal!

• Write a two page summary of the literature you have found. Detail what you searched for, what keywords you used and provide full bibliographic references (author, date, title, journal, volume, pages) for the J-Stor articles
you found. Under each referenced article, indicate how many times it has been cited based on the SSCI.

Workshop 4: Data Analysis I

This workshop will let you apply some of the quantitative techniques we have encountered in class to your selected dataset. Before beginning, you may have to clean your data (remove missing cases, recode variables, etc.).

- First, generate a bivariate analysis of two variables (identified in your research design) using your chosen dataset and an appropriate analytic technique (e.g., cross-tabs with chi-square tests; difference of means tests, etc.). Interpret the results of this analysis both statistically AND substantively.

- Next, generate a bivariate regression using two variables in your dataset. Remember that your dependent variable must be continuous! Interpret your results both statistically AND substantively. Check your residuals for normality and heteroskedasticity. Include the relevant descriptive statistics and regression results, as well as the relevant graphs.

This assignment – including all relevant graphs, tables, statistical output, and explanatory text, should not exceed three pages in length.

Workshop 5: Data Analysis II

This workshop assignment builds on the exercise from last week but adds in more complexity.

- Select a dependent variable – either continuous or dichotomous – from your dataset. If possible, I would recommend using the same dependent variable used in the previous assignment. But if you believe a binary variable would be more relevant/interesting given your research question, feel free to change. Generate the appropriate descriptive statistics for your variables and then perform either a linear (OLS) or logistic multivariate regression with at least three independent variables. Interpret the results both statistically AND substantively. For those doing a logistic regression, this will involve interpreting both the coefficients and the odds ratios.

- Check for heteroskedasticity, multicollinearity, and autocorrelation. Include the relevant diagnostic output and your interpretation of these results. If your diagnostics reveal a problem in any of these areas, you do NOT have to take corrective steps in this assignment, but you should indicate what your next move might be to fix or at least minimize the problem.

Your output for this assignment – including regression results, graphs, tables, and explanatory text – should not exceed four pages in length.
Workshop 6: Mixed-methods

In a paper of no more than two pages, reflect on the research design that you proposed in week six and answer the following question:

- Would your investigation of this question benefit from a mixed-method design? If yes, explain what the addition of a second methodological tool would potentially contribute to your investigation. If no, clarify why a single-method approach is preferable. In your answer, consider what the possible tradeoffs might be of using one vs. multiple methods.

- If, in your opinion, a mixed-method approach might be appropriate, indicate if you believe any of the qualitative methods we have considered in class would be particularly useful for answering your question.

Philosophy of Science Paper:

Based on the readings from the first several days of class, write a paper of no more than six pages that responds to the following question:

To what degree is a "science of politics" possible?

Some issues to consider as you write:

- Would a science be more possible if the discipline strived to adopt one common ‘approach’ (with its attendant ontological and epistemological positions) thereby mirroring more homogeneous (scientific?) disciplines like Economics and Psychology?
- Could one of the approaches described in Marsh & Stoker be best suited to build a science of politics? Are there any approaches that we should particularly try to deemphasize in this regard?

While defending pluralism is a noble (if a bit wishy-washy) position, if you decide to take this position, describe how you think the different approaches can coexist. Strong essays will engage the central points of this debate such as the problem of the double-hermeneutic and/or the fact-values distinction.

Research Design:

The research design is your chance to articulate your proposal for the final project and (critically) to get advanced feedback before investing too much time and effort into the final product. In a paper of no more than six pages, include:

- An articulation of your research question (This is the intro paragraph). The question should be a manageable one. It MUST be phrased in the form of a question (remember “FINER”!) and MUST address a political issue. You should also include at least a sentence or two about why this question is worth asking (e.g., what is its theoretical/real world significance? Why should we care about answering it – is there anything at stake?)

Examples of reasonable questions: Are democratic dyads less prone to war? Why did some Eastern European states transition from authoritarian rule
more successfully than others? Why do some states adopt stricter seatbelt safety laws? What factors predicted a country’s support for the United States’ initiation of the War in Iraq?

Examples of unacceptable research questions: Do seatbelt laws work? (This is a public policy question; there is not enough political content). I’d like to study interstate border disputes. (not in question format). What causes ethnic conflict (too broad; you could narrow it by asking something like: Does environmental degradation lead to ethnic conflict)? Is democracy better than authoritarianism (normative question; you could make it more reasonable by asking whether, for example, democracy is better than authoritarianism for promoting economic growth).

• A literature review which provides some insights into what others have written (or perhaps have overlooked) about this question. What theories have been offered to explain the phenomenon? What key variables have been identified? (2-3 pages). You may want to discuss conceptualization issues here if there is any debate in your readings over how terms are defined.

• Although you wouldn’t normally be so explicit about this phase, I’d like you to articulate the general ‘approach’ to the research question that you will be employing (behavioral, rational choice, institutional, a blend of multiple approaches etc.) This section should take no more than a half page. YOU WILL NOT INCLUDE THIS ON YOUR POSTER.

• One or more testable, directional, conceptually clear and theoretically based hypotheses derived from the literature you’ve discussed (one or two sentences each).

• A very preliminary discussion what kind of testing strategy you would want to employ (a three-cornered fight where competing theories are evaluated against common evidence? A test of one theory and its hypotheses against the null?) You should also include a discussion of what data you will use to implement this strategy. What is the unit of analysis? What selection criteria will you employ if you plan to use a sub-set of the data (i.e., the basis for case selection if you’re not using the full dataset). Evaluate how well the available data sets fulfill these requirements. (1-2 pages).

• Locate a likely dependent variable of interest to you in the dataset you have chosen for your project. You will likely need to consult the codebook in order to identify some relevant variables.

Keep in mind that these components may change in the future as your project evolves and you do more reading, generate new hypotheses, and more closely assess the availability of data. You are NOT locked in to any particular research design – as your knowledge of the topic changes, so too may your evaluation of how to go about answering your question.

We will carve out some time in class (most likely on the Monday after this assignment is due) to discuss your designs in small groups so that you can get some peer feedback on your proposal.