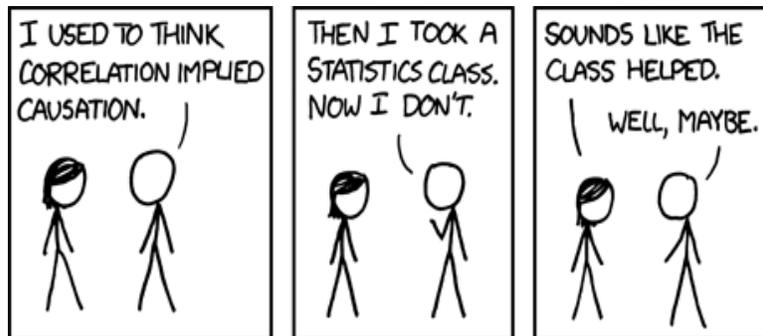


# POSC 230: Methods of Political Research

Carleton College, Spring 2009

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**Spring office hours:**  
Tuesdays, 3:00-4:00pm  
Wednesdays, 11:00-2:00pm  
Thursdays, 3:00-4:00pm



xkcd.com

## 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 choose 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 and mixed-method research designs that bridge the quantitative-qualitative divide.

The course will involve some combination of lecture, discussion, and 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 classmates.

### **Required Texts:**

There are three required texts for this course, all of which are available through the Carleton bookstore.

- David Marsh and Gerry Stoker, Theory and Methods of Political Science, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.
- Phillip Pollock, The Essentials of Political Analysis, 3rd ed. (TEPA)
- Phillip Pollock, A Stata Companion to Political Analysis (SCPA)

Additional readings will be made available on Moodle.

### **Course Requirements:**

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

Participation	150 points
Philosophy of science paper	200 points
Research proposal	150 points
Workshop assignments	200 points
Final research project	300 points
	<b>1000 points</b>

#### **Participation**

Your participation grade will be based on your degree of preparation for and engagement with the discussions in class. 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 five 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 five “checks” will give you a baseline of 162 points (82%).
- Each ✓+ you get will earn you seven additional points above the baseline; each ✓– will lower your score by seven 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 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 constraints of a ten-week term.

The project will culminate in a class presentation (worth 100 points) and a poster that encapsulates your research and main findings (worth 200 points).

There is no final exam in this course.

## **Course Policies:**

### **Attendance**

Attendance is required, which means that you are expected to come to class regularly and on time. If you are unable to attend due to illness or some other personal matter, you should notify me by email in advance. A pattern of unexcused absences or tardiness will lower your participation grade. If you need to miss class, it is your responsibility to see me in office hours or to get notes from a classmate. Emailing me and asking “did I miss anything?” is not an acceptable substitute.

### **Policy on Late Work**

Late work will incur a penalty of 1/3 grade per day unless documentation of extenuating circumstances (ill health, family emergency) is provided. Late workshop papers will automatically receive a ✓ - after two days (including weekends). Make a note: technology is heartless. Computers crash, printers jam, and files occasionally disappear from disks. It is your responsibility to plan ahead, to make back-ups of your work, and to leave yourself sufficient time to compensate for mishaps. Technological difficulties will not excuse late work! Extensions will not be granted except in exceptional circumstances involving unforeseen complications or obstacles. Simply having three papers due in a week is not grounds for getting an extension.

### **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:

You are expected to do the assigned readings before coming to class. Your ability to discuss these readings—both the author’s arguments and, if appropriate, the methodology used—will be key factors in your participation grade. Readings noted with (M) will be available on Moodle.

	Date	Topic	Readings
Week 1	March 31	Introduction	
	April 2	No class! Get a head start on next week’s readings and the Johnson & Reynolds article for the first workshop paper.	
Week 2	April 7	Ontology & epistemology	Marsh and Stoker, ch. 1-6, 8
	April 9	Arguments and hypotheses	TEPA, ch. 3  <b>Workshop paper #1 due</b>
Week 3	April 14	Data structures and research resources	Guest speakers; no reading
	April 16	Causality & experimental design	TEPA, ch. 4-5  Alan S. Gerber and Donald P. Green (2001). “Do Phone Calls Increase Voter Turnout? A Field Experiment.” <i>Public Opinion Quarterly</i> 65: 75-85. (M)  <b>Workshop paper #2 due</b>
Week 4	April 21	Measurement and Sampling	TEPA, ch. 1, 2, 6
	April 23	Univariate and bivariate analysis	TEPA, ch. 7  <b>Philosophy of science paper due</b>
Week 5	April 28	Bivariate regression and regression with dummy variables	TEPA, ch. 8 (pp. 170-187)  <b>Workshop paper #3 due</b>
	April 30	Multiple regression	TEPA, ch. 8 (pp. 187-194)
Week 6	May 5	Regression diagnostics	No readings  <b>Workshop paper #4 due</b>
	May 7	Logistic regression	TEPA, ch. 9
Week 7	May 12	The visual display of information	Edward Tufte, excerpts from <i>The Visual Display of Quantitative Information</i> , <i>Envisioning Information</i> , and <i>Visual Explanations</i> . (M)  <b>Research proposal due</b>
	May 14	Introduction to qualitative methods	Marsh and Stoker, ch. 9, 11

Week 8	May 19	Case studies and process tracing	Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, <i>Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences</i> , pp. 17-35, 73-108. (M)  <b>Workshop paper #5 due</b>
	May 21	Interviews and human subjects	Robert White (2007). "I'm Not Sure What I Told You Last Time: Methodological Notes on Accounts from High-Risk Activists in the Irish Republican Movement." <i>Mobilization</i> 12(3): 287-305. (M)  In addition, familiarize yourself with Carleton's IRB requirements: <a href="http://apps.carleton.edu/governance/institutional_review_board/">http://apps.carleton.edu/governance/institutional_review_board/</a>
Week 9	May 26	Content analysis	Klaus Krippendorff, <i>Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology</i> , ch. 1. (M)  Melissa K. Merry (2008). "Communicating Complexity: Do Environmental Groups "Dumb Down" Issues for Public Consumption?" Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston. Skim, but read the hypotheses, data, and methods sections (pp. 5-12) closely. (M)
	May 28	In-class presentations	
Week 10	June 2	In-class presentations	