

FUNDAMENTALS OF RESEARCH IN THE SUBJECT AREA OF POLITICAL SCIENCE: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract: The article highlights the dynamic and evolving landscape of social science disciplines, particularly in the realm of political science. This field encompasses the examination of politics at local, state, and national levels, as well as international relations, political theory, and political history, among other areas of human activity related to politics and political behavior. Consequently, political science can be characterized as a multifaceted and ever-evolving domain that investigates the political actions of individuals and groups, the institutions through which societies govern themselves, and the foundational values that shape political ideologies and systems. Research undertaken by political scientists inevitably tackles the numerous inquiries that emerge within this expansive area of social science.

Keywords: Research, Research fundamentals, Political Science, Research methods, Political theory, political ideologies

1.0 Introduction

Research Methods for Political Science was developed to address the demand for a comprehensive methods book that reflects contemporary perspectives across key subfields of political science, such as comparative politics, international relations, and public administration. The text features discussions and examples of current research topics and methodologies prevalent in the professional literature. A significant strength of this book is its integration of both positivist and postpositivist methodologies within a single volume. It also offers detailed guidance on utilizing various statistical software programs. Additionally, the text highlights advancements in social science research, as well as management and organizational studies, alongside political and administrative research. This book is not merely another quantitative research methods guide or a statistics manual; it encompasses aspects of both while providing a robust introduction to qualitative research methodologies. Given the sustained interest in positivist research methods evident in leading political science journals and presentations at numerous conferences I have attended in recent years, the book slightly prioritizes the statistical techniques utilized by contemporary political scientists. It covers both descriptive and inferential statistical methods, complete with step-by-step instructions for their application. The qualitative methods addressed include explanatory, interpretive, and critical research designs. It is crucial to note that this text does not focus on political science as a discipline or its subfields. It does not engage in comparisons of political systems, analyze declining citizen engagement, or offer guidance on conducting political campaigns. However, it does reference such topics and the research methodologies and data collection techniques employed by political scientists. This book focuses on how individuals interested in pursuing careers as practicing politicians, political campaign directors, future academic researchers, or political scientists can effectively design and implement research that adheres to the fundamental principles of "good science." It heavily references the insights, recommendations, conclusions, and innovative ideas of numerous current and former political scientists. This research methods guide is deeply indebted to their academic contributions. However, the examples provided should not be viewed as exhaustive or fully representative of the entire field. The author has selected these examples based on personal experience, education, and perspective. Any inaccuracies, whether due to omission or commission, are solely the author's responsibility.

2.0 Purposes of Political Science Research

Research serves a variety of purposes, fundamentally categorized into basic and applied types. Basic research, often referred to as pure or theoretical research, aims to expand the overall body of knowledge. It focuses on developing theories regarding political phenomena and the reasons behind specific events. An illustrative example of basic research is the examination of ancient fossils, a field known as paleontology, which prioritizes theoretical exploration over practical problem-solving. For instance, a common inquiry in paleontology might investigate the reasons for the extinction of dinosaurs. While the insights gained from paleontological studies are intriguing, they often hold limited immediate relevance for those engaged in political discourse. Conversely, applied research is oriented towards addressing practical issues or aiding researchers and political scientists in interpreting historical behavior to inform future predictions. Applied researchers strive to formulate theories that explain past occurrences, seeking to identify causal relationships. Their investigations aim to provide a comprehensive account of what transpired, the mechanisms behind it, and the reasons for its occurrence, thereby enhancing the ability to forecast similar events in the future. In the realm of political science, applied research is more prevalent than basic research, although both approaches significantly contribute to the academic landscape. Political scientists employing either methodology utilize comparable techniques, adhere to similar research frameworks, and are committed to conducting their inquiries with scientific rigor, ethical standards, validity, and reliability.

3.0 Describing the Purposes for Research

Several scholars have sought to articulate a set of objectives tailored to the themes and inquiries prevalent in political science research. For instance, Babbie (2001) outlined three primary objectives of research within the social sciences, including political science: (1) exploring a topic, (2) describing a topic, situation, or event, and (3) explaining a phenomenon. In their examination of the comparative method in political science, Pennings, Keman, and Kleinnijenhuis (1999) identified three research objectives: (1) recognizing patterns in the interactions between societal and political actors, (2) understanding the processes of political institutionalization, and (3) analyzing societal changes that arise from these interactions. Stallings and Ferris (1988) proposed a three-category framework for classifying research purposes, labeling them as conceptual, relational, and evaluative. Conceptual studies aim to define the core concepts related to a problem, identifying key variables for future research or framing issues for subsequent studies. Relational studies focus on describing the connections between variables or exploring potential causal relationships. Evaluative studies, on the other hand, seek to explain or assess an event, program, policy, or other phenomena. Lathrop (1969) offered a different perspective, outlining four research purposes: (1) testing theories, (2) broadening the applicability of existing research, Resolving conflicting research findings and replicating previous studies are two key aspects of research. These can also be viewed as research objectives, which are often synonymous with research purposes in scientific inquiry. Commonly cited research objectives include: (1) exploring a topic to gain insights and generate ideas, (2) describing a topic, typically aimed at quantifying the occurrence of specific phenomena, and (3) establishing or measuring causation; in causal studies, the goal is to assess the influence of one or more independent variables on changes in a dependent variable. These objectives could equally be referred to as purposes. Researchers focus on issues they deem worthy of investigation and approach their studies based on their beliefs about how knowledge is acquired. Regardless of their awareness, researchers across various disciplines are influenced by the philosophical perspectives they bring to their work (Marsh, Stoker, and Furlong 2002). These perspectives are rooted in the philosophical concepts of ontology and epistemology, both of which pertain to knowledge and its development. Ontology addresses what can be known about the world, focusing on the nature of our experiences. In contrast, epistemology examines the methods through which knowledge is acquired, including the validity of that knowledge, and poses questions about how we can ascertain the truth of what we know (Plotkin 1994).

4.0 Research Fundamentals in Political Science

The Fundamentals of Political Science Research serves as an introductory guide to the scientific examination of

political phenomena. It equips readers with essential tools to become discerning consumers and novice creators of political research, encompassing the following key components.

4.1 The Big Issues in Political Science

In the early 1980s, the editorial board of the American Political Science Association (APSA) initiated a series of publications that invited various political scientists to contribute papers outlining the current trends in the field. Subsequent volumes were published in 1993 and 2002. A comparative overview of the key section headings from each volume is provided. The first edition of the State of the Discipline series raised a significant question among researchers regarding whether the focus of political science should be theoretical or applied. There was a strong emphasis on pure or theoretical science, moving away from liberal reform and social control as the justification for social science. The 1960s represented a period of optimism about scientific theory and the goal of achieving a behavioral model of political science, with many efforts centered around the idea of politics as a “system.” However, researchers began to express dissatisfaction with the behavioral/systems model during this time. The emergence of political science as a policy science led to increased focus on policy-related research, but it also became challenging to pinpoint a limited set of core issues within the discipline. Diverse interests led to varying emphases, causing political science to become too broad for any consensus on a core set of issues applicable to all. While the field was considered dynamic, it was also viewed as lacking a clear direction or focus. The understanding of what constitutes “appropriate” political science research continues to change. Major issues within political science frequently shift, as illustrated by the three State of the Discipline volumes. By the time an issue becomes relevant to academics and practitioners interested in it, it may already be outdated, with new topics emerging to capture the attention of researchers. This observation may have influenced Heywood's decision to focus on broad concepts in his book, *Key Concepts in Politics*, where he listed a range of key concepts, ideologies, research approaches, values, governmental systems, structures, levels of government institutions, and ways to address political science questions. His concise volume offers enough topics to inspire political scientists with numerous research ideas.

4.2 Fragmentation in Political Science Research

Since the mid-20th century, many fields, including political science, have experienced significant growth. An unintended effect of this expansion has been a shift towards more interdisciplinary research. Researchers have increasingly moved beyond a narrow set of questions to explore a broader range of topics in search of new areas of study. As a result, disciplines have become fragmented into smaller, specialized areas. Political science, like other social sciences, has developed numerous distinct subfields. Each of these subfields typically has one or more journals dedicated to sharing advancements specific to its focus. An analysis of issues from 2001 and 2002 of four notable political science journals—the American Journal of Political Science, American Political Science Review, Journal of Politics, and Political Research Quarterly—revealed articles addressing the field's traditional topics, such as political theory, American politics, elections, the judiciary, comparative politics, international relations, research methodology, public administration, and program evaluation. Additionally, numerous papers on diverse individual topics that do not fit neatly into established subfields were also published. Currently, the American Political Science Review features research papers categorized into five areas: political theory, American politics, comparative politics, international relations, and public administration. There is also a sixth category focused on research methods and analysis, which prioritizes methodological issues rather than political topics.

4.3 Categories of Political Science Research

To establish a framework for the expanding field of political science, Fagan (2002) categorized numerous working papers into just over a dozen distinct areas. The primary topics he highlighted include American politics, comparative politics, political communication, political theory, public administration, international relations, political economy, public policy, and research methods and data. Within these main categories, various subfields emerge. For instance, Cochran et al. (1995) identified nine specific areas related to public policy studies, which encompass intergovernmental relations, the overall economy, taxation and spending issues, energy and environmental concerns, crime and justice, healthcare, education, legal and social equality, and issues of diversity and tolerance. Ruget (2002) proposed four key dimensions that structure political science research. These dimensions pertain to the discipline's standing in academia, the specific research areas political scientists focus on, the sociological traits of political scientists, and their political affiliations. Collectively, these aspects define the

symbolic capital of the discipline.

4.4 From Thematic Focus to Research Topic

The thematic emphasis within the field of political science significantly influences the selection of research topics. One effective approach to identify viable research areas is to examine the focus of current studies, as well as the projects receiving funding and those that are being published. A reflection of the diverse range of research topics can be seen in a selection of recent studies funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF). In 2007, the NSF declared its commitment to supporting research that enhances the understanding of citizenship, governance, and political dynamics. The substantive areas of interest encompass, but are not limited to, American politics, comparative politics, international relations, political behavior, political economy, and political institutions. Notable examples of funded research include investigations into bargaining processes, electoral campaigns and systems, citizen engagement in both emerging and established democracies, democratization and political transitions, domestic and international conflicts, international political economy, party activism, political psychology, political tolerance, research methodologies, and student research experiences (NSF 2007).

4.5 Branches of Political Science

One alternative approach to delineating the scope of work in political science is to examine the structural organization of the discipline itself. Numerous efforts have been undertaken to condense the extensive and expanding array of research topics into a more manageable set of core themes. The Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences division (SBE) of the NSF provides funding for research across, but not exclusively limited to, the six political science topic areas previously mentioned. In a similar vein, Laitin recognized four primary branches along with two supporting areas within the discipline.

4.6 Political Science Research in Journals

An examination of key political science journals provides clarity on the definitions and structures within the field. Current researchers are concentrating on inquiries across five major domains: (1) the history, theory, and philosophy of politics; (2) American politics; (3) comparative politics; (4) public administration, which encompasses the judiciary, public law, and criminal justice; and (5) international relations along with associated geopolitical matters. To broaden the perspective beyond American politics, the second category could be reframed as national politics, acknowledging that significant political science research is being conducted globally. This research may be comparative in nature or may focus on analyzing a specific national system, yet it consistently addresses issues of national relevance. Researchers from various countries typically replace American politics with their own national or regional contexts while adhering to a similar framework of topics.

4.7 Different Answers for Similar Problems

Researchers across various subfields initiate their work with a shared foundational purpose statement, which serves as the basis for developing one or more research hypotheses. From this common starting point, they diverge in their approaches to achieve what may seem like a unified objective, yet is fundamentally distinct. For instance, consider three researchers from different subfields who are exploring how various issues affect voter behavior. A political activity researcher might investigate whether voters in California respond differently to a presidential candidate's agricultural platform compared to those in Nebraska. Meanwhile, a public policy researcher could focus on how families from diverse ethnic backgrounds react to a candidate's position on welfare reform training programs. Additionally, a researcher in international relations might analyze voting patterns among adults in the European Union following the implementation of a shared currency. Such variations are also evident in other areas of political science.

5.0 Conclusion

The study of politics and political activities expands our understanding of the institutions and individuals that shape the political landscape. As a branch of social science, political science research enhances our knowledge of political systems and human behavior related to politics. Researchers in this field can explore a vast array of questions, employing various methods to direct their investigations. This chapter discussed various topics covered in political science research and proposed strategies to narrow down these topics into major fields of study. Research involves

the collection of data to address specific questions or solve problems, while research methodology refers to the strategies used to gather this information. In philosophical terms, this falls under epistemology. The phrases research techniques or processes describe the steps taken within a particular methodology. Research activities are often defined as straightforward procedures for collecting information, influenced by the philosophical perspective researchers bring to their work. Scientific research should not be viewed as a rigid process but rather as a philosophical approach applicable to diverse problems and methodologies. Researchers generally aim to (1) describe phenomena, (2) predict future behaviors or events, or (3) deepen our understanding of various relationships. Most political science research is categorized into five main areas: (1) the history, theory, and philosophy of politics; (2) American or other national politics; (3) comparative politics; (4) public administration, including the judiciary, public law, and criminal justice; and (5) international relations and geopolitical matters. Each subfield has its unique concerns and research traditions. However, mainstream research tends to concentrate on a positivist approach and quantitative methods. Identifying key issues in political science poses challenges due to the ongoing evolution of the discipline.

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