Sample Syllabus

QUALITATIVE METHODS IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

The questions driving our class:

- What can qualitative methods tell us that quantitative methods cannot, and vice versa?
- How do we select cases, and why does case selection matter for inference?
- How do we collect, manage, and analyze qualitative data systematically?
- What does it mean to do rigorous qualitative research in political science?

Course Description:

This course introduces students to the logic and practice of qualitative research in political science. We begin with the epistemological foundations of qualitative inquiry and the relationship between research questions and methodological choices. The course then moves through the core building blocks of qualitative research such as case selection strategies, process tracing, interviewing, archival and documentary analysis, ethnographic observation, and content analysis. Throughout, students develop practical skills by designing and executing a qualitative research project. The course concludes with sessions on research ethics and writing qualitative findings.

Student Learning Outcomes:

Upon completion of this course, students will be able to

- Articulate the epistemological foundations of qualitative research and its place within political science;
- Formulate research questions suited to qualitative inquiry and select appropriate research designs;
- Apply case selection strategies, including most-similar, most-different, and deviant case designs;
- Design and conduct semi-structured interviews, including informed consent protocols;
- Analyze primary documents, archival materials, and media sources systematically;
- Evaluate the strengths and limitations of ethnographic and participant observation methods;
- Code qualitative data and identify patterns through thematic and content analysis;
- Write up qualitative findings with attention to transparency and replicability;
- Assess the ethical dimensions of qualitative fieldwork, including positionality and researcher effects.

Course Logistics:

Tuesdays & Thursdays: Lectures and workshops

Thursdays: In-class exercises

Required Materials:

Cyr, Jennifer, and Sara Wallace Goodman, eds. *Doing Good Qualitative Research*. Oxford University Press, 2024. [DGQR]

Note: DGQR chapters are short. Most run 10-12 pages each, so two chapters per week is roughly the same load as a single journal article. The book is designed as a handbook with standalone chapters by different authors, not a dense monograph you read cover to cover.

Gerring, John. *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices*. 2nd edition. Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Powner, Leanne C. *Empirical Research and Writing: A Political Science Student's Practical Guide*. CQ Press, 2014.

Additional journal articles as assigned (available on course management system).

Course Policies

GRADES

Qualitative Research Design Proposal (25%): You will develop a qualitative research design proposal, including a research question, case selection rationale, data collection strategy, and analytic framework. You will present a draft and receive peer feedback before final submission.

Practical Exercises (20%): Four short exercises applying methods covered in class: (1) a process-tracing memo, (2) interview design and pilot, (3) documentary/archival analysis, and (4) a coding exercise. Each exercise is worth 5%.

Weekly Reading Responses (15%): Short reflections (300-500 words) engaging critically with assigned readings. Your two lowest grades are dropped.

In-Class Participation and Workshops (15%): Active engagement in discussions and in-class workshops. Quality of contributions matters more than quantity.

Methods Critique Paper (20%): You will select a published qualitative study in comparative politics and write a 2,000-word methodological assessment, evaluating the author's research design, case selection, data collection, and analytic strategy.

Self-Reflection and Assessment (5%): Two 1-2 page self-reflection essays on your learning and development as a qualitative researcher. I will provide a template for these reflections.

Academic Integrity

Should you commit academic misconduct in this class, you will be held accountable according to University policies. Consult the institution's published academic integrity policy for details.

Accommodations

If you have a physical, psychiatric, emotional, medical, or learning disability that may impact your ability to carry out coursework, contact the Student Disability Resource Center, who will review your concerns and determine, with you, what accommodations are necessary and appropriate. All information and documentation are confidential.

Emergency or Illness

Should you experience a serious illness or personal emergency during this course that would prevent you from completing the required assignments, notify the professor immediately. Students who notify the

professor may receive an incomplete grade in the course or pursue alternative actions, at the professor's discretion.

Course Schedule:

PART I: FOUNDATIONS OF QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

Week 1: Introduction: Why Qualitative Methods?

DGQR, Chapter 1: Introduction (Cyr and Goodman)

Mahoney and Goertz (2006) "A Tale of Two Cultures: Contrasting Quantitative and Qualitative Research," Political Analysis 14(3): 227-249.

Week 2: Research Questions and Theory

DGQR, Chapter 2: Choosing a Research Question (Lynch)

Powner, Chapters 1-2: From Research Topic to Research Question; From Research Question to Theory to Hypothesis

Week 3: Positionality, Reflexivity, and the Construction of Knowledge

DGQR, Chapter 3: The Researcher's Gaze: Positionality and Reflexivity (Thomas)

DGQR, Chapter 5: The Construction of Knowledge (Lee)

PART II: RESEARCH DESIGN

Week 4: Case Selection: Strategies and Trade-offs

DGQR, Chapter 6: Case Study and Selection (Goodman)

Gerring, Chapter 5: Case Selection

Seawright and Gerring (2008) "Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research," Political Research Quarterly 61(2): 294-308.

Week 5: The Comparative Method

Lijphart (1971) "Comparative Politics and Comparative Method," American Political Science Review 65(3): 682-693.

Powner, Chapter 5: Case Selection and Study Design for Qualitative Research

PART III: COLLECTING QUALITATIVE DATA

Week 6: Preparing for Data Collection

DGQR, Chapter 13: Developing a Flexible Data-Collection Plan (Mayka and Rich)

DGQR, Chapter 15: A Plan for Managing and Storing Your Data (Pérez Bentancur)

Powner, Chapter 6: Qualitative Data Collection and Management

Week 7: Interviewing Elites and Ordinary People // Fieldwork Exercise 1 Due (Process-Tracing Memo)

DGQR, Chapter 16: Interviewing Elites (Li)

DGQR, Chapter 17: Interviewing and Listening to Ordinary People (Cramer)

Week 8: Interviewing Vulnerable Populations and Focus Groups // Fieldwork Exercise 2 Due (Interview Design and Pilot)

DGQR, Chapter 18: Interviewing Vulnerable Populations (Pearlman)

DGQR, Chapter 19: Focus Groups (Cyr)

DGQR, Chapter 11: Sampling Hard-to-Reach Populations (Khoury)

Week 9: Ethnography and Participant Observation

DGQR, Chapter 20: Ethnography (Pisano)

Wedeen (2010) "Reflections on Ethnographic Work in Political Science," Annual Review of Political Science 13: 255-272.

Week 10: Archival Research, Historical Data, and Digital Fieldwork // Fieldwork Exercise 3 Due (Documentary/Archival Analysis)

DGQR, Chapter 22: Locating and Working with Historical Data (Kim)

DGQR, Chapter 28: Digital Fieldwork: Opportunities and Challenges (MacLean, Smith, and Kapiszewski)

Lustick (1996) "History, Historiography, and Political Science," American Political Science Review 90(3): 605-618.

PART IV: ANALYZING QUALITATIVE DATA

Week 11: Close Reading, Description, and Content Analysis // Fieldwork Exercise 4 Due (Coding Exercise)

DGQR, Chapter 29: Reading Closely (Ellermann)

DGQR, Chapter 30: The Role of Description (Avant)

DGQR, Chapter 31: Content Analysis (Rucks-Ahidiana)

Week 12: Process Tracing and Comparative Historical Analysis

DGQR, Chapter 33: Process Tracing (Liu)

DGQR, Chapter 34: Comparative Historical Analysis (Singh)

PART V: ETHICS, TRANSPARENCY, AND PUBLISHING

Week 13: Research Ethics

DGQR, Chapter 27: Navigating Ethical Issues and Choices in the Field (Duquette-Rury)

DGQR, Chapter 37: Research Transparency in Qualitative Inquiry (Kapiszewski)

Week 14: Draft Research Design Presentations and Peer Review

Powner, Chapters 10-11: Practicing Peer Review; Posters, Presentations, and Publishing

In-class: Draft presentations and structured peer feedback.

FINAL QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN PROPOSALS DUE: See course calendar