POLI210: Political Science Research Methods

Lecture 2.1: Studying Politics Scientifically

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September 7th, 2021

Plan for today

- What is science?
- What is political *science*?

Boring admin stuff

- Labs: start next week

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- Course discussions: MyCourses + whatever you set up
- Office Hours: T 10-11; W 4-5; F 10-11
  - Zoom link on MyCourses; TAs' TBA
- Textbook: 4th edition + bookstore out of copies
- Any questions?

Clarifying expectations

2 types of readings:

- About actual methodological content
  - Important, especially if content is both here and in lectures
- "Application" readings
  - For your broader understanding; more tangible
  - I'm not going to ask specific questions

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Types of evaluations:

- Quizzes: objectively right or wrong, e.g. what are the three types of inference? Which of these statements is normative?
- Midterm: for longer answers, e.g. is the scientific study of politics worthwhile?
- Assignments: both correct code + demonstrate understanding

How to do well in this class

- Stay on top of things
- Can be difficult, so be strategic
- Think about what's actionable in terms of evaluation
- At the end of each reading/lecture:
  - Are you able to describe the main argument/takeaways in 2-3 sentences?
  - If you had to name a handful of critical concepts, what would they be?
- Don't lose the forest for the trees
  - There's a lot of superfluous information
  - Focus on the big picture

Political science as a science

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- See Kerry and Massie

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- See Kerry and Massie
- This course: learn methods and make your own assessment about the "science" in political science

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Explanatory theory: Story that justifies the hypothesis

Definition by negation: Michael Moore

Start watching “Bowling for Columbine” at 42:50 and 1:17:12

Discussing “Bowling for Columbine”

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- What about his independent variable?

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- What is his method of gathering and analyzing evidence?

Discussing "Bowling for Columbine"

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- What about his independent variable?
- What is his method of gathering and analyzing evidence?
- Overall, how scientific is Michael Moore's method?
  - What are the scientific elements?
  - What are the not-so-scientific elements?

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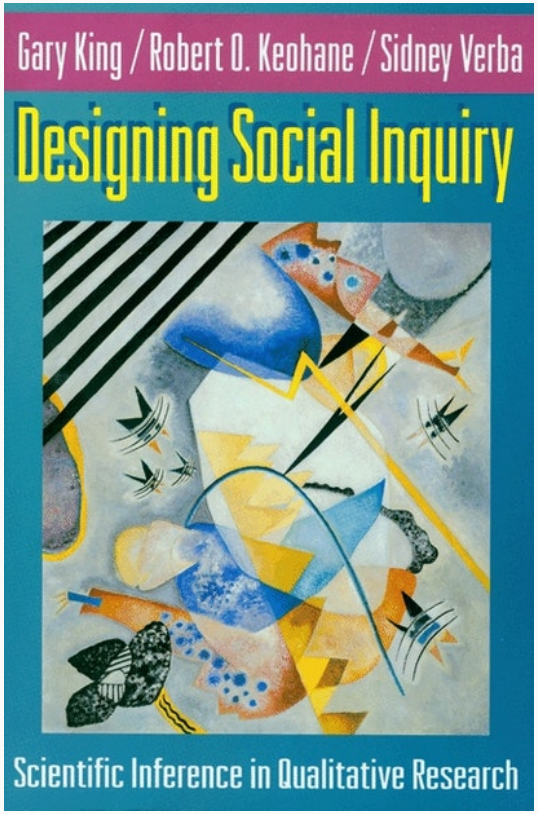
- "The" cause? Acknowledge multicausal processes

Science as rules-based

King, Keohane and Verba (1994): "The content of 'science' is primarily the methods and rules, not the subject matter, since we can use these methods to study virtually anything."



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- Accumulation of knowledge: a community builds on one another's findings

You may wonder whether this can be achieved in the social sciences – there are a lot of complications!

Empiricism

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Problems?

- Our intuition is sometimes hard to tame!
  - Always ask yourself: what piece of empirical evidence would make me change my mind?
  - Is the answer "none?"

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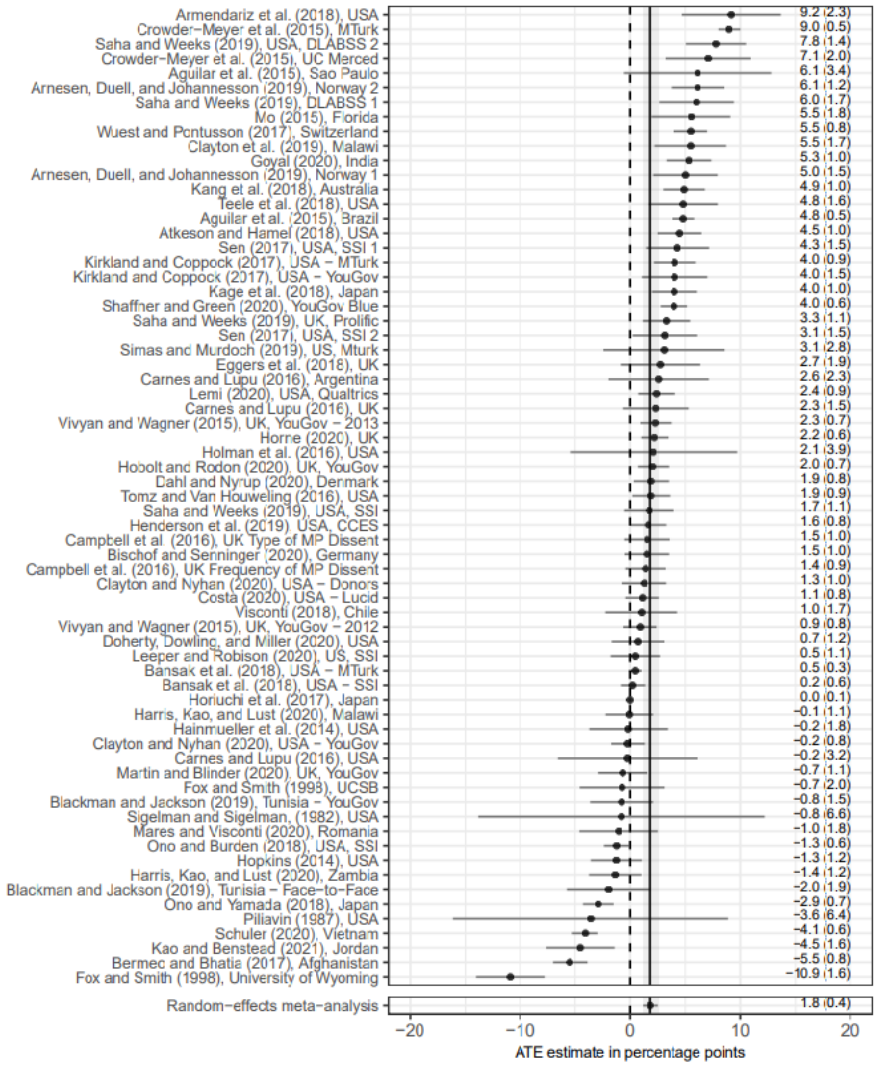
  - Is the answer "none?"
- We disagree on the best way to measure a concept
  - The "real-world observations" are not always lying there to be observed
  - The observation itself has to be constructed
  - Upshot: the "observation" you make may not be the same "observation" I make

Empiricism and intuition

(Schwarz and Coppock 2021)

Figure 1: Results of 67 Candidate Choice Experiments on the Effect of Candidate Gender

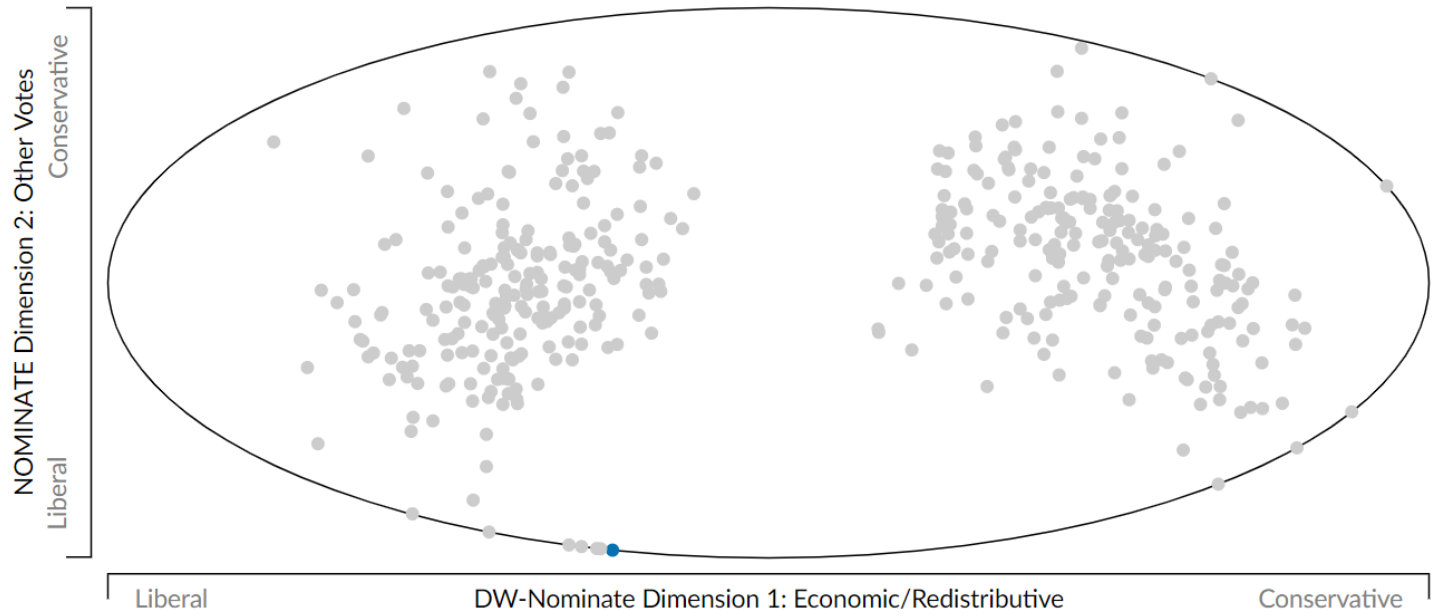


Empiricism and measurement

DW-NOMINATE: AOC as a moderate Democrat?

117th Congress (2021-2023) > Representatives

DW-Nominate Plot



Roster (Sort by Name, Party, State, Ideology, Seniority -- Tabular View)

Filter Name: alexandri

OCASIO-CORTEZ,
Alexandria
Democrat

Method

Method: There are rules (more or less loose) for processing those real-world observations

Problems?

- How "loose" must the rules be?
  - Too loose: no common standard, potential for abuse
  - Too strict: restricts scientific creativity/personal preferences/heterodox approaches
- The data rarely "speaks for itself!"

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- My choice of research question is, necessarily, "biased" by my interests, normative commitments...
  - As well as the research topics I *don't choose*

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Problems?

- We are not good at dealing with and quantifying uncertainty!
  - We want to know whether the vaccine "works" or "doesn't work"
  - Oftentimes, the answer is: it works some of the time, for some people, under some circumstances

Accumulation of knowledge

Accumulation of knowledge: a community builds on one another's findings

Problems?

- Findings can be contradictory; the "body" of evidence not coherent
- Difficult to get a view of the literature as a whole

A few presumptions

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A lot of complications; peculiar philosophical presumptions!

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- Other option: do the best we can and acknowledge how hard this is
  - We have *no choice* but to engage with social scientific evidence
    - Gelman: "whatever we do, people will engage in social-science reasoning...the alternative to good social science is not no social science, it's bad social science."

Science as socially-constructed

Note that we still don't have a definition of science...

- Get 100 scientists in a room and they wouldn't agree!
- Early political scientists certainly thought they were doing science
- We do today – but maybe we'll look stupid in 50 years!
- Sartori (2004, 786): "Where is political science going? ...American-type political science...is going nowhere. Visit, to believe, the annual meetings of the American Political Science Association; it is an experience of unfading dullness. Or read, to believe, the illegible and/or massively irrelevant *American Political Science Review*."

On the comparative nature of science

Something to keep in mind:

- "The question over the objectivity of the social sciences was framed from the start in a comparative form: 'can the social sciences be as objective as the natural sciences?' The comparison, in its turn, was premised on the belief that the natural sciences are the better 'sciences.' " (Montuschi 2014, 123)

Are the natural sciences "better sciences?"

- Are the social sciences merely derivative of the natural sciences (i.e. the same but applied to a different object of study)? Or are they

Challenges we face

A peculiar challenge we face: questions about "the very existence of their [the social sciences'] subject matters." (Montuschi 2014, 126)

- Seems clear that gases, heat, molecules, planets, etc. exist *independent of our investigation of them*
- Does "alcoholism" exist independent of sociological studies of substance abuse? "The state?" "Inflation?"

Another challenge: "individuals knowingly interact with the ways they and others are classified"

- The igneous rock doesn't care what it's called!
- A person cares whether they live in the "inner-city" or the ghetto!

Scientific literacy

A goal of this course: scientific literacy

A difference between having the ability to *do* science and scientific literacy

- "*use* the habits of mind and knowledge of science…to think about and make sense of many of the ideas, claims, and events they encounter in everyday life." (American Association for the Advancement of Science, quoted in Hill and Myers 2014)

Reading news articles, reading op-eds, debating with friends: apply a social-scientific lens

BONUS: A short disciplinary history

Early days: science as "fact gathering and objective reporting."

American scholars of politics have, for the most part, always viewed their discipline as a science. But up into the 1940s they did so with little anxiety or, for that matter, self-reflection. A low-key empiricist notion of science as fact gathering and objective reporting prevailed, and it gave little reason to prefer quantitative over qualitative techniques. The behavioralists challenged

(Adcock and Bevir 2010)

Empirical research was concerned with "densely descriptive reports on particular people, places, processes, events, or institutions, which were treated as innately interesting rather than as 'cases' of broader phenomena" (Sigelman 2006, 467)

Political science drew from law and history, more than the other social sciences

A short disciplinary history

1950s: Rise of quantitative techniques and surveys

- Pioneering studies in voting behavior and public opinion
- Quantitative methods are rudimentary – means, cross-tabs...

1970s: Influence of economics and the rational choice framework

- Quantitative work moves to multivariate analysis

1980s: the first experiments (Iyengar and colleagues on news media)

Political science today

Increasing methodological sophistication

- In economics: a "credibility revolution" (Angrist and Pischke 2010)

Increasingly complex data collection

Top PhD programs in the discpline have long methods sequences - Often ~6 courses in PS depts + more in other depts!

Amidst all this...

- "we should never forget that methods are the tools we use when we do research, not the goal of our research, or our reason for being political scientists." (Rothstein 2005, 8)

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