Course convenor: Dr Pieter van Houten (pjv24@cam.ac.uk)

Course description

The course provides a graduate-level introduction to empirical research in international relations and politics. The topics covered in the first term's general module include historical background on the study of IR and politics in Cambridge, the main aspects of research design and different methodological choices and issues faced in most research projects (including MPhil dissertations), some of the philosophical assumptions underlying different approaches in the field, and common challenges related to selecting cases and materials, constructing arguments, formulating and presenting research proposals, and dealing with ethical considerations. This module will be particularly useful for students who have not done courses on research methodology in the social sciences before (and should be a useful reminder for those who have done such courses before). The module's emphasis is not on teaching specific techniques and approaches (which will vary widely across the students' dissertations), but on outlining different methodological challenges and choices involved in doing research in IR and politics, clarifying some methodological concepts and jargon, and giving practical advice on doing research. In addition, in the first term students will do a module on how to read and understand statistics used in the study of politics and international relations (or a different statistics module depending on preference and existing expertise in statistics).

In the second term, students choose one of the following modules on methods in qualitative and quantitative analysis commonly used in the conduct of inquiry: comparative case studies, interpretative methods, and public policy analysis. Particular attention will be paid in these modules to influential applications of these techniques in international and political studies. In addition, there will be optional workshops on using archives and on elite interviews, which will be useful to students who are planning to use these methods in their research.

Lectures and seminars in the various modules in this course orient students toward asking good research questions, gathering and analysing high-quality materials, and persuasively presenting research results. They develop skills for supporting further applications and experience in the field, and for evaluating key concepts, debates, and theories in our understanding of domestic and international systems and political behaviours.

Course structure

Michaelmas term modules (for all students)

1. Doing research in international relations and politics (weeks 1-8)

2. Understanding Statistical Analysis in Politics and International Relations (weeks 3-8)

Students who already have some background in statistics and did well in the 'skills check' done by the Social Sciences Research Methods Programme (SSRMP), or students who
would prefer to do a basic course that will give them practice in descriptive statistics, can substitute this module for a SSRMP statistics module. See below for more information.

**Lent term modules (elective)**

In Lent term, students will acquire familiarity with specific methods through lectures/sessions in the module of their choice. A later section of the course guide provides fuller descriptions of the modules.

The available elective modules are:

1. Comparative case studies

2. Interpretative methods [note that some of the sessions for this module take place already in Michaelmas term]

3. Public policy analysis

Students with specific interests in further topics in statistics or cross-disciplinary approaches offered by SSRMP should consult with the course convenor on the option of taking an SSRMP module instead of one of modules listed above.

In addition, there will be two optional two-hour workshops on the following topics:

- Archival research
- Doing elite interviews

**Assessment**

All students will need to receive a ‘Pass’ grade for the statistics module they choose. In addition, students will write a 2,000-word essay on a question/topic taken from a list provided by the department. This list will have questions/topics related to each of the elective modules taught in Lent term, as well as a question that relates to the general issues of research design covered in Michaelmas term. **For the relevant dates and deadlines for the provision of essay questions and the submission of the essay, see the MPhil course handbook.** Students will need to receive a ‘Pass’ mark on the essay in order to pass the course.

Students who have received permission to substitute one of the Lent modules with an additional SSRMC module will need to receive a ‘Pass’ mark in their chosen module.

**Readings**

There is no general textbook for this course. However, general texts on research methodology in politics, international relations and social science, which can be useful as reference, are:

- Janet M. Box-Steppensmeier, Henry E. Brady and David Collier (eds), *Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

For help on writing:


The module descriptions below indicate further specific suggested readings. However, as their interests in particular issues and methods will vary widely, students are encouraged to approach lecturers for reading suggestions on issues that are of particular relevance to their own research.
Module descriptions and reading lists:
Michaelmas term

1. Doing research in international relations and politics

Lecturers: Prof Duncan Bell, Prof Duncan Kelly, Dr Pieter van Houten

Time: Mondays 9-10 (weeks 1-8)

This module serves as background to research methodology in the study of international relations and politics. All students should find aspects of it useful, but it will be of particular use to students who have no or limited experience with research methodology in the social sciences. For other students, it should serve as a helpful refresher of methodology issues they have studied before.

The module takes a pragmatic approach to research methods, and aims to focus on issues and advice that are relevant for most types of research in the study of international relations and politics. It does not provide training in specific methodological tools or advocate particular approaches or methods. Instead, it will provide students with a clearer sense of what doing research involves and the most common methodological challenges and choices encountered in the process of doing this, and indicate some possible strategies to deal with these challenges. Thus, it serves as an introduction to the more specific modules that are available in Lent term (see below).

The module consists of 8 sessions. These sessions will follow a lecture format, but there will be time to ask questions about the various aspects of research methodology that are covered in the session. Hopefully the sessions will be interactive, as this would make the sessions more directly relevant for the practical issues faced by students embarking on a research project.

There are no required readings for this module. The readings below are suggestions for students who want to start exploring the discussed issues further. The lecture slides will include references to relevant examples from the political science and international relations literature. In addition, students are encouraged to approach the lecturers (or their supervisors) if they would like further reading suggestions on specific topics and issues.

1. History of the study of politics and IR in Cambridge [Duncan Bell and Duncan Kelly]

   This introductory session does not focus on research methodology, but provides some historical background to the study of politics and international relations in Cambridge (something students often ask and are curious about when they start their MPhil).


2. Research design and formulating research questions [Pieter van Houten]

   This session introduces the basic elements of research design, and discusses the importance and challenges of formulating research questions. In relation to this, it will discuss the various ways in which research projects – and, in particular, MPhil dissertations – can ‘make a contribution’.


Rogers M. Smith, ‘Should We Make Political Science More of a Science or More about Politics?’, *PS: Political Science and Politics* 35 (June 2002): 199-201.


3. Methodological issues and choices in a research project: an overview  [Pieter van Houten]

‘Research methodology’ covers many different aspects, ranging from fundamental assumptions underlying particular approaches to research (which are grounded in different positions in the philosophy of social science) to a variety of concrete methods and techniques that can be used to obtain and analyse information. This session lays out the various aspects, and considers the extent to which a combination of approaches/methods is possible for each of them.


4. Positivist approaches to research in politics and international relations  [Pieter van Houten]

This session considers one prominent approach to social science research known as ‘positivism’. It highlights the main features and manifestations of this approach, gives some examples from the study of international relations and politics, and considers its problems and limitations.


5. Non-positivist approaches to research in politics and international relations  [Pieter van Houten]

In contrast to positivist approaches, a variety of non-positivist approaches have gained prominence in the study of politics and IR. This session discusses the shared general assumptions behind these approaches, some of their more specific differences, and gives some examples of applications of these approaches.


Doing research and producing academic writing implies formulating arguments and making the best possible case for these arguments. This session focuses on some of the issues involved in formulating and supporting arguments (including the use of concepts, the logical nature of certain arguments, and various ways in which arguments can be supported).


7. Common challenge (II): selecting materials, cases, interpretations [Pieter van Houten]

Each research project faces the challenge of ‘selecting’, whether it is particular cases, documents, other materials or data, or different interpretations by other researchers. For some of these selection issues it has been attempted to formulate specific rules, while others can at best be approached with some awareness of the issues and common sense. This session highlights some of the more common ‘selection issues’, their possible implications, and ways to try to address them.


8. Practical issues: research proposals, addressing ethical concerns [Pieter van Houten]

This last session provides some guidance on how to present research proposals (which is what students will need to do in the Easter term dissertation workshops), and on the importance of ethical consideration in various kinds of research. It is also an opportunity for students to ask any questions related to this module of the course.

Some advice on proposal writing:
http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic1258127.files/Prospectus.pdf
2. **A Module in statistics**

Students are required to take a module on statistics. The ‘default module’ is a module on ‘Understanding Statistical Analysis in Political and International Relations’, offered in the POLIS department. If students want to do a more hands-on statistical module or a more advanced statistical module, it is possible to do a statistics module offered by the Social Sciences Research Methods Programme (SSRMC, [www.ssrmc.group.cam.ac.uk](http://www.ssrmc.group.cam.ac.uk)) instead of this default module. Students interested in doing this should discuss this with the course organiser (Dr van Houten).

To assess the students’ existing background in and knowledge of statistics, a ‘skills check’ will be conducted by the SSRMC before the start of Michaelmas term. Students will receive information on this test by email. The results of this test will inform any discussions between the course organiser and students about their choice of statistics module.

2a. **Understanding Statistical Analysis in Politics and International Relations**

**Lecturer**: Dr Pieter van Houten ([pjv24@cam.ac.uk](mailto:pjv24@cam.ac.uk))

**Time**: Fridays 13.00-14.30 (weeks 3-8)

Statistical analyses (or ‘quantitative research’) are widely used methods in the study of politics and international relations. While most students in our MPhil programme do not use such methods in their own research, it is likely that they will come across works that do in their course work or when reading about the topic of their research. It is, therefore, important that any student in this field is able to make some sense of such analyses and is able to read them critically (rather than simply avoid or ignore them).

This module will introduce students to the most relevant statistical concepts (such as distributions, correlation and statistical significance) and techniques (such as linear regression and logistic regression) for applications of quantitative methods in the study of politics and IR. The emphasis will be on understanding and evaluating the results of the analyses, and less on how to actually do the analyses. This should help students to become more critical readers of books and articles that apply these methods to topics of interest to them.

The module is targeted at students who have not taken university-level courses in statistics or quantitative methods before. However, other students may find it a useful reminder and may be interested in the discussed applications to IR and politics.

This module consists of 6 sessions of 1.5 hours each. These sessions will follow a lecture format, but there will be time to ask questions about the covered material.

There will be optional quizzes related to some of the sessions (for students to test their knowledge of the topics covered). **Students will need to do a test at the end of the module.** They need to receive a ‘Pass’ in this element in order to pass the course as a whole.
Schedule of lectures

1. Introduction: evolution of the use of quantitative methods in Politics/IR, the role of quantitative methods in research
2. Descriptive statistics: distributions, frequencies, mean, median, etc.
3. Statistical significance, correlations
4. Linear regression
5. Logistic regression, other forms of regression
6. Conclusion: summary of main issues, pitfalls of quantitative methods, further examples

Possible readings

Overviews of the use of statistical analyses in Politics and IR, and discussions of the differences and complementarities between quantitative and qualitative methods:

Peter Burnham, et al., Research Methods in Politics (Palgrave, 2004), chapters 5, 6.
James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, ‘Integrating Qualitative and Quantitative Methods’, in Janet M. Box-Steppensmeier, Henry E. Brady and David Collier (eds), The Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology (Oxford University Press, 2008).

One of the goals of this module is to give students a better intuitive grasp of statistical analysis and statistical reasoning. It is, therefore, strongly recommended that students read a non-technical book on statistical concepts, intuitions and techniques. Good books of this nature are (pick one or two, and no need to look at many of these!; the ones with * are particularly recommended):

* David Spiegelhalter, The Art of Statistics: Learning from Data (Pelican, 2019)
Uri Bram, Thinking Statistically (Capara Books, 2017).
Neil Salkind, Statistics for People Who (Think They) Hate Statistics (4th ed) (Sage, 2010).
If you would like to learn statistics in more details, the next step is to consult a textbook on statistics (ideally one focused on the social sciences). There are many such books. Some useful ones are:

Andy Field, *Discovering Statistics Using SPSS* (one of the more recent editions) (Sage).

Examples of quantitative research in Politics and IR will be provided in the lectures, and the lecture slides will have references for these examples.

**2b. A statistics module offered by SSRMP**

It is possible to substitute another module for this default module. If a student wants to do a more ‘hands on’ introductory statistics module (but has no prior background in statistics), then the module on ‘Foundations in Applied Statistics’ (www.ssrmc.group.cam.ac.uk/modules/core/foundations-in-applied-stats) is a possibility (unlike the default module, this requires students to learn and do some actual statistical analyses, but it only covers very basic statistics). Students who already have a background in statistics and obtain a good score in the ‘skills test’ are encouraged to take a SSRMC statistics module that is more advanced than the default module. Substituting the default module can only be done with approval of the convenor of this MPhil course in research methodology.

For the full list of SSRMC statistics modules, see https://www.ssrmc.group.cam.ac.uk/Modules/Core-modules-list. Note that modules are taught in different periods. So students will need to be flexible with their schedules to substitute the default module.

Students who are considering taking a SSRMP module are encouraged to attend the SSRMP Introductory Session on Wednesday 9 October 2019 at 4pm in the Lady Mitchell Hall (Sidgwick site).
Module descriptions and reading lists:
Lent term modules (elective)

1. **Comparative case study methods**

**Lecturer:** Dr Pieter van Houten ([pjv24@cam.ac.uk](mailto:pjv24@cam.ac.uk))

Case studies – either comparative or single case studies – remain a very prominent methodological approach in the study of international relations and politics. This module focuses on several strategies and justifications for conducing case studies in the ‘positivist’ tradition (that is, research that assumes that facts and values can be separated and that focus primarily on substantiating causal arguments and explanations), as well as how case studies may be combined with other methods.

Sessions are one hour each.

**General reading:**


**Session 1: Controlled comparisons**


**Session 2: Process tracing**


Session 3: The congruence method


Session 4: Case studies & multi-method research


2. Interpretative methods

‘Interpretivism’ takes issue with many of the assumptions of the ‘positivist’ tradition. For example, it questions whether facts and values can be separated (which implies that the researcher’s own views and values become an important issue and consideration in interpretivist research), and it focuses primarily on ‘understanding’ the meaning of particular actions and events rather than on ‘causal explanations’.

Interpretivism in the study of international relations and politics – and in the social sciences more generally – takes many different shapes, and is a vibrant and increasingly prominent approach (or, more accurately, set of approaches). This module focuses on some of the methods used in and issues raised by these approaches. It consists of two parts. The first part focuses on critical discourse
analysis, while the second part focuses on ethnographic methods used in interpretivist research in our field.

**Part 1: Critical approaches to discourse analysis** *(shared with SSRMP)*

**Lecturer:** Dr Lauren Wilcox *(lw487@cam.ac.uk)*

The focus of these two sessions will be the linking of theory to method, paying particular attention to the relationship between language or other forms of representation or communication and the broader social milieu with special attention to power relations. The topic will be approached from a broadly Foucauldian angle: Foucault writes that discourse “consists of not—of no longer—treating discourses as groups of signs signifying elements referring to contents of representations, but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak.” The emphasis of these two lectures will be less upon what is known as ‘conversation analysis’ or ‘content analysis’ and more on methods based on post-positivist methods and critical theory which emphasize how language and other social practices create reality rather than reflect it, and thus methods of interpreting discourse are themselves not ideologically or politically neutral practices.

**Session 1:** The origins of critical discourse analysis (the Frankfurt school, Foucault, post-structuralism, feminism); how theoretical backgrounds shape research design

**Session 2:** 'Doing' discourse analysis: analysing methods and approaches

**Suggested readings:**


**Part 2: Methods and issues in interpretivist research**

**Lecturer:** Dr Iza Hussin *(ih298@cam.ac.uk)*

This part of the module is organized as a seminar on interpretivist methods as a sub-field of political science methodology. Students will read a range of recent scholarship on, and using, political ethnography, the analysis of symbols, text and culture, and address analytic and ethical issues that arise alongside mixed methods research. The second meeting builds upon the first to continue to question criteria for evaluating qualitative methodologies in the study of politics.

**Texts will include:**

3. **Public policy analysis** *(shared with SSRMP)*

**Lecturers**: Prof Mike Kenny, Dr Cristina Penasco, Dr Pieter van Houten

The analysis of policy depends on many disciplines and techniques and so is difficult for many researchers to access. This module provides a mixed perspective on policy analysis, taking both an academic and a practitioner perspective. This is because the same tools and techniques can be used in academic research on policy options and change as those used in practice in a policy environment.

This course is provided as three 2-hour sessions delivered as a mix of lectures and seminars. No direct analysis work will be carried out in the sessions themselves, but sample data and questions may be provided for students who wish to take the material into practice.

**Session outlines**

**Session 1: How do we analyse policy development and change over time? The policy cycle and models of policy change**

In studying how policies are developed and chosen, there are two different timescales to consider - the immediate process of policy development (the policy cycle) and the evolution of a policy over long periods of time (models of policy change). This session will outline both timescales and discuss how these models can be applied to study policy change, highlighting the contested nature of most models of policy.

**Readings**


Examples of using the models in research:

Session 2: What tools do we use to analyse policy options I – CBA and MCDA in policy analysis

Policy analysis is a distinct practice that is forward looking, taking an issue and trying to both develop options and to provide a decision framework for making a policy choice. This first of two sessions provides a brief overview of cost-benefit analysis (CBA) and multi-criteria decision analysis (MCDA) and gives examples of their use in policy decision making.

Readings


Session 3: What tools do we use to analyse policy options II – assessing the (likely) effects of policies

A key challenge in policy analysis and practice is how to assess and predict the effect of particular policy decisions. Examples of widely used tools for this are regression analysis (as much of the information that policymakers need is provided through the outputs of regression analysis of varying complexity) and randomised controlled trials. This session will focus on some of tools, discussing their main features and using examples of their use in policy analysis and policy making.

Readings


Additional reading

Beyond the topics covered in the three sessions above the following are provided as broader reading on policy analysis and the craft of policy analysis:


Optional workshops (Lent term)

These workshops focus on specific methods (archival research and elite interviews), and are intended for students who are planning to use these methods in their research. The workshops will help them to understand some of the key features of these methods, and illustrate how historians and social scientists use information from documents or interviews to develop coherent arguments. Each workshop is a two-hour session.

A. Archival research

Lecturer: Dr Peter Sloman (pis93@cam.ac.uk)

When using historical sources, students in the social and political sciences are entering slightly unfamiliar territory: there are rules and customs governing the use of such sources, but also freedoms associated with their use about which they might otherwise have been ignorant. This workshop will look in detail at one of the contemporary historian's key sources – original documents – and consider the challenges and opportunities they present. We will consider why we need documents and where they are to be found; how archives are organised; and issues of secrecy, confidentiality and the release of documents.

Recommended reading:


B. Elite Interviews

Lecturer: Dr Pieter van Houten (pjv24@cam.ac.uk)

Interviews can be an immensely helpful tool for the study of politics and international relations. They can serve as a way of accessing information that is otherwise hard to obtain, as a direct measure of attitudes of elites and the wider public, or as a check on whether information found in other sources is consistent with the perspective of insider participants. However, these methods and the information obtained by them also have their pitfalls and pose various challenges. This workshop focuses on why interviewing is useful and how to carry it out. It will discuss issues such the peculiarities of interviewing, its main advantages and disadvantages, interview preparation, conducting the interview, and the interpretation of interview data.

Possible readings:


