

# International Relations GOVT2991

## Political Analysis (2021 Semester 1)

### Theme: Foundation of political research

#### Week 1: Introduction: What is political research?

##### What is politics?

- The question '*What is Politics*' is more likely to generate confusion than bring comfort or reassurance. The problem is that debate, controversy and disagreement lie at its very heart, and the definition of '*the political*' is *no exception...*'

Andrew Heywood (2002) *Politics*, 2nd Ed.

##### Politics as an Arena or a Process?

###### Arena

- Based primarily on the institutions of governance and the role of governments and politicians.

###### Process

- *Identifies 'the activities they call politics as occurring previously in a much wider range of institutions activities and groups for example, in families or in voluntary associations, beyond or below the state or formal institutions of government, and wherever questions of power, control, decision making and resource allocation between two or more people occur in any human society past or present.'* (Leftwich 2004, p. 14)

##### What is political science?

- Research on the political world
- Some would contest that it can be considered a 'science' and so would prefer to use the term 'political studies'.
- Incorporates a very broad range of research areas.
  - Political theory
  - Area studies
  - Elections
  - Political behaviour (voting, protest)
  - Social movements
  - International relations

##### What do political researchers do?

- Field surveys
- Conduct interviews and focus groups
- Collect data about countries individuals, political, parties, politicians
- Run experiments
- Analyse data using statistics
- Theoretical research
- Specialisation in a subfield is common

##### Studying political science: Some core themes

- Power- it's sources, forms, legitimacy, uses and abuses
- Governments and governance
- Citizens engagement in the political system
- Political science as a systematic study- using evidence to test theories and hypotheses
- Some differences between the study of politics in the US, UK, Australia and elsewhere
- US emphasis on a quantitative approach
- UK and Australia qualitative approach is more prevalent.

### **Australian Political Studies Association Discipline Standards**

- Political Science is the study of political behaviour, governance, and power. it is concerned with the interaction of interests, institutions, and ideas to understand the authoritative if the allocation of resources and values, and the negotiation of conflict and difference. political phenomena happen at all levels: local, sub-national, national, regional, and global. **Politics is about who gets what, when, how, and why.**

- **The discipline of Political Science embraces a diversity of approaches and different analytical traditions.** It draws on a broad range of research methods and strategies to investigate, analyse and interpret phenomena.

- The qualitative methodologies practised in the discipline include textual analysis, process tracing, historical analysis, discourse analysis, structured, and semi-structured, focus groups, ethnographic techniques, action research, and case study strategies.
- The quantitative methodology employed include surveying opinion poll techniques, statistical analysis, in various modelling.

### **Political research can help us answer key questions about the world**

- Why did Labour lose the 2019 Australian Federal Election?
- Why do some countries become democracies while others do not?
- What explains record levels of voter dissatisfaction in Australia?
- Is social media undermining Democratic politics?
- Do politicians keep their promises?
- What explains why voters in the UK voted for Brexit?
- What explains the rise of populism?
- What explains democratic reversals?
- What is the impact of COVID-19 on democratic politics?

## **Week 2: Ontology, epistemology, and ethics**

### **Defining Ontology**

- Ontological questions focus on the nature of 'being'
- Literally means 'theory of being'
- The word derives from the Greek for 'existence'
- The key ontological question:
  - What is the form and nature of reality, and consequently what is there that can be known about it?
  - Is there a 'real' world 'out there' ... independent of our knowledge of it

**Ontological positions**

<b>Foundationalism (naturalism/objectivism)</b>	<b>Anti-foundationalism (constructivism)</b>
There is a 'real world' out there, independent of our observation of it	The world is socially constructed

**Defining Epistemology**

- *'If an ontological position reflects the researcher's view about the nature of the world, her epistemological position reflects her view of what we can know about the world'*
- Theory of knowledge
- How do we know about the world?
- Key epistemological question:
  - *"Can an observer identify 'real' or 'objective' relation between social phenomena? If so, how?"*

**Epistemology Positions**

<b>Positivism</b>	<b>Interpretivism</b>
Foundationalist ontology: Real-world out there, independent of our observation	Anti-foundationalism ontology: The world is socially constructed
- Can therefore establish 'real' relationships between social phenomena	- Social phenomena cannot be understood independently of our interpretation of them
- Can study these relationships via direct observation	- No observer can be objective because he/she lives in the world and participate in the social construction of reality
-Interested in causal relationships	- Double hermeneutic - the world is interpreted by the actors and their interpretation in interpreted by the observers

**Ontology**

**Foundationalism**

**Anti-foundationalism**

**Epistemology**

**Positivism**

**Interpretivism**

**Methodology**

**Quantitative privileged**

**Qualitative privileged**

**Positivism**

**Broad Features:**

- Ontology- the independent world exists

- Ethnographic methods; ‘shadowing’ parliamentary secretaries, diary analysis

### Interpretivist research: Overview

Ontology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The world does not exist independent of our senses - it’s a world of appearances</li> <li>- Its appearance varies according to the contextual setting of the observer- hence multiple realities can co-exist</li> </ul>
Epistemology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Knowledge is inter-subjective and contingent</li> <li>- Not limited to the scientific method</li> </ul>
Methodology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No clear hierarchy of methods</li> <li>- Qualitative privileged</li> </ul>
Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No commitment to generalizable, objective ‘truth’, but rather geared to keep the conversation going</li> </ul>

### Why does this matter?

- Philosophical worldviews (ontology and epistemology) underpin the whole research process
- As a researcher:
  - Underpins the whole research process - from goals of the research to methods and analytical approaches.
- As a consumer of research:
  - Need to understand what different kinds of researchers are.
  - Strengths and weaknesses of different approaches.
- *It is rare for a researcher to state outright their epistemology. However the reader (you!) can determine their epistemology by the way the research was conducted (/any underlying assumptions)*

### Example positivist research project:

#### Government performance and desertification with democracy in Australia

Media commentary on the decline:

- Democratic malaise affecting other advanced democracies
- Frequent changes of Prime Minister ‘*There have been some rather united comment about Australia being the Italy of the South Pacific and the coup capital of the world*’ (Julie Bishop 2018)

### WHAT EXPLAINS SATISFACTION WITH DEMOCRACY?

#### Theory

#### Key findings of previous comparative studies:

- 1. Political institutions**
  - Electoral system: Majoritarian vs. proportional representation
  - Electoral winners/ losers
- 2. Culture**

- Can be confident in causal claims because of random assignment

External validity

- Low (e.g. using unrepresentative participants like students) - setting might not reflect the real world.
- Higher in field experiments than lab experiments

### **Quasi-experimental design**

Internal validity

- Higher than observational design / lower than experiments

External validity

- High
- Real-world rather than a lab setting

### **Observational design**

Internal validity

- Low
- Determining causality can be difficult

External validity

- High
- Real-world rather than a lab setting

## Gathering evidence: Methodology, primary and secondary data

### **Gathering evidence: Methodology**

Qualitative or quantitative?

- **Quantitative methods:** collecting and analysing data that can be analysed numerically using statistics;
  - E.g. surveys, experiments
- **Qualitative methods:** relies on words, description, and meaning as sources of evidence rather than on the use of numbers.
  - E.g. interviews, focus groups, ethnography, document analysis

Primary or secondary data?

- **Primary data:** New data / information that you collect yourself;
- **Secondary data:** Data / information collected by others.

### **Why use secondary data?**

- Many datasets are free to access, save money and time (cuts the ethics approval and data collection phase-out of the research process);
- The quality of existing datasets is often high;
- Can enable longitudinal analysis (e.g. if someone else was collecting data since the 1980s);
- Facilitates cross-national research;
- Making use of the extensive available data;
- Pools the resources of the social science community to do more than could be done individually.

### **Secondary data sources in political science**

Cross-national surveys

<b>Deviant</b>	1+ cases deviate from cross-case relationship	Probe new explanations for Y, disconfirm a deterministic argument	Corroborated with cross case test of new hypothesis with new variable
<b>Influential</b>	1+ cases with influential configurations of IVs	Double-check cases that influence results of cross case analysis	Not representative

### **What is Small-N design?**

- N is the number of observations in the analysis
  - ❖ Some confusion because N is sometimes used to mean the number of observations in a study.
- Just as it sounds, this is a research agenda that involves only a few observations.
- The idea is to use close observation of a small number of units to draw out detailed and rich findings of:
  - ❖ Causal process
  - ❖ Thick descriptive information

### **What is Large-N design?**

- Participants are grouped
- Data from individual participants, not main interest
- Data from each group are studied
- Data are represented as group averages
- Data are analyzed with statistics

### **Unit of Analysis**

- Unit of analysis: definitions
  - ❖ “The objects that a hypothesis describes or explains and are the focus of study.”
  - ❖ “A unit is the unit of analysis for an effect if and only if that effect is assessed against the variation among units.”

Case: what is the unit?

- “Observations used to draw inferences at whatever level of analysis is of interest.”

### **Most Similar System**

- Cases (two or more) are similar on specified variables other than X and Y.
- Select cases that are similar across as many independent variables as possible BUT vary in outcome (value of a dependent variable) and the independent variable of interest
- Case selection example: Scandinavian countries, East Asian Little Tigers
- Weakness: No way to know whether unmeasured variables are actually responsible for outcomes

### **Most different systems**

- Select cases that are quite different from each other (perhaps except for one independent variable), but have the same outcome
- Show that the process (interaction of variables of interest) by which outcome occurs is the same across cases
- Weakness: Can show that interaction of variables is the same in very disparate environments, but may not be hitting on actual causal process

### **Why observation as a method of data collection?**

- Useful for exploring what is happening in a particular social context. Interviews find out what people say they do, observations find out what people actually do, how they do it and the norms that shape their actions.
- You can observe:
  - People (participant observation) – also known as ethnographic research
  - Things (e.g. graffiti or digital traces)
  - Texts
  - Observation provides insights you can't get from other methods – you can see what insiders might take for granted.

### **Participant and non-participant observation**

- We can think of observation as a continuum with varying levels of researcher involvement



- Participant observation is where a researcher participates in activities relevant to what they are studying in order to gain an insider's perspective of these activities.
- Non-participant observation is where a researcher observes but does not interact with what's going on (e.g. behind a mirror).

### **Observing political party conferences**

- Goal: to gain access to and understand what happens behind closed doors
- To analyse how the conference attendees made decisions & the dynamics involved
- To ascertain what activities took place beyond the official program

### **Some of the challenges of participant observation**

- Need to get access to a site and developing relationships with people at the site (who are the gatekeepers and who needs to accept you?)
- Need to pay close attention to what is going on and accurately document these in field notes, which can be later analysed and written up (more on this next week)
- Emotional and physical demands on the researcher
- Some of these challenges can be tempered by non-participant observation
- Ethical issues: when should you disclose that you are a researcher?

### **Collecting data from participant/nonparticipant observations**

- You will be exposed to a lot of information, so planning is key:
- What is your research question(s)?
- Develop an observational protocol
- The layout of the room, who is present, discussions that took place, interactions between participants.

### **Topic 4: Documents as sources of data**

#### **Advantages and disadvantages of texts as data**

- Texts can be sourced at the researcher's convenience, saves money and time