IDENTIFYING GOOD RESEARCH QUESTIONS
AND
DOING A LITERATURE REVIEW

POL 199

IDENTIFYING YOUR QUESTION

Why is it important to find a research question as opposed to a research topic?

A good, well-stated question can frame your entire research project. A poorly stated question can destroy your project. Wow! How are questions so powerful? Consider the advantages to using a question to guide your research:

1. **A question calls for an answer.** Compare the topic "voter turnout" with the questions “What are the effects of electoral reforms – such as voting by mail and day-of-election voter registration – on turnout?” or, better still “Are some electoral reforms more effective than other reforms at increasing turnout?” Unlike the topic, “voter turnout,” which can never be covered completely, a question can be answered.

2. **Questions lead to hypotheses, or “guesses”:** When you pose a question, it is human nature to try to guess the answer. This is the beginning of research. In research terms, we call this the process of hypothesizing or, perhaps, theorizing. Consider how phrasing the problem in terms of a question will help you identify and develop relevant theories. In the case of voter registration laws, you might look at existing theories of the decision to turnout on Election Day to identify reforms that you think would be particularly effective. For example, many scholars have framed the decision to vote in terms of cost/benefit analysis. Voting is a costly act; you need to inform yourself about the candidates and their issue position then, on Election Day, you need to actually get to a poling place. By this logic, laws that more effectively reduce the direct costs of voting will stimulate turnout at greater levels than laws that do not effectively reduce these costs.

3. **A question is conversational.** An open question invites reply, and that reply can lead to other questions. Questions often have a number of responses, or there are various aspects to a question, which stimulate a number of answers. This process of question and answer, like a conversation, is the basis of intellectual inquiry.

4. **An open question calls for real research and thinking.** Asking a real question— one for which you do not have a ready answer—forces you to become intellectually engaged in your own learning. The work you do will consequently be more meaningful to you.

5. **A question will lead you to think about relevant data:** Once you have a question, you will try to think of ways to answer that question—that’s where data comes in. With your question in hand, you can ask yourself, “What data would I need to provide a convincing answer to my research question?” In the case of the effects of voting reforms, for example, you might want to collect state-level data on turnout rates and lists of electoral reforms adopted by various states. If you wanted to examine a small set of cases, you could look at turnout figures before and after the adoption of a particular reform in a given state (for example the effect of day of election registration in Maine). Or you might do a large-N cross-state comparison of the effects of
registration laws. Making a precise statement of your research interests will focus your data collection efforts, no matter what research design you choose.

How do I find a research question?

There is no formula to finding a good question. It often takes time, and serious reflection to find a question that is interesting to you, to your audience, and research-able. Students are encouraged to use their creativity and common sense during their selection of a research question, and, most of all, their self-knowledge. Here are some tips to finding a good research question.

Choose a question that interests you.

The starting point of good research is self-knowledge. What interests me about politics? It’s very easy to articulate a set of platitudes about your interest in politics. “I love politics because I always have.” “I love politics because I think it’s important to be aware of your community.” It’s much more difficult to dig down into yourself and articulate the specific, concrete reasons why something is important to you and what it is that you actually care about. This is extremely important. The more concrete and specific you can be about what interests you, the better your research will be.

Many people think that this is a “fluff” step that is easy to skip—but in some ways, this is the most important part of the whole project. Why waste your time researching and writing about something you don't care about? Find a question you want to answer—if you are truly interested in your question, your curiosity will drive you to find the answer, and it will make you more convincing in building your argument. If not, it will be hard to find the motivation to push your analysis to the highest level it can be.

Look for a research question that is significant.

A significant question is one that matters. Why spend all your time researching something that does not matter? Find a question that has broader implications for politics and political science. This does not mean that your question has to be broad—it can be very narrow, but you should understand why your question can have broader implications.

An advantage to finding a significant question is that other people are likely already interested or can become interested in it. If others are already interested in a question, some of them will have investigated it and written about it. As a result, you will be able to find related materials in the library, and have a basis from which to begin your inquiry.

Look for a research question that is not too general or too specific.

Look for one that's just right. A question that is too specific can be difficult to research and may be of limited interest to your audience. A question that is too general is even more difficult to research and is often hard to pin down a good way to answer. Most of you will probably have to narrow or broaden your first question or idea to find the right scope for your research paper.

This is so hard to understand in the abstract. How will I know when I have a good research question?

There is no right answer to that question. Nonetheless, based on past experience teaching courses like this, here are some characteristics of questions (and projects) that tend to do well or do poorly.
CHARACTERISTICS OF PROJECTS THAT TEND TO SUCCEED:
1. Data easily available
2. Lots of quantitative research already done
3. Fields rich in data (elections, public opinion, political economy, some development questions, etc.)

CHARACTERISTICS OF PROJECTS THAT TEND TO FLOUNDER:
1. Data hard to come by in the field
2. Very little quantitative analysis or careful case studies already done
3. Idiosyncratic phenomena, like terrorism—hard to find general patterns
4. Projects where you know the answer already and can’t be convinced you’re wrong.

EXAMPLES OF PREVIOUS RESEARCH TOPICS THAT HAVE WORKED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTION</th>
<th>DATA SOURCE(S)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does the death penalty deter murders?</td>
<td>U.S. Justice Department crime statistics; Book of the States</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are more senior members of Congress able to bring more “pork barrel” spending to their districts?</td>
<td>Rice University data set on federal spending disaggregated to CD level; Congressional Directory</td>
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<td>What effect did joining NATO have on military sending in Eastern European countries?</td>
<td>International Institute for Strategic Studies, The Military Balance</td>
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<td>Do political contributions to congressional candidates from PACs interested in gay rights increase representatives’ support for those rights?</td>
<td>FEC data; Roll call data (ICPSR)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do congressional districts with more members of environmentalist groups elect more environmentalist members of Congress?</td>
<td>Sierra Club membership data; ICPSR roll call data</td>
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<tr>
<td>What method of privatization has been the most economically effective in Eastern Europe following the fall of communism?</td>
<td>OECD data; World Bank data</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do actions taken by the U.S. to punish terrorism increase or decrease the number of terrorist actions aimed at the US?</td>
<td>Coding of NY Times articles; Rand Corporation terrorism yearbook</td>
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<td>Does the presence of large numbers of members of environmental groups in a congressional district cause members of Congress to be more pro-environmental in their voting records?</td>
<td>Membership data from groups; interest group ratings reported in reference works.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does poor environmental quality in a congressional district lead to higher levels of environmental activism in a district?</td>
<td>EPA data; League of Conservation Voters</td>
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<td>What is the role of religiosity in attitudes among Jewish Israelis about “land for peace”?</td>
<td>Israeli Election Study</td>
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<td>Did Roman emperors who acquired power through violence tend to meet violent ends themselves?</td>
<td>Historical sources concerning the Roman Empire</td>
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<tr>
<td>Which types of international crises tend to produce the biggest “rally effect”?</td>
<td>Gallup Poll; political scientists’ codings of “rally events”</td>
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CONDUCTING AN EFFECTIVE LITERATURE REVIEW

What is a literature review?

The first step in your assignment was the selection of your research topic. The next step is to identify and review the relevant literature on your topic. This means identifying work that has been done on your topic by social scientists. Your goal is to describe what is already known about your topic, how it has been researched by others, and what you can add to this body of work.

The literature review is a valuable opportunity to review previous research on your research question, and take a critical view of studies that are related to your work. Seeing what other people have done helps you to understand the different ways people have of answering the question. It also tells you what we already know about your question, and what we still have left to know. The reading process can also provide a framework for clearly defining the research problem.

Leedy & Ormrod (2001, p. 70) highlight the benefits of literature reviews:

- It will increase your confidence in your topic if you can find that others have an interest in this topic and have invested time, effort, and resources in studying it.
- It can provide you with new ideas and approaches that may not have occurred to you.
- It can inform you about other researchers conducting work in this area individuals whom you may wish to contact for advice or feedback.
- It can show you how others handled methodological and design issues in studies similar to your own.
- It can reveal sources of data that you may not have known existed.
- It can introduce you to measurement tools that other researchers have developed and used effectively.
- It can reveal methods of dealing with problem situations that may be similar to difficulties you are facing.
- It can help you interpret and make sense of your findings and, ultimately, help you to tie your results to the work of those who have preceded you.

What does a good literature review do?

It is important to realize that the literature review is not just a summary or concise description of various studies. It is not a list of what has been done, or a series of book reports or article abstracts.

The literature review should show that you understand how to (1) find, (2) read, (3) interpret, and (4) synthesize scholarly literature on the topic that interests you, and relate that literature to your research question. In fact, your research question should emerge organically from your literature review. The review must identify vital relationships between different studies while showing how it relates to your project. It should identify problems or flaws with contemporary work, and show how your research project can help fill fix some of those problems. The review should constantly remind the reader that the literature is related to the research problem.

Leedy & Ormrod (2001, p. 84) suggest practical ways to synthesize diverse studies and thereby indicate where the gaps in the literature are:

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• Compare and contrast varying theoretical perspectives on the topic.
• Show how approaches to the topic have changed over time.
• Describe general trends in research findings.
• Identify discrepant or contradictory findings, and suggest possible explanations for such discrepancies.
• Identify general themes that run throughout the literature.

Where can I find materials to BEGIN my literature review?

**Your Professor**

You should start your research by talking to the professor. There is a wide, wide, wide world of political science, and it will be extremely difficult for you to figure out how to access the information you need by yourself. So talk to the professor and ask for some tips or places to start.

**JSTOR**

Then, there are some places on-line where you can do some research (once you have a little guidance from the professor). The best resource for finding political science journal articles is JSTOR.

You can access JSTOR from Wellesley’s library:
1. Go to the Wellesley library homepage: [http://www.wellesley.edu/Library/](http://www.wellesley.edu/Library/).
2. On the left-hand side, click on “Databases A-Z”.
3. That will bring you to a webpage with a long list of electronic databases [http://luna.wellesley.edu/screens/a-zlist.html](http://luna.wellesley.edu/screens/a-zlist.html).
4. Click on “J.”
5. Find “JSTOR - journals”.
6. That will take you to [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org) (you can go directly to this page if you are working from a Wellesley computer).

Once I get to JSTOR, what do I do?
1. Click on “Search.”
2. You will get to a page with a box in the middle that says JSTOR Search. Click on “Advanced Search” on the right.
3. Once in JSTOR Advanced Search, enter keywords that you think might lead you to research on your topic.
4. Then, scroll down and do the following:
   a. In “These Types”, click on “Article” and “Review”.
   b. In “These Disciplines and/or Journals”, scroll down until you find “Political Science”. Click on the box next to Political Science.
5. Click Search.

You will probably have to do this several times. Maybe the first time you enter some key words, it gives back too many articles for you to examine. Maybe the second time you enter some, it gives back too few articles.

Once you get your list of articles, you have to look carefully at them to see whether or not they are relevant to your question. Probably most of them will NOT be relevant. It is your job to find the ones that are. A quick way to see whether or not an article is relevant for your work is to click on “Citation/Abstract” and read quickly to see if it seems important. You should download the ones that are.
**AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE REVIEW (APSR)**

Probably the leading journal in political science is the American Political Science Review (APSR). JSTOR has APSR articles through 2001. If you want to find something more recent than that, you can examine recent articles here:

http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayJournal?jid=PSR&bVolume=y

You cannot search the articles as easily as you could in JSTOR, but you can scroll through the titles to see if there is anything that seems relevant or piques your interest.

**WEB OF SCIENCE**

This is more general than JSTOR or because it focuses on areas beyond political science. However, if you are stuck, this is a good place to look for articles. Like JSTOR, you can access it from Wellesley Library’s homepage:

1. Go to the Wellesley library homepage: [http://www.wellesley.edu/Library/](http://www.wellesley.edu/Library/).
2. On the left-hand side, click on “Databases A-Z”.
3. That will bring you to a webpage with a long list of electronic databases [http://luna.wellesley.edu/screens/a-zlist.html](http://luna.wellesley.edu/screens/a-zlist.html).
4. Click on “W.”
5. Find “Web of Science”.
6. That will take you to [http://portal.isiknowledge.com/portal.cgi](http://portal.isiknowledge.com/portal.cgi) (you can go directly to this page if you are working from a Wellesley computer).

Once at the Web of Science homepage, you should click on “Web of Science, Social Sciences Citation Index” in the top, left-hand corner. Then, search topics as you would with any other search engine. Note that you can use an “Advanced Search” if you want to use more detailed search parameters. Note also that you should unclick “Science Citation Index” to make sure you are searching only in the social sciences.

**How do I continue my literature review, once I’ve found a couple of good starting points?**

Once you have found one or two good places to start your literature review, you should use those articles/books as your starting point. Start reading them, and as you read, look at the research that they cite. Use the bibliography in the article/book to track down some of those other sources. Often, they will cite articles that you can find on-line, or books you can find in the library.