PSCI2300 The Study of Politics
Political Science as Science

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Interests in Various Political Phenomena

- What conditions lead to stable and secure political regimes without civil unrest or government repression?
- What shapes mass opinion on policy issues?
- Does public opinion influence the policy decisions of the public officials?
- Does Congress serve the interests of organized groups rather than of the general populace?
- How much do the policy outputs of states vary and why do they vary?
Goal of Political Science Research

- We hope to acquire knowledge about and an understanding of a variety of important political phenomena.
- Our research is based on the actual, “objective” observation of phenomena to achieve scientific knowledge about politics.
- Thus, our research is empirical.
- Scientific knowledge differs from other types of knowledge such as intuition, common sense, or superstition.
- Two reasons for conducting empirical research:
  1. To accumulate knowledge that will apply to a particular problem in need of solution or improvement → applied research
  2. To satisfy intellectual curiosity about a subject → theoretical research
Specify a research question (What is it you want to explain?).

Review the existing studies.

Derive specific predictions from each of the theories.

Look for information or “data.”

The theory with the most empirically confirmed propositions would be judged to be the best.

Draw conclusions and implications from your research.
Harold Laswell: Who gets what, when, how.

Politics is about winning and losing. Policies favor some and disadvantage others.

We review research by David Bradley and his coworkers.
1. What explains “redistributive political outcomes”?

2. Find two competing theories in the literature:
   - “power resource theory” – a group or class that can control for a government will win the concrete benefits (e.g., Strong labor unions or left parties).
   - “state-centered theory” – the government (and bureaucrats) itself has its own policy objective and goals.

3. Derive hypotheses:
   - If the “power resource theory” is right, countries with a left party in power will benefit to the lower classes (more redistribution to the lower classes).
   - If the “state-centered theory” is right, there should be no relationship between left parties and redistribution to the lower classes.
4 Define a *dependent variable*:
- The Gini coefficient ranging from 0 (perfect equality) to 1 (perfect inequality).
- The reduction in inequality after government taxes and transfers have been taken into account.

5 Define *independent or explanatory variables*:
- Leftist party control of government

6 Define *control variables*
- Globalization
- Female participation in the workforce
- Proportion of the service economy
7 Statistical analysis
- How closely two variables are related to each other while other factors are held constant.

8 Findings and conclusion
- Strong relationship between reduction in inequality and left government.
- Confirm the “power resource theory”.
A lot of money was spent on campaign advertising by candidates!
- In the 2008 Presidential election
- Obama spent $730 million
- McCain spent $333 million

How does campaign advertising affect citizens’ decision to vote?
- Campaign advertising simulates citizens’ interest in elections and therefore increases turnout → mobilization effect
- Little effects because of the public’s ability to screen out messages conflicting with their existing views → no effect
- Negative (especially TV) advertising has harmful effects because negative campaign ads increase cynicism about politics → demobilization effect
Ansolabehere et al.

- Controlled experiment
- Groups of potential voters were exposed to one of the 3 advertisement treatments: positive political advertisements; no political advertisements; negative political advertisements
- After taking into account other factors likely to affect a person’s intention to vote, they find that exposure to negative advertisements depressed intention to vote by 5%.
- They ask “whether it is legitimate for candidates to use public funds in ways that are likely to discourage voting in case of publicly financed presidential campaigns.”
Two Conventional wisdoms about voter turnout in the US:

- Voting varies by socio-economic class — the lower classes participate less frequently than do more affluent and better-educated citizens.
- Since the 1950s fewer and fewer people are going to the polls.
Who Votes, Who Doesn’t?

Presidential Turnout Rates, 1952–2004

How can we measure voter turnout rates?

- \# of votes casted / Voting Age Population (VAP)
- \# of votes casted / Voting Eligible Population (VEP)

When VAP is used, voter turnout has declined over time. When VEP is used, there has been no decline in turnout.

How measurement can affect substantive conclusions!
Presidential Turnout Rates, 1948–2004


Turnout Rate (%): 40, 45, 50, 55, 60, 65

VEP
VAP
Repression of Human Rights

- Explaining variations in human rights practices of governments around 153 countries during the 1980s.
- The causes of state terrorism (violations of personal integrity rights)
- Potential explanations:
  - Democracy
  - Population size and growth
  - Level of economic development and economic growth
  - Establishment of revolutionary regime
  - Establishment of military regime
  - British colonial experience
  - International and civil war experience
Finding:

- Democracies are unlikely to engage in human rights abuses.
- More populous states are more likely to engage in human rights abuses.
- Economic development has a weak impact.
- National experience in international and civil wars has a strong impact.
What determines the decision by 9 justices of the US Supreme Court?

Potential explanations:

- Judge’s background
- Personal attributes (race, gender)
- Precedent
- Personal political views
- President
- Public opinion

Difficulty of measuring judicial attitudes
Segal and Cover’s research

- They looked at the editorial columns written about judges in four major U.S. daily newspapers after their nomination by the president but before their confirmation by the Senate.
- Justices’ personal political attitudes have a strong influence on their decisions.
Studying Politics Scientifically

- Characteristics of scientific knowledge
- Induction and deduction
- Is political science really “science”? 
Acquiring knowledge through the scientific process differs from information derived from myth, casual observation, intuition, belief, or common sense.

1 Scientific knowledge must be (1) **empirically** (2) **verified**: A statement must be proved true by means of objective observation.

- “Empirical”: relying or based on observation or experience
- “Verified”: our acceptance or rejection of a statement regarding something known must be influenced by observation (tangible evidence)
2 Scientific knowledge (everybody can observe) VS Mystical knowledge (only true believers can observe)

- Scientific knowledge (based on systematic, unbiased evidence) VS Commonsense knowledge (accepted without question, as a matter of faith)
- Normative knowledge VS Nonnormative knowledge
- What is the relationship between personal values and scientific research?
3 Scientific knowledge must be transmissible—the methods used in making scientific discoveries must be made explicit so that others can analyze and replicate findings.

- Science is a social activity in that it takes several scientists, analyzing and criticizing each other, to produce more reliable knowledge.
- Example: TV violence and antisocial behavior among children
  - Aggressive behavior among children in 2 Canadian towns (one with TV reception, the other without)
  - Children in a single town (with “low” and “high” viewers)
  - The deficiencies in these studies could be detected because the research procedures were clearly described.
4 Scientific knowledge must be **general**–applicable to many rather than just a few cases

- (1) “States with easier voter registration systems have higher turnout rates than states with more difficult systems.”
- (2) “Wisconsin has a higher turnout rate than Alabama because voter registration is easier in Wisconsin than in Alabama.”
- **Empirical generalization** – summarizes relationships between individual facts.
5 Scientific knowledge must be explanatory – a conclusion can be derived (logically) from a set of general propositions and specific initial conditions.

- Explanation answers “why” and “how” kind of questions
- **Causal relation** – the emergence or presence of one factor will always (or with high probability) bring about another.
- Statements asserting cause and effect are generally considered more informative and perhaps useful than ones simply stating that there is an unexplained connection.
- Explanation → predictive (offering systematic, reasoned anticipation of future events)
- Probabilistic, not deterministic
- The accumulation of related explanations sometimes leads to the creation of a **theory** – a statement or series of statements that organize, explain, and predictive knowledge
Characteristics of Scientific Knowledge

6 Scientific knowledge is **provisional** (tentative) – subject to revision and change
  - Scientists should always remain open to the alteration and improvement of their understanding of phenomena.
Induction and Deduction

- **Induction**: the process of reasoning from specific observation to general principle or theory
  - Observation precedes theory
  - Observe an phenomenon → Define a pattern or regularity → Develop and explanatory theory

- **Deduction**: the process of proceeding from general principle or theory to specific observations.
  - Theory → Certain phenomena are predicted → Events are observed and measured to see if they occur as predicted.

- Scientific research typically involves both deduction and induction
Science is not about what you study.
Science is the way you try to understand phenomena.