

Introduction to Research Methods in Political Science

Introduction to Research Methods in Political Science
A concise, organized guide for students and beginners

1. Why Study Research Methods?

Purpose	What It Enables
Explain	Identify causes of political phenomena (e.g., why do some countries democratize faster?).
Predict	Forecast future events (e.g., election outcomes, policy impacts).
Evaluate	Assess the effectiveness of policies, programs, or institutions.
Contribute	Add new knowledge to the discipline and inform public debate.

2. Core Concepts & Terminology

Term	Definition	Example
Theory	A set of inter-related ideas that explains or predicts political behavior.	Democratic Peace Theory
Hypothesis	A testable statement derived from a theory.	"Countries with higher GDP per capita are less likely to experience civil war."
Variable	An attribute that can vary across cases (independent, dependent, control).	Independent: GDP per capita; Dependent: Civil war occurrence.
Operationalization	Translating abstract concepts into measurable indicators.	"Democracy" ? Freedom House score (1–7).
Case	The unit of analysis (individual, state, organization, etc.).	United States (state-level case).
Generalizability	Extent to which findings apply beyond the studied sample.	Results from 30 European democracies may inform broader theories of democratization.

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Term	Definition	Example
Reliability	Consistency of a measurement over time or across observers.	Same survey yields similar responses when repeated.
Validity	Accuracy of a measurement—does it capture the intended concept?	A “trust in government” scale truly reflects citizens’ trust.

3. Research Design Choices

3.1. Qualitative vs. Quantitative

Dimension	Qualitative	Quantitative
Goal	Deep, contextual understanding	Statistical testing, pattern detection
Data	Text, interviews, observations	Numbers, surveys, coded events
Typical Methods	Case studies, ethnography, content analysis	Surveys, experiments, statistical modeling
Strengths	Rich detail, theory generation	Generalizability, replicability
Limitations	Small N, harder to generalize	May overlook nuance, dependent on measurement quality

3.2. Major Designs

Design	Key Features	When to Use
Cross-sectional Survey	One-time data collection from many respondents	Public opinion, voting behavior
Longitudinal (Panel) Survey	Same respondents measured repeatedly	Attitude change, policy impact over time
Comparative Case Study	In-depth analysis of a few cases	Explaining why outcomes differ
Most Similar / Most Different Systems	Systematic case selection to isolate variables	Testing causal mechanisms
Experimental (lab or field)	Random assignment to treatment/control	Causal inference on micro-level behavior

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Design	Key Features	When to Use
Quasi-experimental (e.g., regression discontinuity)	Natural "policy shocks" approximating randomization	Evaluating policy reforms
Content / Discourse Analysis	Systematic coding of texts, speeches, media	Studying framing, agenda setting

4. The Research Process – Step by Step

1. Identify a Research Question

- Must be clear, focused, and answerable.
- Example: *"How does social media use affect political participation among youth in Brazil?"*