

Guidelines for the research design final assignment

Requirements

Students are required to write and submit a Research Design, articulating a theory, hypotheses, and a workable empirical strategy to test them, on a topic of their choice directly associated to at least one of the topics covered in this course. This assignment is to be done in pairs, which the students are free to form. There are no exceptions to this rule, except in class groups where an odd number of students are enrolled, where one group of 3 will be allowed.

This assignment is worth 20% of the grade. All team members will receive the same grade. The research design is due on November 28 by 23.59 on Blackboard. Only submissions on Blackboard will be accepted, and late submissions will be penalized.

The deliverable is a 2-page write up (with up to 1 additional page for references and a potential appendix). These 2-3 pages are to be written in 12-point, single-space text, using normal margins. The title and authors should be listed on top of the first page.

The write up must be 100% students' work, without support from AI tools in writing or proofreading the text.

All groups must come to an in-person, 5-minute oral defense (no slides or presentation, just questions and answers) after delivering the work. After reading the submission, I will ask each team member at least one question about one aspect of the submitted work. As a result of the defense, the grade can go up (if responses are particularly insightful) but also go down even to a failing mark if students' responses suggest they did not author the 2-pager or they authored it with abuse of AI tools.

Expectations

While the deliverable is short, students are expected to produce a high-quality academic text in both form and substance, abiding by academic standards on both fronts. In essence, the challenge here is to produce a thoughtful, original, and academically rigorous piece of writing that showcases students' creative thought on a topic of political science. The research design must engage with at least some academic literature on the topic, ideally recent articles published in top political science journals such as APSR, AJPS, or JOP.

The research design needs to:

- Articulate a theory, that is a proposition or set of propositions about the relationship between variables, providing an internally consistent logic to explain a given political phenomenon. The theory should have some generality (i.e., abstract from empirical cases) but be specific, and include details on mechanisms (or channels through which the key variables of interest are connected) and any relevant scope conditions.
- Specify hypotheses, that is falsifiable claims that can be derived from the proposed theory and that can help us test it empirically.
- Advance an empirical strategy, that is a plan that can test the hypotheses and in that way the theory. The proposed empirical strategy should specify what cases will be examined, what comparisons will be done, how data will be collected and analyzed, how uncertainty will be addressed, and an overall justification of how the proposed design would help us test the hypotheses. The design should also include a discussion of internal and external validity.

I strongly encourage students to:

- Start early by forming pairs, thinking through topics, and narrowing down their focus for this assignment.

- Brainstorm and discuss among themselves significantly before writing any sections of the research design. In the meantime, a shared document with ideas, questions, and resources would be useful.
- Revisit the slides, handout, and readings from sessions 2 and 3 on how to do political science.
- Read academic studies to refine the theory and empirical strategy, and to make sure the research design speaks and contributes to recent academic debates on the topic.
- Use weekly readings and discussions to continue refining their theory, hypotheses, and empirical design.
- Reach out to me during breaks, by email, or in office hours for additional help refining their research design.

Checklist

Content

- The submission clearly articulates a political science theory touching on one or several of the topics covered during the semester, that is a proposition or set of propositions about the relationship between variables, providing an internally consistent logic to explain a chosen political phenomenon.
- The key variables specific and well defined, as are the theorized relationships between them.
- The submission articulates the mechanisms, channels, or rationale connecting the variables in the theory.
- The theory is specific but phrased in abstract terms, that is independent of any countries to which it could be applied.
- The submission specifies hypotheses, that is falsifiable claims that can be tested empirically.
- The submission articulates an empirical strategy or plan through which the theory could be tested. The submission does not focus on providing actual tests, results, case studies, or other data analyses – instead, it focuses on outlining a plan through which the theory could be tested.
- The empirical strategy specifies what cases will be examined, what comparisons will be done, how data will be collected and analyzed, how uncertainty will be addressed, and an overall justification of how the proposed design would help us test the hypotheses.
- The empirical strategy includes a succinct discussion of internal and external validity.
- The submission engages with at least 2 or 3 academic articles on the topic, ideally recent articles published in top political science journals such as APSR, AJPS, JOP, BJPS or CPS.

Style

- Clarity. The write-up is clear, using precise language. Key terms are defined, but there are no verbose discussions of context, or issues that a well informed, college-level reader would know.
- Structure. The research design is organized in sections (between 2 and 4), and sections in paragraphs. Each paragraph presents and then develops one key idea. Paragraphs use topic sentences.
- Focus. The write-up is committed to presenting the authors' theory and their suggested or proposed empirical plan to test it, without lengthy detours or discussions of other people's ideas.

Authorship and integrity

- The submission is joint work in a team of exactly 2 people (unless otherwise authorized by email)
- The submission is an original piece of thinking and writing by team members
- Text taken from human sources (academic or policy articles, textbooks, etc.) is quoted and credit is given to the authors through in-text citations
- No fraction of text included in the submission is produced by large language models, or by humans other than the authors (except when it is published work and it is properly cited).

Formatting

- The submission is a PDF of 2 pages, plus 1 more page for references and a potential appendix.
- The submission is all in single-spaced text, using 12-point font.
- The document uses normal margins – about 2.5cm on each side.
- The title of the research design and its authors are on top of the first page.
- The submission has no cover page.
- The design uses in-text academic references, with cited works (and no others) listed at the end.