

## Week 8: Qualitative Research Methods

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UP UNTIL THIS POINT, we have largely focused on large-N and quantitative research methods including descriptive statistics, experiments, surveys, confidence intervals and regressions.

However, we now turn to small-N and qualitative research methods. These methods are based on text-based data and you study a small number of cases in great detail. Data analysis is based on finding patterns in the process or entity of interest. Common types of qualitative methods include

- Historical Methods
- In-Depth Interviews
- Focus Groups
- Participant Observation

### *Historical Methods*

Historical Methods are based primarily based on primary source research methods where you look at documents stored in archives and draw conclusions based on these documents.

A subfield in American politics that is built off of the historical methods, primary source approach is **American Political Development (APD)**, which studies that continuity and change over time in American politics, including how the state was built and how society, and its institutions, has changed across the years.

An example of a study that uses the APD method is Lacombe (2019)<sup>1</sup>. In this paper, Lacombe is interested in the way the the NRA develops a social identity among their members and how they can use this social identity to mobilize their membership base in political action. To do this, he coded 79 years of the *American Rifleman* magazine and letters to the editor in major American newspapers and conducts content analyses of these letters and entries. The results show that the NRA created and channeled a social identity in all resources to build influence in mass arenas and that this identity is powerful in mobilizing the membership base in political action. It has become more powerful over time.

<sup>1</sup> Lacombe, Matthew J. "The political weaponization of gun owners: The national rifle association's cultivation, dissemination, and use of a group social identity." *The Journal of Politics* 81, no. 4 (2019): 1342-1356.

## *Interviews*

Interviews are based on conversations with subjects or groups of interest. Types of interviews include

- **Structured Interviews:** Provide a set number of questions for each participant
- **Unstructured Interviews:** Broad topics for conversations and depending on the answers, you respond flexibly.
- **Semi-Structured Interviews:** A mix of questions and free flowing discussions

## *Focus Groups*

Another type of qualitative research method that stems out of interviews are **focus groups**. These are centered around a group of people who discuss a topic moderated by a facilitator. The goal is often to arrive at a solution of a issue, evaluate a program, understanding concepts etc.

Collectively, interviews and focus groups happen more in sociology than in political science. Common topics of focus groups I have seen include experiences of the LGBTQIA+ peoples in various social groups such as civic organizations and churches.

## *Participant Observation*

**Participant Observation**, or **ethnography**, is a research method where researchers go to the community, join the group and observe their behavior without being too actively involved.

One example of this research method is Cramer (2012)<sup>2</sup>. In this paper, she was interested in why people vote against their self-interests and use rural Americans as a case study. People in rural America tend to be poor and less educated, which makes their policy interests align more with the agenda of the Democrats. However, they do not vote for the Democrats. To find out why, Cramer visited 37 regularly congregating discussion groups in coffee shops and bookstores across 27 communities across Wisconsin between May 2007 and May 2011. She observed and recorded their conversations to learn about their attitudes about politics without intervening in their conversations. her results emphasized the importance of group consciousness in personal political decisionmaking. Rural Americans collectively despise urban Americans as they blame the urban residents and politicians from urban areas for all of their problems. Therefore, they vote against the Democrat party, who champions city interests and whose politicians are more likely from cities than small towns.

<sup>2</sup> Walsh, Katherine Cramer. "Putting inequality in its place: Rural consciousness and the power of perspective." *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 3 (2012): 517-532.

## *Where Qualitative meets Quantitative*

**Text as Data** methods take qualitative data and quantify it to meaningful data that we can use statistical methods to analyze. Texts are treated as a “bag of words” to analyze using dictionaries. This allows us to find patterns in large sums of text without necessarily needing to read each text.

An example of this combination of qualitative and quantitative method is a paper that I have been working on<sup>3</sup>. In this paper, I wanted to investigate whether Democrats and Republicans appeal to different moral values and to what extent they align with the moral values that are championed by their base. Past research has suggested that Democrats and Republicans appeal to different moral values in their press releases, church sermons, and platforms. So for this study, I was interested in national conventions, which are focused on getting voters excited for the election and willing to mobilize on the party’s behalf.

For this project, my methods are summarized as follows:

1. Collect transcripts of speeches delivered at the Democrat and Republican National Convention from 2008 to 2020
2. Parse data using the Moral Foundations Dictionary with text as data methods
3. Code data based on the definitions of the foundations to see how well the dictionary does in sorting the moral appeals.

This provides me with both qualitative and quantitative data to work with.

From the qualitative data, we can draw parallel conclusions as the quantitative data. For example, the Harm foundation is interested in caring and protecting vulnerable peoples. This is a core value of the Democrat party. The dictionary characterized Bernie Sanders’ 2020 Democrat National Convention speech as a good example of appeals to the Harm foundation. If we read the speech, we can see why

As long as I am here, I will work with progressives, with moderates, and yes, with conservatives to preserve this nation from a threat that so many of our heroes fought and died to defeat. This president is not just a threat to our democracy, but by rejecting science, he has put our lives and health in jeopardy. Trump has attacked doctors and scientists trying to protect us from the pandemic while refusing to take strong action to produce the masks, gowns, and gloves our healthcare workers desperately need. Nero fiddled while Rome burned. Trump golfs. His actions fanned this pandemic resulting in over 170,000 deaths and a nation still unprepared to protect its people

As another example, the Authority foundation emphasizes traditions, rule of law, and respect for authority. This is a core value for

<sup>3</sup> Lin, Jennifer. “From Barack Obama to Donald Trump: The Evolution of Moral Appeals in National Conventions.” *Working paper*.

the Republican party and the text methods coded the speech by Rudy Giuliani in the 2020 Republican National Convention as a good example of appeals to this value. The excerpt of his speech seem to parallel this.

It is clear that a vote for Biden and the Democrats creates the risk that you will bring this lawlessness to your city, to your town, to your suburb. There is no question that this awesome job of restoring safety for our people cannot be done from your basement, Joe. There's also no question that President Trump will fight with all his strengths to preserve the American system of government and our way of life

So the parties do appeal to different moral values but I also find that they use the value systems of the opposite party to mobilize moderate and swing voters.

This study, and the others that I showed you in this section, demonstrate the use to qualitative data in Political Science research.