What We Mean by Scope and Methods: A Survey of Undergraduate Scope and Methods Courses

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ABSTRACT Self-reflective political scientists have extensively reviewed the history of the discipline and argued over its future, but to date there has been little effort to systematically survey undergraduate scope and methods courses (for an exception see Thies and Hogan 2005). This lack of data leaves the discipline unable to assess how much we are teaching undergraduates about the scope of political science or, indeed, what we mean by the scope of the discipline. Similarly, though there have been many battles waged over the appropriateness of various methodologies, it is not clear how much of this discussion, or how many of these methods, make it into the undergraduate classroom. Survey results from a nation-wide sample of political science departments indicate that most departments require a scope and methods course of their majors and that, while there is a great deal of variety in topics covered, some common themes exist and some common assignments are used.

Survey data suggest that as many as three-quarters of political science departments at American colleges and universities require a class in "scope and methods" of their undergraduate majors (Thies and Hogan 2005, 295).[1] As a discipline, this is a subject we know we should take seriously. Indeed, the Wahlke Report (1991, 51), perhaps the most highly regarded and well-developed analysis of the undergraduate political science major in recent years, includes among its several recommendations "*that every political science major gain familiarity with the different assumptions, methods, and analytical approaches* used by political scientists" (emphasis in original). Though Wahlke acknowledges the great diversity of application (i.e., political scientists embrace a wide range of methodological approaches), he also stresses the centrality of this subject matter: "students in any program must be acquainted with the various alternatives and the rationale for them" (1991, 51).

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In the 18 years since the Wahlke Report was issued, departments across the country have, undoubtedly, taken heed of many of its recommendations—but which ones and to what degree? Wahlke points departments in many important directions, and it seems relevant to ask where we have gone and how far. The present investigation aims to provide an update of one aspect of curricular development. Namely, what do we teach in our undergraduate scope and methods courses? The results indicate a wide diversity in texts used, but a high degree of consistency in course titles, topic coverage, and course assignments.

WHAT WE KNOW, AND WHAT WE ONLY THINK WE KNOW

Past research on undergraduate methods training teaches us a great deal about successful approaches to teaching the course, and constantly reminds instructors to keep their chins up—the course "is one of the toughest teaching assignments in academia, but it can also be one of the most productive" (Adams 2001, 3) is a typical sentiment. Indeed, there are many good normative articles that offer great advice for teaching undergraduate methods courses, usually based on years of first-hand experience (see, for example, Rodgers and Manrique 1992; Hubbell 1994; McBride 1994; 1996; Adams 2001; Clawson, Hoffman, and McCann 2001; Hojnacki 2001; Janda 2001; Lewis-Beck 2001; Poggione 2001; Stone 2001; Reinke 2005; Turner 2005). These articles have provided instructors with valuable insights about best practices in scope and methods courses

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and, we suspect, have helped provide a better classroom experience for both students and faculty. The shortcoming of this literature, when taken as a whole, is that it provides little *systematic* knowledge of how scope and methods is taught. The descriptions and recommendations are typically idiosyncratic, based on the experiences of one or two instructors at one or two universities.

In addition to these useful didactic pieces, there have also been a small number of descriptive works attempting to assess the state of the discipline in scope and methods training. Some offer broad overviews of the state of scope and methods training, usually with a prescription for change. Mayer (2002), for example, presents an epistemological history of political science over the past few generations. He argues that a misplaced emphasis on statistics and the outward trappings of science has caused political science education to overlook more fundamental issues: "if we are to pursue a scientifically based discipline, we must first understand and reach consensus on what that is and then clearly communicate that understanding to all of our students" (2002, 122). Though Mayer's advice to the discipline is valuable, and his historical descriptions likely accurate, his assessment of the present state of methodology education does not appear to be based on any objective empiricism. Other works on methods education, though empirical in nature, focus narrowly on specific content elements, such as the incorporation of information literacy (Marfleet and Dille 2005). Still others, like Schwartz-Shea (2003) and Bennett, Barth, and Rutherford (2003), offer thorough empirical accounts of methods offerings in graduate programs.

Finally, Thies and Hogan (2005) present recent empirical evidence on undergraduate scope and methods courses. Surveying a broad cross section of American political science departments, Thies and Hogan find that departments with Ph.D. programs are less likely to require a methods course (46.8%) than those without (64.5%). Prior to their survey, many political scientists may have assumed the opposite was true. We speculate that this finding may mean the former programs are less interested in teaching undergraduates to be social scientists, or that the latter programs are more likely to see such training as a key component of a liberal arts education. Whatever the departmental motivations might be, the data suggest that important divisions exist in how political scientists view the role of undergraduate methods. This discovery indicates the need for a more detailed investigation.

Indeed, though we have a sense of how some individual courses are taught, and we now know how often they are required, political scientists have relatively little empirical knowledge of the content of undergraduate scope and methods courses. This lack of information has led some to make assumptions that may or may not be accurate. Michael Lewis-Beck (2001, 7), for example, notes that the "scope and method" format for undergraduate instruction, with a "review of leading theoretical paradigms and its going over of different study approaches" is "pretty much a thing of the past." He argues (2001, 8) that this has largely been replaced by an emphasis on "understanding tools for the scientific explanation of politics—computers, mathematics, statistics." Though Lewis-Beck's statements are made in passing and are not the main focus of his article, the claim raises an interesting question: just what is the substance of undergraduate political science scope and methods courses in American universities today? What do we know, and what do we only think we know? Upon teaching undergraduate methods for the first time, one professor observed: "I wasn't sure about what the objectives of a research methods course should be or what material to include and what to exclude" (Poggione 2001, 10). We suspect many an instructor has confessed a similar ignorance when faced with this question.

The importance of the question of content is further highlighted by battles over the "best" or "correct" methodology for political science. While these discussions have largely focused on the content of the leading journals and the training of graduate students, it may also be of some interest to know how such academic debates filter down to the undergraduate classroom. Are scope and methods classrooms being overrun with rational choice theorists? Are qualitative approaches being taught to undergraduates? On one hand, it may be the case that the positivist vs. postpositivist debate has been largely confined to academic journals and that when it comes to educating undergraduates in the fundamentals of political science research, we are largely in agreement. On the other hand, this debate may rage just as fiercely in the classroom. In order to answer this question, we asked instructors what they teach.

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SURVEY DESIGN AND RESULTS

Though the findings of previous studies are enlightening, there are more pieces to this puzzle that need to be put in place if we are to get a clear picture of the scope and methods curriculum. To that end, we developed a survey for undergraduate scope and methods instructors (see Appendix).[2] The survey asks about topics covered, assignments, and demographic data regarding the course, instructor, and institution. An introductory letter was mailed electronically to department chairs who were asked to identify faculty in their department who taught a scope and methods type course and provide us with e-mail addresses for them. Chairs provided approximately 150 addresses, which we used to distribute the survey instrument. We received 106 unique responses, for a response rate of 70%.[3]

Respondents and their institutions were demographically varied: 60% of respondents taught at public institutions while 40% taught at private institutions. About 60% were tenured and 34% were on the tenure track.[4] The mean number of departmental majors was 263 (with a range from 10 to 1,100) and the average class size for the scope and methods class was 29, with 76% of

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Table 1

Most Common Scope and Methods Course Titles*

TITLE	*N*
Research Methods	43
Introduction to Political Research/Analysis	17
Political Analysis/Inquiry	13
Scope/Methods	10
Quantitative Methods/Statistics	9
Other (e.g., critical thinking, political seminar)	14
Total	**106**

*Course titles are grouped by most salient words. For example, Research Methods includes courses with that exact title, but also courses with titles like Political Science Research Methods. The category "other" consists of titles mentioned only once.

respondents indicating that the class was recommended for students during their sophomore or junior year.[5]

Table 1 indicates the most frequently mentioned titles for the scope and methods course. Though many titles were similar and have been grouped together in the table, of the 106 responses, there were 62 unique course titles. This result suggests that, while there is great variety in exact titles, political scientists have coalesced around certain important words to include in the title of this type of course. Of the 62 unique responses, 54 (87%) included some form of one or more of the following words: research, scope, methods, analysis, inquiry, and empirical. Though titles alone can be misleading, the data seem to suggest that research methods play a bigger role than does an examination of the scope of the discipline.

Beyond course titles, we also asked which books instructors assigned for the class. The most frequently listed required texts are presented in Table 2. The most striking features of this list are the dominance of the first two titles and the diversity of the rest. Two titles were mentioned in 27 responses each. *Political Science Research Methods* (Janet Buttolph Johnson, H. T. Reynolds, and Jason D. Mycoff) and *The Essentials of Political Analysis* (Phillip H. Pollock III) each accounted for over 16% of the total. Beyond those two leaders, 18 titles received between two and 11 mentions and 51 of the 168 responses—over 30% of the total—were unique. Though the survey reached a relatively small sample of courses, the results suggest that scope and methods instructors see a wide range of texts as suitable for their course.[6] Indeed, though they could list more than one, 106 respondents produced a list of 71 distinct titles that they require for the scope and methods course.[7] This textual variety suggests that instructors have found a multiplicity of suitable tools for conveying course content.

Table 2

Most Frequently Assigned Books in Scope and Methods Courses*

TITLE/AUTHOR	*N*
The Essentials of Political Analysis and/or *An SPSS/Stata Companion to Political Analysis*/Pollock	27
Political Science Research Methods/Johnson, Reynolds, and Mycoff	27
Research Methods in Political Science/Le Roy and Corbett	11
Doing Empirical Political Research/Carlson and Hyde	8
The Basics of Social Research or *The Practice of Social Research*/Babbie	7
The Craft of Political Research/Shively	4
Basics of Social Research/Neuman	3
Damned Lies and Statistics/Best	3
Designing Social Inquiry/King, Keohane, and Verba	3
Empirical Political Analysis/Manheim, Rich, Willnat, and Brians	3
Polling and the Public/Asher	3
Applied Regression/Lewis-Beck	2
Bowling Alone/Putnam	2
The Elements of Social Scientific Thinking/Hoover and Donovan	2
Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs for Research/Campbell and Stanley	2
Practical Research/Leedy and Ormrod	2
Researching the Polity/Jones and Olson	2
Research Methods in the Social Sciences/Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias	2
Statistical Methods for the Social Sciences/Agresti and Finlay	2
The Structure of Scientific Revolutions/Kuhn	2
Other	51
Total	**168**

*Versions of the same text are grouped in the same line (e.g., second and third edition). The most recent edition/title is listed here. In the cases of Philip Pollock, Earl Babbie, and Michael Corbett, multiple distinct titles are grouped because respondents did not always make clear which text they were using by that author. The total sums to greater than 106 because respondents were allowed to list up to four required texts. The category "other" consists of titles mentioned only once.

Of course, class titles and books assigned are not always indicative of the exact content of a course, so the survey also asked respondents to indicate topics covered and projects assigned by selecting from a list of possibilities. The results are displayed in Table 3 and Table 4. Some topics appear to be covered nearly universally. Measurement, elements of a research design, the logic of scientific reasoning, causality, sampling, and survey research are included in over 90% of the courses sampled. An additional nine topics are covered by at least half of the respondents. Taken together, it seems reasonable to conclude that these 15 topics form a core of what political scientists teach undergraduate majors about the scope of political science, the research methods of the discipline, and its various modes of inquiry and analysis.[8] With that premise, a few observations are in order.

First, very few instructors view this course as an appropriate venue for incorporating political ideology or the history of political thought. Perhaps because these topics often raise normative concerns, they do not tend to be covered in a course that nearly all respondents saw as an appropriate venue for discussing scientific reasoning.

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Table 3

Percent of Respondents Covering Selected Topics in Course

TOPIC	%
Nearly All	
Measurement	97.1
Elements of research design	95.2
Logic of scientific reasoning	94.3
Causality	93.3
Sampling	93.3
Survey research	90.5
Most	
Components of a research paper	83.8
Experiments	82.9
Existing data sets	80.0
Nature of social science	79.0
Quasi-experiments	75.0
Quantitative data analysis	73.1
Research ethics	65.7
Interview techniques	57.1
Case studies	54.3
Some	
Comparative method	43.8
Archival research	41.0
Qualitative data analysis	38.1
Ethnographic/field research	36.2
History of academic political science	36.2
Subfields of political science	32.4
Few	
Formal or mathematical models	18.1
Policy/program evaluation	15.2
History of political thought	7.7
Political ideology	4.8
Other topics	1.9

N = 106

Table 4

Percent of Respondents Requiring Selected Assignments

ASSIGNMENT	%
Use of statistical software	77.1
Research design/research proposal paper	63.1
Complete research project with data collection and analysis	49.0
Collaborative data collection	25.0
Individual data collection	22.1
Other	10.7

N = 106

Second, some methodologies clearly enjoy a wider acceptance than others in this course. At least 70% of respondents include survey research, experiments, quasi-experiments, and quantitative analysis. Over half cover interview techniques and case studies. On the other hand, less than half of the respondents mentioned the comparative method, archival research, qualitative analysis, ethnographic research, formal modeling, or program evaluation. It is not clear whether these results indicate the instructors' preferred methodological approaches, or merely what they deem relevant to the undergraduate experience. In any event, it is clear that some methods are taught more than others. Instructors teach quantitative approaches, surveys, and experiments to undergraduates far more often than qualitative or formal approaches.

Finally, the fact that 95% of courses address the elements of a research design and 83% cover the components of a research paper suggests that most instructors expect students to conceive of political science research as part of a written academic project. Table 4 further indicates the form that this written project takes. While just under two-thirds of respondents require a research design/proposal paper and just under half require a complete research project, cross-tabulation of responses for those two questions indicates that 79% require either one or the other of those two assignments. Thus, it seems safe to conclude that there is a fair amount of uniformity regarding the need for students to write their own scientific research, either with or without inclusion of their own data analysis. Moreover, 23% of respondents indicated that the scope and methods course fulfills a department or university writing requirement.

In addition to writing, most courses in the sample require students to work with data. Over three-quarters require the use of statistical software and about one-quarter require individual or collaborative student data collection. Of those two types of data collection, cross-tabulation indicates that 34% of courses require just one, while only 7% require both. In other words, instructors are much more likely to focus on data analysis than data collection, though a significant minority do both.[9]

DISCUSSION

So, what do these survey results tell us about the undergraduate scope and methods curriculum? Though just a sample of the nation's courses, some patterns are evident that help answer this question. Taken as a whole, schools offering a course in the scope and methods of political science tend to require that course of all majors seeking a BA in political science (75%). The typical course will be taught by a tenured (60%) or tenure-track (34%) professor and include words like research, methods, analysis, inquiry, scope, and statistics in its title.[10] Though there is significant variety in the texts instructors assign in this course, a majority (56%) of the texts assigned have some form of the words political/social and research/analysis in their titles. Respondents mentioned over 25 different topics that they address in their courses, with a majority agreeing on 15 of those and over 90% covering six subjects. Students taking scope and methods should expect to write a research proposal or complete research project (79%) and to learn how to use statistical software (77%).

What do these findings say about our discipline and, in particular, our treatment of methods in the undergraduate major? We suggest a few conclusions. First, the presence of broad consensus in everything from course requirements and titles to topics covered to books and assignments suggests that the American

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political science department has taken a fairly uniform view of the Wahlke Report's "primary task" for the major: "to maximize students' capacity to analyze and interpret the significance and dynamics of political events and government processes" (1991, 49). The scope and methods course appears to equip students with the tools and skills to attain this end. Second, despite (or, perhaps, because of) the methodological battles scholars have waged in the pages of leading disciplinary journals in recent years, about three-quarters of scope and methods courses teach undergraduates quantitative data analysis and the use of statistical software, while less than 40% teach qualitative analysis, ethnographic/field research, or the comparative method. The perceived dominance of quantitative approaches in the discipline at large seems to translate to the undergraduate classroom as well.[11] Finally, though there are a number of things on which methods instructors agree, the courses are by no means uniform. Just as we are a pluralistic discipline of professionals, the majors we offer contain methodological variety as well. When one considers the role of higher education in a democratic society, this variety is likely a positive characteristic. We may not all mean the same thing by "introductory scope and methods," but enough overlap seems to exist for meaningful dialogue about the content and future of this course to continue. ■

NOTES

We would like to thank Robert E. Hogan for assistance with the survey instrument and Jennifer Leger for research assistance. We would also like to thank two anonymous referees for their helpful suggestions.

1. A survey conducted by Thies and Hogan (2005, 295) reported a 64% requirement rate and the rate was 75% in the survey conducted for this article. The latter survey also found an additional 10% of respondents indicating that this course is required for at least some of their majors. Though, as the present survey results indicate, there are a variety of titles given to the undergraduate methods course, for the sake of consistency we use "scope and methods" throughout when referring to this type of course.
2. Before distributing the survey we presented a draft version at the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting in 2005 and at the APSA Teaching and Learning Conference in 2006 as a field pretest and sought feedback. We are thankful to those who took the time to help improve the survey instrument.
3. E-mail addresses were obtained from the APSA listing of political science department chairs. All 717 chairs with valid e-mail addresses were initially e-mailed; about one-quarter responded with the requested information. This is the same sampling frame used by Thies and Hogan (2005). Survey responses were received beginning in the spring 2006 semester and ending in spring 2007. Though the focus here is domestic, for a comparative look at how research methods is taught in eight different countries, see Parker (2008).
4. Perhaps because these classes are typically taught by tenured/tenure-track faculty, or perhaps because department chairs did not want to burden part-time or full-time temporary instructors, this latter group of faculty is underrepresented in the survey results.
5. Some respondents discussed two distinct courses in their responses, typically an introductory methods course and then a more advanced statistics course. For the sake of consistency, we recorded data for only the first course described.
6. For a useful discussion of textbook content that relies on some of the data reported here, see Lawrence (2008).
7. Eight respondents listed no required texts, 52 listed one, 28 listed two, 13 listed three, and five listed four.
8. This survey did not collect data on highest degree awarded by institution as some previous research has (see Thies and Hogan 2005). Data collected here indicate little difference in course content between public and private institutions. The only significant correlations between institution type and the 26 listed topics indicate that private institutions are more likely to cover the use of existing data sets and formal or mathematical models.
9. Crosstabs indicate that 78% of courses requiring some form of data collection also require the use of statistical software.
10. About 87% include one or more of these words in the course title.
11. Though, to be sure, we find that more advanced mathematical techniques are rarely taught in the introductory methods course.

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APPENDIX: Survey of Undergraduate Scope and Methods Courses

1. Which of the following best describes your institution?Public____Private ____
2. If your department offers a BA/BS, is it in:
   political science/politics/government ____
   a combined program (e.g., government and history) ____
   social science ____
3. Approximately how many undergraduate majors do you have? _____
4. What is the title of the relevant **undergraduate** course(s) at your institution? _____
5. At what level of student is the course(s) primarily aimed?
   Fresh. ____ Soph. ____ Junior ____ Senior ____ other (please specify) _____
6. Including you, approximately how many different instructors are teaching this course during the current academic year? _____
7. Is the course required for all of your undergraduates? ____ yes____ no
8. Is the course required for some of your undergraduates? ____ yes____ no
   If yes, is it required for a specific major (e.g., political science, international relations), or degree (e.g., BS, BA)? Please elaborate:
   _____
9. If the course is an elective, do you encourage majors to take it? ____ yes____ no
   If yes, please briefly how you encourage majors to take the course:
   _____
10. Approximately how many students are enrolled in your course in the current semester (or in the most recent semester you taught the course)? If you teach multiple sections, please list separately: _____
11. Are there any prerequisites for this course? ____ yes____ no
    If yes, please list by name: _____
12. Please list any texts (author and title) that you assign as **required** for your course:
    _____
13. Please list any texts (author and title) that you assign as **suggested or optional** for your course:
    _____
14. Which of the following topics are covered in your course? (check all that apply)
    ____ history of political thought
    ____ political ideology
    ____ subfields of political science
    ____ history/development of academic political science
    ____ nature of social science
    ____ logic of scientific reasoning
    ____ causality
    ____ elements of research design
    ____ measurement
    ____ sampling
    ____ experiments
    ____ quasi-experiments
    ____ survey research
    ____ ethnographic/field research
    ____ interview techniques
    ____ archival research
    ____ case studies
    ____ comparative method
    ____ existing data sets
    ____ formal or mathematical models
    ____ policy/program evaluation
    ____ components of a research paper
    ____ research ethics
    ____ qualitative data analysis (please list specific approaches/techniques _____)
    ____ quantitative data analysis (please list specific approaches/techniques _____)
    ____ other (please elaborate: _____)

(*continued*)

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APPENDIX: (continued)

15. Which of the following are required components of your course? (select all that apply)
    ____research design/research proposal paper
    ____complete research project (including data collection and analysis)
    ____use of statistical software
    ____individual data collection
    ____collaborative data collection (i.e., by groups of students or entire class)
    ____other (please elaborate: _____)
16. Is there a department- or university-required writing component to your course?
    yes ____ no ____ If yes, please explain: _____
17. Which of the following best describes your employment status in the political science department/program?
    ____ tenured
    ____ tenure track
    ____ full time, temporary (non-tenure track)
    ____ part time, temporary
    ____ graduate student
    ____ other (please describe: _____)
18. Is there anything else you would like to share about the course you teach?

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