Teaching Political Methodology

Introduction to the Symposium on Teaching Political Methodology

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At the 1983 meeting of the American Political Science Association (APSA), a small group of scholars interested in the methodological tools of political science met for a panel on the state of the discipline.[1] The participants agreed that the use of methods in political science needed improvement (although there was variation in their optimism about that goal). The group secured $5,000 from the 1984 American National Election Study funds and met for the first time as the Political Methodology Society in Ann Arbor, Michigan, that summer. In the following years, the Society started a journal (i.e., *Political Analysis*), institutionalized the summer meeting, and began what is now a vibrant and active field in political science. The Society comprises a large section of APSA, hosts numerous conferences and workshops in the United States and beyond, and supports one of the top journals in the discipline. Scholarship in methodology continues to advance and improve our capacity to ask and answer critical questions in the study of political phenomena.

The field's growth in scholarship is more visible, but teaching political methodology is as important for improving the quality, breadth, and sophistication of quantitative analysis in the discipline. Indeed, whereas there is great interest in the new methodological developments published in our journals, so also is there demand for the dissemination of that work to students and applied researchers. Modern graduate programs require more methods coursework than ever before, and many PhD students are taking advanced courses, short courses, and workshops beyond their program's required sequences. Undergraduates are adding data science courses to their schedules, learning `R` and `Python`, and writing honors theses that require data collection and analysis. This widespread interest in methods training is a major change from the field's early days when a debate in several top departments was whether to add a second course to graduate sequences on maximum likelihood estimation.

Establishing a framework for teaching methods was important at the beginning of the field because most students at the time were trained in other disciplines' methods programs. Improving methods teaching also is a critical component to maintaining the field's positive momentum. This task is difficult. Political methodology is expanding so rapidly that a specialized course a decade ago might be considered fundamental today. Instructors often must decide how to teach students with minimal prior experience as well as those with extensive backgrounds *in the same class*. They also face the reality that the material they teach is demanding and stress inducing even for high-performing students. Methods instructors' office hours are comparatively busier but their student evaluation scores are lower, on average. For all of these reasons, faculty who teach methods—especially junior faculty—need support from the field.

Thus far, political methodologists have taken an ad hoc approach in teacher training. Although the field boasts many excellent teachers and mentors, knowledge about teaching political methodology has traveled largely through small individual networks. Senior faculty pass down their perspectives on teaching (as well as their course materials) to their students; those students leave and are mostly on their own as they begin their teaching career. Many methodologists working today are likely familiar with the feeling of arriving on campus as a first-year faculty member with the label of "the methods person" (emphasis on the singular) but without much guidance regarding how to handle the job. In that role, junior faculty might ask themselves several questions, including the following:

- How should I present complicated material to a group of students with varying methodological backgrounds?
- What software should I use in my courses?
- How do I get undergraduates excited about methodology?
- How should I teach programming skills to graduate students?

Political methodologists have useful perspectives on these and related questions but, to date, they mostly have been confined within networks and are not easily accessible to new members of the field. In 2019, the International Methods Colloquium (IMC) began an effort to centralize this collective wisdom.[2] The IMC sought proposals for a roundtable and symposium on best practices for teaching political methodology. The call generated numerous proposals, from which the IMC advisory board selected eight.[3] The contributors then

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developed their essays and presented them on April 30, 2021, in a roundtable held during one of the IMC's regular Friday virtual sessions.[4] These essays are the articles in this symposium. They reflect the perspectives of a diverse group of scholars: new and experienced teachers, those focused on qualitative and quantitative methods, and those with experience instructing undergraduates and graduate students.

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The symposium answers questions on how to get undergraduates excited about methodology (Lonna Rae Atkeson) and which software to use in class (David S. Brown, Katherine V. Bryant, and Andrew Q. Philips). It provides guidance on teaching specialized material, such as Annotation for Transparent Inquiry (Alan M. Jacobs, Diana Kapiszewski, and Sebastian Karcher) and Bayesian statistics (Diogo Ferrari). Regarding practical skills that transcend specific courses or topics, Shawna K. Metzger discusses how to use `R Shiny` to facilitate the intuition of challenging concepts, and Rob Williams orients us toward the opportunities that come from teaching programming skills. Finally, the symposium offers reflections on teaching political methodology in general (Frederick J. Boehmke) and from the perspective of junior faculty in particular (Clayton Webb and Soren Jordan).

Although these articles reflect substantial insight into teaching political methodology, they only scratch the surface of the collective wisdom embedded in the community of political methodologists. The IMC's goal with the roundtable and this symposium is to begin an open conversation about the pedagogy of methodology and the methodology of pedagogy. We hope that the conversation will continue at conferences, on the PolMeth listserv, on social media, and in other forums for scholarly exchange in the discipline. If we can disseminate knowledge about the unique aspects and challenges of teaching methods courses, it will help the political methodology field continue to develop and improve political science for decades to come. ■

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NOTES

1. We thank Chris Achen, Neal Beck, and Jim Stimson for helpful conversations on the early history of the political methodology field.
2. The IMC is a periodic online interactive seminar discussion on the application of quantitative statistical methodology to the social sciences. Its goal is to make the discussion of cutting-edge techniques and interesting applications accessible to scholars, students, and data scientists all over the world, free of charge. It was founded in 2014 by Justin Esarey (Wake Forest University).
3. The members of the IMC advisory board are Michelle Dion (McMaster University), Cassy Dorff (Vanderbilt University), Jeffrey Harden (University of Notre Dame), Dustin Tingley (Harvard University), and Christopher Zorn (Pennsylvania State University).
4. A recording of the roundtable discussion is available at www.methods-colloquium.com/single-post/roundtable-discussion-on-teaching-political-methodology.

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