Case Studies, Online Databases, and the Senior Seminar*

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Students typically enter the senior seminar in political science having taken different sets of courses in the major and having developed interests in different subjects. They also may believe they are incapable of conducting social scientific research because they have limited skills and because the term is so short. In particular, students taking a capstone course in political science at a liberal arts college that, like Rhodes College, lacks a major research library may question their ability to accumulate in a timely manner adequate information about a subject of interest. These doubts and concerns are not unfounded. Fortunately, combining the case study method and online research resources offers a solution to these difficulties and can greatly enrich the senior seminar experience. This combination would also prove beneficial to faculty overseeing honors research or senior theses.

The principal benefit of using the case study method in the context of advanced undergraduate education is that it allows students with different skills and interests to pursue a variety of constructive projects within a uniform set of guidelines provided by the instructor. Students who have taken courses in hypothesis testing and statistical analysis and those who demonstrate extraordinary writing skills but shy away from "numbers" can pursue case studies. The former can pursue a case study with hypotheses about a real-world phenomenon; the latter can produce an analytical narrative. Other important benefits of using case studies are that students can be prevented from undertaking overly ambitious projects, students can be encouraged (and even taught) to engage in scholarly and social-scientific thinking, numerous examples of case study research are accessible and available to students, and ambitious students can distinguish themselves from their peers through the selection of cases and relevant theoretical literatures.

The traditional difficulty with using the case study method in undergraduate courses is that accumulating the necessary sources within a single semester (much less a quarter) has proven nearly impossible. For example, to learn about the case, one might have to physically search the archives at a local or distant newspaper office. To review the relevant literature, one might have to order back issues of journals or travel to off-campus libraries.

With the growth of the Internet, however, such time-consuming chores as these have become, for the most part, a thing of the past.[1] Online databases such as Lexis-Nexis and ProQuest give scholars easy access to practically all journal and periodical articles published in the last five years. Other excellent online research resources include Amazon (www.amazon.com), for book searches; THOMAS (http://thomas.loc.gov), for U.S. government documents; and FirstSearch (http://firstsearch.oclc.org), for dissertation abstracts and texts.[2]

In this article, I describe how I have used the case study method in my senior seminar and how my students have successfully used the extensive resources and tools available online.[3]

Definitions and Structure

On the first day of class, I provide students with the following definition of the case study method: The investigator chooses a real-world, observable phenomenon to study and uses what he or she discovers about the phenomenon to enhance the understanding of larger theoretical issues. This definition has several notable characteristics.

First, it does not suggest a preference for qualitative or quantitative research—a battle that most undergraduates need not enter. They simply need to pick one approach and run with it. Second, the definition leads students to focus from the start of their research not on the case itself but on what the case illustrates about larger issues. To reinforce this point in class, I suggest that only a handful of people will be interested in, for example, the interests sponsoring the redevelopment of downtown Memphis or the failed bid for reelection of a U.S. House member from suburban Kansas City. However, many thoughtful people will be interested in what those respective cases illustrate about the politics of urban renewal and incumbent reelection to the House.

Finally, my definition of the case study method makes it clear to students that they will have to become experts in two areas: the specific case that interests them and the theoretical literature they seek to advance.

I discuss the general structure of a case study on the first day of class. Although there is no need to bind students to it, this five-section for-

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mat is a solid one for most case study papers.[4]

1. Introduction of theoretical subject
2. Literature review
3. Particular case(s)
4. Connecting case(s) to theory
5. Implications for theory

Part one of case study papers should introduce the theoretical subject in such a way as to illustrate why it deserves attention. For example, the reason that interest groups are worth studying is that their activities raise questions about the distribution and exercise of political power in a democratic society. Part two should cover key findings on the subject and—if hypotheses will be tested—summarize the reigning hypotheses and the statistical models that scholars have used to test them. All literature reviews should conclude with a description of the oversights, uncertainties, and disputes that are present in the literature and addressed directly in the case study. Part three of the paper should carefully describe the real-world, observable phenomenon (that is, the case) with special attention to the issues raised in the literature review. Part four, which I tell students is the most important and most challenging, should link conclusions about the case to unsettled questions in the literature. Typically, this section of the paper will contain an appraisal of the limitations of the particular case as applied to theory—for example, redevelopment interests in Memphis may differ from those of other cities. Finally, part five of the paper should illustrate why studying the particular case and literature will benefit those who systematically observe politics.

Research Questions and the Matching of Data to Questions

Once students understand what the case study method is and what their case study paper should look like, their next concern is to find a subject. I give my students a head start on this by providing a list of various types of research questions addressed in the social sciences with an accompanying description of the type of evidence needed to address the questions. I encourage students to match their own interests to one (or more, in the case of ambitious students) of these categories of research questions.

My list of the types of research questions, which political theorists and philosophers would have to amend to suit their expertise, is focused on cause and effect. I choose this type of analysis because the bulk of scientific inquiry centers on cause and effect. Further, I developed the list of questions with an eye toward the sort of inquiry that, in the view of Yin (1994), is appropriate to case study research.[5] When discussing these questions, I ask students interested in proving causation to do their best to list and eliminate from contention other possible causes of a phenomenon besides the ones their work traces.

A. *Why did a particular event occur?* For example, why did the OPEC countries simultaneously decrease their production of crude oil in the late summer of 1999? Or, why did Mississippi legalize casinos in 1990? The analytic narrative fits neatly these sorts of questions since the author would want to tell the story of how the event came about, being careful to make clear its causes. Students with keen writing and analytical skills have success with this sort of research question.

B. *Why does a particular pattern exist?* For example, why do certain racial groups have different voter turnout rates than do white Americans? Why do Americans today have lower levels of trust in government institutions than they did 50 years ago and why does that matter (Hetherington 1998)? What factors contribute to the rates of racial crossover voting? To answer these questions, students will need quantitative data indicating the likelihood of the various causes proposed and a rank ordering of their effects. Students with training in hypothesis testing will have success addressing this sort of research question.

C. *How has a particular phenomenon influenced other phenomena?* How has city–county municipal government integration influenced other aspects of urban politics and policy? How has a given law, such as the 1995 Personal Responsibility Act, influenced individuals and/or communities? To answer these questions, the researcher will need to examine changes across time. Students who lack training in hypothesis testing but who bring clear thinking to their work can often shine in addressing this type of question.

D. *How much change has occurred in a certain phenomenon?* How much soft money is spent on political campaigns in the U.S. today compared to 20 years ago? How much change in a neighborhood has occurred due to the efforts of clergy and congregations? To answer questions such as these, one needs comparable measurements of the phenomena across time. Students comfortable with descriptive statistics—and ideally other statistical tools—will be able to address such questions effectively.

During the second or third meeting of the term, my students and I discuss the strengths and weaknesses of a few examples of case study research. This provides a way of tying the previous theoretical discussions of the case study method and research questions to good research that is in print. I have found case studies by Hamm and Harmel (1993), Owens (1997), Strom (1999), and Thompson (1993) to be very useful examples for this purpose. After only two or three class meetings, I ask students to submit one-paragraph statements of interest and the case they will study. From this

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point forward, class meetings become venues for students to share the problems they encounter and to get feedback from other members of the class.

Pursuing the Literature: Online Databases

To write good papers, students must master the literature that bears on their subject. I require them to use a combination of sources including scholarly papers, books, and dissertations, all of which can be located easily on the Internet.

JSTOR (www.jstor.org) is the most efficient search engine for finding papers in refereed journals because it allows access to the full text of affiliated journals. The Social Sciences Index within Wilson Databases (http://firstsearch.oclc.org) supplies more refereed journals, but only some have the full text accessible. ProQuest (www.proquest.com) is another search engine that is helpful. It provides a mix of scholarly and journalistic sources.

Students searching for books will have a great deal of success with Amazon. Starting with an online source rather than a library catalog is usually best, since most books are not owned by a campus library but may be accessible through interlibrary loan or, if they apply to the paper topic directly, purchase.

Finally, dissertations can be helpful to students, providing an instructor offers some oversight, interpretation, and, on occasion, culling. FirstSearch allows students to search efficiently for dissertations that apply to their subject. Students can access and examine abstracts to see if they are applicable and download whole works for a reasonable fee. Needless to say, I have spent several office hours helping students decipher the substantive results of dissertations.

One-third of the way through the term, I require students to submit an annotated bibliography of the scholarly works they have consulted and a written statement of how each work applies to the subject of their paper.

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Pursuing the Case: Online Databases and Interviews

I devote one class solely to teaching search techniques and information assessment. Web sites hosted by political parties and candidates can sometimes be useful, but I encourage students to take care in consulting partisan sites. If students have any questions about the accuracy of the information on a web site, then I encourage them to see me before proceeding.

I also encourage students to conduct phone and in-person interviews. Given the setting in Memphis, some Rhodes seniors have an interest in urban politics. City officials, reporters, city council members, and community and business leaders can provide useful information to such students. Based on lessons I learned about effective interviewing while researching the politics of gambling (Mason and Nelson, forthcoming), I share several suggestions with students. First, be prepared. Know as much as you possibly can about your interviewees and their organizations. Second, have a list of questions, but don't be a prisoner to it. Listen closely to the answers and ask follow-up questions that are not on your list. Third, always conclude with these questions: "What have I not asked you that I should have?" and "Who else do you think I should speak with regarding my project?"

Students who pursue quantitative research questions invariably need help analyzing and presenting their data. In some exceptional cases, when students are proficient in using sophisticated methods such as regression analysis, I consult with them regularly to make sure they truly understand the tools and that their analyses are appropriate to the question posed. When students have been exposed to quantitative methods but lack knowledge of causal analysis, I encourage them to explore frequencies and descriptive statistics with the use of Microsoft Excel or SPSS. Along with this encouragement, of course, I caution students to use language such as "appears to be a relationship between" and "on average, voters in group one behave differently than voters in group two," rather than "x causes an increase in y."

Finally, I require students to submit an outline of their case about halfway through the term. This allows me to assess whether the data they have gathered match the question they've posed.

Payoffs

As students solidify the case portion of their papers, I devote class time to discussing how they are linking their cases to the gaps or controversies in the literature. Students often provide the most perceptive criticisms of each other's work. From these discussions, we move on to assessments of the limitations of the cases chosen. Often, students can state clearly in their final papers the new directions or subsequent questions that stem from their own work. I encourage them to do so.

In the last set of class meetings, students present their findings in 20-minute sessions and have 10 minutes to respond to questions and challenges. Ambitious students create Power Point presentations complete with tables, charts, and statistical results.

As the term draws to an end, it becomes evident that the case study method provides dramatic payoffs for the students. They can attack a complex and important problem or phenomenon in a way that requires clear thinking. Moreover, they are

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left with a sense of the way scholars build (sometimes incrementally and sometimes exponentially) on previous work. Students practice skills of writing, organizing, presenting, and—one hopes—gracefully refuting or accepting criticism.

Finally, students' understanding of and comfort with online resources grows within a setting of close faculty–student interaction. Rather than replacing the faculty–student relationship, use of online resources actually enhances it. This benefit is an especially important one given the recent momentum toward distance learning that is occurring in some settings of higher education.

The political science department also stands to gain from the application of the case study method in the senior seminar. If all goes as planned, the instructor will have a clear gauge of how well the department's curriculum prepares students to undertake ambitious projects about important political topics because students will have the opportunity to demonstrate their background knowledge while developing the literature review sections of their papers.

Lastly, using the case study method gives instructors who teach in college departments without graduate students the chance to consult with talented students about important questions and practice, in a scaled-down way, the relations between a political scientist and political scientists in training. Moreover, the instructor gets the gratification of watching soon-to-be college graduates master a subject, advance in some way the understanding of a subject, and take pride in these accomplishments.

Notes

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1. Notable exceptions to this still exist in comparative politics research. Searching libraries and archives remains a necessary component of research on other countries, particularly ones without U.S.-style information technology.

2. For a discussion of other online sources and their application to political science classes, see Young (1998), Crawford (1998), and Kuzma (1998).

3. Because the political science department at my college is separate from the international studies department, my examples stem from American politics rather than international or comparative politics. My argument about the usefulness of case studies in the senior seminar, however, would certainly apply to classes that incorporate comparative politics.

4. The logic and order of these sections are analogous to the phases of case study research found in George (1979).

5. The first and fourth chapters of Yin's (1994) book on case study research provide excellent background reading and are accessible to advanced undergraduate students.

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