

Political Science 210: Introduction to Empirical Methods

Week 2: Research questions and theory

Research questions and theories

Research projects begin with a well-developed research *question*, which the researcher attempts to answer by either testing or building *theories*.

- In empirical research, the *question* should:
 - Be answerable with empirical measurement (not by normative judgement of “good” or “bad”)
 - Could be either descriptive or explanatory
 - Concepts should be clear
 - Fit the “Goldilocks” test: Not too broad, not too narrow
 - If a question is too broad, its concepts probably can’t be measured
 - If a question is too narrow, it can’t be generalized to other cases (though sometimes a case may be of particular interest)
 - Matter somehow
 - Is the question unresolved in the literature?
 - Does it improve our understanding of real-world events?
 - Keep asking: “So what?”

Can we make these research questions better?

- How does the media influence political outcomes?
- What are the factors that contributed to the success of the Green Party in the 2019 European Parliament elections in Germany?
- What is the fairest way to improve global environmental sustainability while maintaining income growth in developing countries?

Research questions and theories

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- A good *theory* should:
 - Be parsimonious (as simple as possible) and generalizable (applies across cases of interest)
 - Be falsifiable (how can we tell if the theory isn't true?)
 - Build on existing theory (explored in literature review)
 - Clarify relationship between concepts of interest (the “mechanism” or “causal pathway”)
 - Imply what we can *observe* if the theory is true. What should we be able to see in the “real world” if the theory is correct?
 - This leads to *hypotheses* that we can test.

Can we make these theories better?

- The world is controlled by a secretive group of elites who impact political events from behind the scenes.
- Civil war is more likely in mountainous regions that have experienced periods of severe drought within the last five years.
- In democratic countries, voters cast ballots in elections for their preferred party or candidates

Theory-building vs. Theory-testing

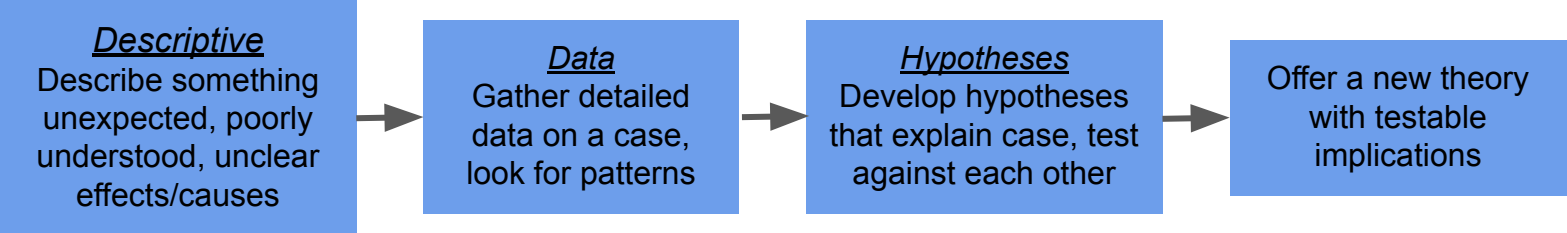
Research question

Method

Outcome

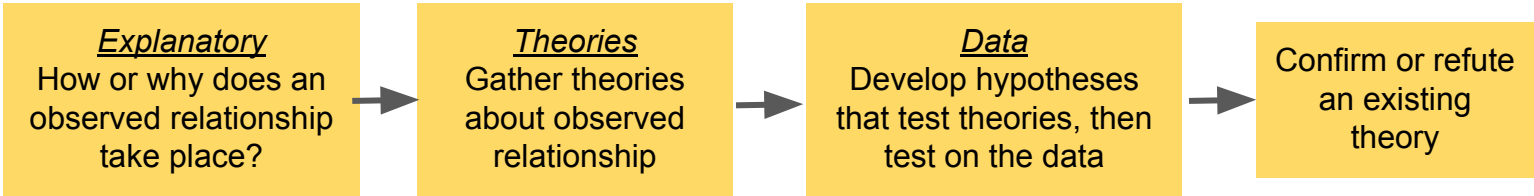
Inductive

Theory-building



Deductive

Theory-testing



Pick *two* terms from the box (or come up with your own), then respond to the prompts further below:

- Democracy
- Inequality
- Race/ethnicity
- Gender
- Poverty
- Health care
- Retirement
- Civil rights
- Voting
- Elected officials
- Redistricting
- Polarization
- Political parties
- Political attitudes
- Development
- Peace
- Trade
- Corruption
- Welfare
- Armed conflict
- Civil war
- Education
- Incarceration
- Cities
- Climate change
- Social media
- Taxes
- Discrimination

1. Come up with a research question about the relationship between the terms you chose.
 - a. Is the question descriptive or explanatory?
 - b. What concepts does it involve? How would you define them?
 - c. Is the question broad or narrow? How might you make it more broad or more narrow?
 - d. Why should we care about the question?
2. Come up with at least two theories that might answer the research question you posed.
 - a. Are the theories parsimonious? Generalizable? Falsifiable?
 - b. If the theories are true, what would expect to see happen in the “real world”? That is, what are the observable implications? What hypotheses could you draw?
 - c. How would you measure the important variables in your theory and hypotheses?