

Dissecting and Reconstructing Case Studies

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Students who want to write a dissertation that includes qualitative case study analysis are typically motivated by wanting to study a specific political phenomenon in a specific context. As soon as they start turning their personal interest into a potential argument to test in their research, though, they face canonical questions such as: What is the logical scope of my argument? How representative are the cases that I want to study? Should I study more cases to test my argument? How many, and which ones? Over what temporal span? How deep should I go in my analysis of each? Is field research necessary? How much of it? In which of my cases? All of them? Some of them? What is the appropriate mix of primary and secondary sources to support my claims? The same questions may arise down the line when, as often happens, students find that they must rethink or specify their initial research questions.

Methodology lectures and textbooks offer an important foundation for students to think through those research design questions. Textbook knowledge, however, can only go so far. Effectively navigating the practical tradeoffs between the potential research payoff and costs in terms of time, resources, and available skills that the various options entail, depends on the specifics of the research. And the category of “case studies” includes an enormous variety of objects of analysis, sites of research, and of course, types of evidence. The tremendous variety of evidence that can be analyzed in a case study—qualitative as well as quantitative; from historical archives or legal research as well as from interviews, participant observation, or ethnography—and, relatedly, the variety of skills required to collect and analyze it, is an important feature that separates the dilemmas of qualitative research design from those emerging in quantitative and experimental research.

Typically, graduate students tackle these issues in a trial-and-error fashion, drawing on the experience of their supervisor, and through informal discussions at

conferences or with other faculty. Several years ago, I came around to the view that something more systematic might help speed up the learning process. The basic idea was to provide graduate students engaged in (or about to embark on) case study research with a workshop-like venue where they could practice these skills by analyzing published research and engaging in guided discussion with their peers. The Oxford calendar offered a good opportunity to hold a short, four-week module at the start of the summer (Trinity) term—convenient in terms of time and duration for students who already have a heavy courseload. So, in 2007, I designed a short graduate seminar aimed at covering these idiosyncratic aspects of the case study research process. Students would have already attended the normal sequence of quantitative and qualitative methods lectures and workshops, which are offered in the first two terms of the Oxford academic year, so they would come to my short course equipped with the necessary methodological knowledge to be able to think through the more practical aspects of their research strategy.

Originally, I expected the course to attract at most five or six particularly motivated graduate students who were writing comparative case study dissertations. My initial idea was that students would choose, in coordination with me, their own text to analyze and discuss in class, and we would focus every week on a different set of practical questions, reconstructing how they had been addressed by the author, what were the plausible alternatives, and what the implications of such alternative routes would have been. There would have been time for broad-ranging and relatively unstructured discussion, in a rather small setting that would have allowed individual students to bring up their own research dilemmas in connection with the class discussion.

In fact, things went quite differently. Instead of the handful that I expected, eighteen students signed up. They came roughly equally from our two-year Master of Philosophy programs in Comparative Government and

European Politics and Societies (in which students write a 30,000-word thesis) and from our doctoral program. A few enrolled from other departments. This led me to reorganize several aspects of the course while keeping its basic structure and purpose. To keep the discussion manageable and still involve everyone, I decided to assign texts for discussion not to individual students, but to groups of students. I adjusted the workload proportionally for individual students so that it would be comparable to that of other courses. I did not let students choose their own texts to analyze and discuss in class but rather provided a list from which each group could choose. Furthermore, considering the variety of training and research experience among the students, it was necessary for me to dedicate some time to reviewing the basic methodological issues that we would be discussing each week. Finally, with a larger group of students, it was not feasible to rely solely on informal assessments and individual students' motivation to keep track of the group's progress over the four weeks of the course. Therefore, I prepared weekly assignments.

With these adjustments, it was possible to scale up the course and achieve the original purpose of providing a forum for the systematic discussion of questions of research design and overall research strategy that students would encounter in their own work. Despite class discussions systematically going over our two-hour slot in that first year, the course went well—so much so that the following year I had more than 20 students sign up, and I had to cap attendance. The year after, I split the course in two streams to accommodate demand and to allow for less-hurried discussions. This is how I have been teaching the course ever since. The course's popularity did not decrease during the Covid lockdowns, even though the online format made class discussions and collaboration of groups of students on homework assignments more difficult for some students.

The course is completely hands-on. Students work in groups of two or three to take apart and reconstruct the design of a recently published article, and to propose plausible strategies to improve on the research at each step, in ways that might reinforce, modify, or possibly reject the original argument. Student groups choose their article from a list that I provide. I choose articles on the basis of three criteria: 1) they were published in top political science or political sociology journals; 2) they were published in the last 5-6 years; 3) they consist of (or contain) fully-fledged single or comparative case studies that rely on qualitative evidence. As we know, top professional journals now publish qualitative comparative case studies quite rarely. Yet it has always been possible to find a sufficient number of recent articles to assign in the course. For example, this past year (April-May 2022), we

discussed articles published in *World Politics*, *Comparative Political Studies*, and the *American Journal of Sociology*. The oldest piece was published in 2017. All others were published in 2020 or 2021. In previous years, articles from *International Organization* and *American Political Science Review* have appeared on the list as well.

Typically, the articles that we discuss in class present a marked variety of case study designs, world regions, types of questions, and evidence. Again, to take last year's course as an example, the articles discussed included four-, three-, and two-case comparisons, as well as single-case studies; a few of the latter compared two different periods within the same country. Some articles explicitly aimed to modify or integrate existing theories, for example by analyzing outlier cases; others had a theory-testing purpose. Substantively, the regions covered included Western Europe and North America as well as countries as different as Syria, China, and Mexico. The subfields of the articles ranged from political economy to the analysis of mass protest to international cooperation, among others; and the types of evidence analyzed were accordingly different.

Each week, I give student groups an assignment that poses a dozen questions, all targeted at one key aspect of research strategy. The short duration of the course only allows focusing on four such aspects: the relationship between case and theory; research design and case selection; process-tracing and within-case analysis; and use of primary evidence and secondary sources. Each week, the groups answer the questions in a short memo. Their memos are read, discussed, and critiqued in class. This way, each group, each week, puts under a magnifying lens one specific aspect of their article, reconstructing how the author made certain choices, what other choices could in principle be made if one were to study the same problem, and what the consequences of such choices would be.

For example, in week two we discuss research design and case selection. The focus is on the pros and cons of changing the case selection strategy, always keeping in mind, on the one hand, the scope conditions implied by (or made explicit in) the author's argument, and on the other, the skills, time, and resources that would likely be needed to analyze more (or different) cases. In the assignment, student groups are encouraged to explore different candidate cases. Drawing on their individual strengths and experiences, within each group students should acquire enough knowledge to discuss the likely implications of different case selection strategies. In other words, the tradeoffs of adopting a different case selection are not discussed in the abstract, but with reference to specific "candidate" cases. The different purposes of the articles analyzed (such as theory developing or testing),

as well as their different research designs (e.g., small-n versus single-case; the presence or absence of temporal variation) pose different challenges and make students think in a practical way about dilemmas of research design in the context of the analysis of very different problems. In subsequent weeks, we use the same approach to analyze strategies of within-case observation and the use of primary and secondary sources. I use the last 15-20 minutes of each class to give students a “refresher” on the methodological literature concerning the aspect of research strategy that will be discussed the following week.

The final assignment for the course builds on the weekly assignments. Each of the groups must write a 5,000-word memo (a “half-paper”) that criticizes the assigned article, proposes a precise strategy that could potentially improve on it by adopting a different research strategy on one or more of the choices analyzed, and documents *why* the strategy in question could be successful. If the memo argues that the original argument could be modified, strengthened, or rejected by analyzing a different set of cases, by focusing on different observable implications in the same cases, or by mobilizing different types of evidence, the students must make a convincing case for the plausibility of their proposed strategy. This task requires them to do enough thinking and preliminary research (read up on different countries, locate specific data, and so on) to confront the choices faced by researchers when designing and conducting a case study project. Working in groups forces the students to plunge themselves into research questions that are often quite different from their own, as at least some students in the group would be working on rather different themes from that of the article analyzed by their group; at the same time though, working in groups allows them to go much further in unpacking the nodal points of research strategy than would be possible individually. Furthermore, the variety of studies analyzed gives us the ability to discuss different types of case study design, and different types of evidence that entail specific questions and dilemmas.

After more than 15 years of teaching the course, three main benefits have emerged in the course evaluations and from informal discussions with students. First, thinking through the dissection, reconstruction, and possible improvement of exemplary research requires that students consider the implications of their decisions

for the *whole* research process. Questions such as how many cases they should include to achieve their research goals, over what period to study such cases, and what evidence is necessary and how should it be collected are not asked hypothetically in relation to a research project that still has to be carried out, but concretely, in relation to published studies, where all these questions have been already formulated and tackled by the author. Second, the structure of the course and the assignments allows students to think *creatively* about research choices: the guidance provided by the weekly assignments, the internal group discussions, and the discussion in class provide structure, and the internal division of labor within groups frees energy for concentrating on specific dilemmas of research that may be akin to those that a student faces in her dissertation. Finally, students learn how to navigate *co-authorship*. I explain at the beginning of the course that much political science research is now collaborative, and that collaboration has enormous advantages, but may also entail moments of frustration. I encourage students to divide labor in an efficient way, and most importantly to pull their weight honestly. Student groups write not only the weekly homework, but also the final assignment collectively. The mark received counts as the students’ *individual* mark for the course. This exposes students to the free-riding problem in a very direct way, but this has not been a problem. Students attending the course are very motivated, and I involve all students in weekly class discussions. Attendance is compulsory. Indeed, in 15 years of teaching the course to over 250 students, there has only been one instance in which two students in a group of three made me aware (extremely politely and rather indirectly) of the fact that their partner was not cooperating as she should have done.

I always look carefully at course evaluations, and over the years these have consistently shown that students have found the course’s hands-on approach very helpful for their own thesis-writing and a useful complement to the normal methodology lectures and workshops. The course seems effectively to “bridge” the theory and the practice of case study research, helping students with the challenge of making their own thesis projects feasible and enjoyable. Former students, who now teach their own version of this course in various universities across Europe and North America, have found the course equally rewarding in context of other graduate programs. It has been certainly rewarding for me.