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Getting started

Learning objectives

This chapter will enable you to:

- define and understand the core components of research practice: methodology, methods, and research design;
- grasp why research methodology and research methods can help you resolve questions about research choices;
- explain why research practice matters for the 'real world' of policymaking;
- delineate common standards for what constitutes 'good research practice';
- understand how research choices are part of a holistic process.

Introduction

If you have picked up this textbook, you are likely on the cusp of beginning your very own research project in Politics and International Relations (PIR). Whether it is a short paper, a lengthier class essay, a bachelor's thesis, or a postgraduate thesis, the core principles of academic research and writing are the same. However, this does not mean there is a single approach to **research**. Rather, understanding **research practice**, which consists of **research methodology**, **methods**, and **design**, opens the door to a diverse kaleidoscope of choices.

Our goal is to help you navigate these choices. Whereas some textbooks cover only **quantitative** or **qualitative methods**, and others maintain a rigid focus on **causal inference** as a standard for good research methodology, our approach is rooted in **methodological pluralism**. We will introduce you to various methodological traditions and a broad range of methods that can be adapted to your project. You can select from this menu depending on the goals and assumptions of your research (your **research purpose**), and your overall **research design**.

Your choice of **methodology** will influence your choice of method. Methods are not tools that can be wielded in any context once you have mastered a particular **data** collection or **data analysis** technique, such as **statistical analysis**. Indeed, a given method must be consistent with your chosen methodology and fully integrated into your research design.

In summary, this book will empower you to carry out research that matters to you using the methodology and methods that help you achieve your research goals. Put differently, methodology and methods are not ends in themselves, but instead a way to discipline your thinking about what you want to know and how you aim to go about knowing it, thereby enabling you to effectively carry out a PIR research project from start to finish.

Evaluating knowledge claims in PIR

Thinking about research practice brings us to core philosophical questions at the heart of PIR and other **social science** disciplines. Namely, how do we evaluate **knowledge claims** about social phenomena? To use an example from PIR, how can we *know* what motivated Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine? We can debate whether it was motivated by security concerns (part of Russian President Vladimir Putin's justification for the invasion), by imperial ambitions (which Putin is frequently accused of by the West), or by some combination of the two, but how do we know that one motivation outweighed the others? You will notice that many theories of PIR rely on knowledge claims to make general statements that go beyond the particular case being studied (for example, 'The case of Country X demonstrates that democracies do not invade other countries'). This is because, as we will explore in Chapter 3, theories allow us to make general statements about social or material processes on the basis of observations. In some cases, these general statements are informed by – and also inform – a particular theoretical worldview, or *-ism*. For example, the security dilemma, or the claim that 'anything one state does to increase its own security will lead other states to fear that state more and in response also take measures to increase their own security, thereby leading to an arms race,' is understood not just to describe a specific historical episode, but rather can be observed across space and time. Additionally, it points to an empirical phenomenon that we can look for in attempting to better understand great power politics.

Evaluating knowledge claims allows us to make theoretical propositions. Casual observers might stake out a position at a dinner table conversation on a major world event such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but as researchers in PIR, our task is to demonstrate what motivated President Putin to carry out the invasion in a way that is persuasive and rigorous. The goal of PIR research practice is to choose a path toward finding a plausible answer to a **research question**, and then to be able to justify the chosen path to our fellow researchers. As a PIR researcher, you are unlikely to score an interview with the Russian president to inquire about his motivations. However, depending on which methodology and methods you choose to employ, you could turn to core IR assumptions about the universality of state interest and simply deduce Russia's geopolitical motivations. You could dig into Russian history to better understand how Russian elites have perceived their country's place in the world while drawing parallels to Putin's own worldview. To accomplish this, you could systematically analyze Putin's speeches and statements, and those of his proxies. But as you make such choices, you will undoubtedly encounter further questions. For example, if you opt to analyze what Putin has said publicly, which speeches and statements do you analyze? And once you choose them, how can you know that these speeches actually reflect Putin's strategic thinking?

All of the above questions, choices, and considerations point to challenges at the heart of PIR research practice: as we think about how we develop and share knowledge, we need to agree on the standards we use to evaluate generalized claims and common assumptions about the phenomena we study. These standards, in turn, lie at the center of good research practice.

So how do you make sense of, or evaluate, knowledge claims? What kinds of claim do you find more convincing, and why? These are often the kinds of questions that are taken for granted by those who dive headfirst into PIR research. But they are important **reflexive questions** that will help you to begin to think in a more structured and critical way about how to both make your own claims and evaluate the claims other researchers make.

The skills to which you will be introduced in this book won't only help you to conduct your own research and evaluate knowledge generated by other scholars in PIR and other fields. They will also hopefully serve you as an informed global citizen. In the highly polarized times in which we live, social media – not to mention partisan traditional media – are full of **disinformation**. Individuals, organizations, and states weaponize information to advance their interests. Much-heralded advances in **artificial intelligence** (AI) augment such trends. Those with a background in research practice will be better prepared not only to evaluate the veracity of findings presented in published research, but also to more readily identify red flags pointing to disinformation and manipulation in the media and popular culture.

Think about scrolling through a social media feed and finding a post by a friend that highlights an issue that tends to generate significant political controversy, such as crime. The post may cite the results of a report indicating that crime is out of control, noting that the policies of the ruling party have enabled impunity. As a sophisticated analyst of politics and policy, your initial reaction might be skepticism, because after all, crime was on the rise even before the current ruling party was in power. But how would you begin proving that it is wrong?

If the broader population constantly reads media stories and social media posts about crime in your city or town on a regular basis, they might be forgiven for concluding that the city has a 'crime problem.' However, the actual aggregate statistics do not support the claim that crime is rampant and increasing. What we are talking about here are *perceptions* that have changed: namely, the fact that stories about crime in your community are appearing with greater frequency on social media feeds which may already be skewed toward a certain political perspective. Besides influencing popular conclusions about a social problem, such assumptions could influence the politics and policies one supports. For instance, when it comes to crime, they often lead citizens to support harsh policing policies that are designed to respond to a problem that might not be as severe as is portrayed by certain voices in the traditional and social media.

Here, you have a stark illustration of how the way information silos shape what we think is knowledge, thereby creating a backdrop against which we think about policy-based solutions to the 'reality' we encounter. These solutions, in turn, can translate into cause-and-effect assumptions we hold about the social world.

Let's now consider another example, in this case of how scholars seek knowledge about questions highly relevant to the study of PIR: Does membership in a particular political party tell us something about a voter's views on foreign policy? How does partisan loyalty affect one's views of alliances in particular? And how do we know that public opinion shapes foreign policy outcomes? These questions motivated Bäcker-Peral and Park (2023/2024) to re-examine the old axiom in the United States that 'domestic politics end at the water's edge.' In other words, partisan political divisions over domestic issues, as expressed in public opinion, do not carry over into foreign policy. In the past, this provided allies of the United States with a high degree of confidence that Washington would honor its alliance commitments. For example, it assured North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members that the United States would defend them if they came under attack. Bäcker-Peral and Park sought to explore whether President Donald

Trump's 'America First' platform – which itself reflects growing isolationist sentiments in some parts of the Republican Party – altered public opinion on alliance commitments, a key foreign policy issue. Indeed, using an innovative **survey experiment**, Bäcker-Peral and Park find that that Republican voters are more reluctant to come to the aid of an ally than Democratic voters, suggesting that when it comes to US foreign policy, partisan politics *do* matter.

Bäcker-Peral and Park's aim was to *explain* aspects of US foreign policy, and one of its drivers, public opinion. In PIR research, there is substantial scholarship that seeks to explain the foreign policy choices of states. A search for causality implies a **positivist** methodology, which is one way of searching for knowledge. Bäcker-Peral and Park critically engage with existing assumptions about what explains real-world foreign policy outcomes, challenging the notion that domestic politics and public opinion do not matter in explaining foreign policy outcomes. Other scholars, by contrast, focus on how discourse shapes how we interpret state actions abroad. For example, Tolz and Hutchings (2023) study words and phrases that appear in Russian media on the war in Ukraine and find that certain terms acted to reinforce familiar historical and cultural frames, making these discourses impactful even when untethered from factual reporting (2023, 346–365). In this textbook, we refer to such a methodology as **interpretivist** because the authors study how words and phrases are understood rather than searching for causality. As we will point out in the next chapter, **positivism** and **interpretivism** do not exist in a dichotomous vacuum. Alternative approaches like **scientific realism** and **critical realism** also allow us to study how meaning shapes possibilities for action (Wilkinson et al. 2022).

In sum, evaluating knowledge claims is central to PIR research practice. Because PIR research is a systematic activity in which we analyze or interpret the real world around us, we need to think critically about how we are going to go about trying to make sense of the complex phenomena that make up politics and international affairs. Our aim as researchers is to help illuminate conflicts over different interpretations, understandings, and explanations of the social world which we inhabit.

Moreover, as we have seen in the perceptions of crime example above, training in methodology is important not just as a core part of PIR curricula, but also serves as a practical foundation for engaging with contemporary and historic political, social, and economic debates, issues, and controversies that you encounter in daily life. At the end of the day, PIR research and the real world of politics and international relations are intricately linked. Although you may initially perceive learning research methodology as an unwelcome chore, you probably enrolled in a PIR program out of an interest in real-world issues such as war, conflict resolution, nuclear nonproliferation, human rights, social justice, or climate change. One goal of this textbook is to help you translate those interests into research that can actually help make a positive impact in addressing these and other pressing challenges of our times.

Bridging the gap between the study of Politics and International Relations

Many methodology and methods textbooks focus narrowly on the domestic politics of states on the one hand or relations among states on the other. Yet in the real world, the line between the 'domestic' and the 'international' has been increasingly blurred. The distinct disciplinary silos of *Politics* and *International Relations* fail to capture highly transnational processes of politics and the cross-border challenges we face in the twenty-first century. Take, for example,

the COVID-19 pandemic which began in 2020 and quickly demonstrated just how interconnected the world has become. Most human beings on the planet felt the effects of the pandemic. Even those living in the relative privilege of developed countries were subjected to supply chain disruptions, leading to severe shortages of certain consumer goods. The provision of vaccines became a major source of international diplomatic competition and domestic political tension (Kahl and Wright 2021). Beyond the pandemic, we might point to other processes that have transcended international boundaries in recent years, such as the way in which impunity in one country has emboldened human rights abuses in another (Applebaum 2021). Alternatively, you might recall the rapid diffusion of calls for racial justice around the world following the mass protests against racism and police brutality that engulfed the United States in the summer of 2020. Given these realities, we aim to show how methodology can help bridge the gap between the study of domestic and international politics.

Toward shared standards: What are 'good' PIR research practices?

What constitutes good research that can contribute to accumulated PIR knowledge while also engaging with real-world issues simultaneously helping to combat disinformation and distortion spread by those with a particular agenda?

As defined at the outset of this chapter, PIR research is a systematic activity in which we analyze or interpret the world of domestic and international politics. We need to think critically about how we are going to go about trying to make sense of complex practices and processes that are the subjects of PIR research. Consider all the possible factors that shape a given state's foreign policy; for example, history, culture, individuals, ideas, bureaucracies, the international balance of power, and national interests. Our aim as PIR researchers is not just to recount an anecdote, but to uncover larger truths about how each of these **variables** influences a state's behavior on the international stage. Furthermore, our goal is to help resolve conflicts over different interpretations, understandings, and explanations of the reality that we inhabit. This is ultimately what distinguishes research from other kinds of writing, such as journalism. However, in our quest to understand political phenomena, uncovering *which factors* matter the most and *how they matter* is not an easy task. As suggested earlier, to sort through such complexity, we must consider the ways in which we produce knowledge (how we do research) and the ways in which we evaluate knowledge claims (how we evaluate and make judgments about existing research). Is all research of equal value? How can we tell good research from bad research?

Some argue that PIR researchers should adhere to the same standards followed by all scientists. When knowledge is presented as *scientific*, whether in the media, a formal meeting, or an online forum, there is an implicit claim being made. In other words, it is assumed that the knowledge claim has undergone some form of rigorous testing, perhaps through careful empirical observation or through **experimentation**. A systematic and rigorous study of an issue, in turn, is a prerequisite to decision-making in any field of life, including those unrelated to PIR. Market researchers want to know which mobile phone consumers are willing to buy. Investors make decisions to buy or sell stocks on the basis of research.

Science, in turn, rests on the **scientific method**. According to Moses and Knutsen (2012, 19), the scientific method is 'a process that involves systematic observation, scrupulous note

taking of things and patterns observed, and thoughtful efforts to make sense of it all.' The scientific method was first applied to make sense of the natural world. Biologists, chemists, and other natural scientists tested **theories**, or law-like propositions, through empirical observation or experimentation. Later, it was applied to the social world, or the social sciences. For some scholars of PIR, such as Stephen Van Evera (1997, 3), there is no reason why the standards of research should differ between the **natural sciences** and the social sciences. As Van Evera argues, 'I remain unpersuaded by the view that the prime rules of scientific method should differ between "hard sciences" and the social sciences. Science is science.' Yet, other scholars argue that the standards and practices we use to study natural phenomena such as the weather are ill-suited to furthering our understanding of human behavior and complex social practices. In Chapter 2, we will delve deeper into this debate.

In North American PIR there is often a narrow understanding of methodology as driven by a 'scientific' search for rigor. This understanding of methodology holds that all research should be based on empirical studies that in turn often lean on **quantitative data** to uncover ostensibly law-like forces. This narrow view of what constitutes good PIR research has served to marginalize interpretivist approaches that seek to illuminate the emergence of **concepts** and how certain social practices are reproduced. Such a limited understanding of good research was challenged in the 1990s by a movement within American political science professional organizations known as *perestroika*. Perestroika (itself named after the set of reforms enacted by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s) aimed to challenge methodological dogmatism and advocate for more pluralist approaches to research practice in the discipline.

While the above debates might at first sound like a tale of intra-disciplinary navel-gazing, how methodology and methods are understood is critical in terms of setting the agenda for the types of knowledge we produce. For example, if we only research those things that can be easily measured (the quantitative approach), we might overlook important dynamics in the political world. For example, if we use only numbers to compare ethnic diversity across various countries, we may be missing key things about the content of that diversity, such as the history of ethnic relations, or the stereotypes that shape attitudes toward other groups.

Despite such differences among scholars espousing various methodological approaches, there are certain shared standards for all good research, inside and beyond PIR. First, good research needs to be **credible** (/credibility) and **reliable** (/reliability). And as researchers, we are assumed to have **integrity**. Credible research convinces, compels, or persuades. Reliable research produces consistent results, and thus can be trusted and **replicated**. Replication occurs when the data one researcher used to reach a finding are reused by another researcher to arrive at the same finding, thereby providing assurance that a conclusion was not just a one-off aberration. To allow for **replicability**, we strive to be transparent about our choices of methodology, methods, and overall research design. **Transparency** is crucial to ensuring both credibility and **reliability** by allowing fellow researchers to replicate your research. These are concepts that will be discussed in greater depth in subsequent chapters. As Focus Box 1.1 highlights, credibility and reliability are what give our research value. Taken together, our aim, our craft, and our role as researchers make us part of a broader conversation. This means that if our findings are based on research practice that reflects credibility, reliability, and integrity, they can more readily shape, and even change, public and elite understandings on important policy questions.

Focus Box 1.1

Key points: Research credibility and reliability

Credible and reliable research...

- 1 Allows research to contribute to shaping how the public and elites respond to, or recognize, pressing challenges.
- 2 Requires transparency and integrity.

Good research practice also requires us to maintain an awareness of ethical dilemmas, which we discuss extensively in two separate chapters. These include the proper handling of **human subjects**, the honest presentation of data, and the careful **citation** of others' work. Traditional ethical red flags such as **plagiarism** are more acute in an age of AI-driven writing aids. The rapid diffusion of artificial intelligence (AI) tools based on **large language models** (LLMs) makes it even more important for researchers to be meticulous about their citations and to highly scrutinize their sources, ensuring that texts they draw upon were produced by a human and not a machine.

Thus, while pluralism is important, we need parameters for what constitutes good research practice. Too broad a definition of what constitutes good PIR research can create a lot of noise and scope for misinformation and pseudo-scientific claims being presented as research. A set of shared standards allows researchers to interrogate each other's work in an open and transparent manner, with the aim of improving it.

Other broad characteristics define good research as well, including the rigor with which you present your work. Feedback you have received on writing assignments may have been directed at aspects of research methodology and methods even before you formally undertook study of them. For example, did your instructor say that your work was overly descriptive and not sufficiently analytical? Or did they say that your conclusion was not supported by sufficient evidence? Or perhaps the feedback was that your research question was too broad, or that you answered a different question than the one you posed.

The buildings blocks of good research practice

The preceding discussion recalls the concepts at the heart of this text. In addition to credibility, reliability, integrity, and **ethics**, methodology, methods, and research design are critical to good research practice. Methodology, the ways we 'know' things about the social world, has been defined in various ways in the social science literature. According to Gerring, methodology refers to the 'tasks, strategies, and criteria governing scientific inquiry, including all facets of the research enterprise' (2012, 6). Linda Tuhiwai Smith tells us that methodology is a 'theory of method' or, in other words, the reasoning that informs which methods we use in our research (2012, 1). Others, like Moses and Knutsen, argue more generally that methodology is a way of knowing or a way of making sense of the social

world (2012, 4). We adopt a broad approach to understanding methodology. Thus, methodologies are the underlying assumptions about what is knowable and how we know about the social world around us. This social world we inhabit includes all facets of life, from major international crises and interstate wars to the mundane and everyday choices we make. In Chapter 2, we introduce you to central methodological debates in PIR to give you a sense of the choices that are available.

While the choice of methodology will inform your overall research strategy, what about the specific means you will use to acquire this knowledge? Methods are what we use in our research to collect and analyze data. They are, in a sense, the researcher's tools. For example, if you are interested in explaining voter behavior, you have to consider what kinds of data might be most useful. You also have to consider how you will go about collecting the data: will you use an existing **dataset**, or carry out your own survey? Then, you have to decide how to analyze the data: will you use statistical analysis, for example? Or will you qualitatively analyze transcripts of in-depth **interviews** with voters?

Research design, in turn, is the overall plan or strategy for your research project that brings together methodological choices and **case selection** with the methods you will use to analyze your data.

All three components of research practice – methodology, methods, and research design – need to be fully integrated to produce a good piece of PIR research. A project that includes methods without methodology or an overarching research design would be like trying to build a house with all the necessary tools and materials, but with no architectural plans. You could put together the individual components of the house, but you would not be able to organize these components into a coherent structure. Yet as there are many schools of architectural design, there are also distinct methodological traditions in PIR, which we will introduce in the subsequent chapter.

In order to illustrate these three concepts, let's consider a **hypothesis** drawn from policing and crime. A hypothesis is a specific, testable, and theoretically informed statement about the relationship between two or more variables. It's an educated guess based on existing theories, observations, or background knowledge, aimed at explaining a political phenomenon or relationship within the realm of international relations.

Hypothesis: More police on the street reduce crime rates

Suppose that you are a researcher who wants to engage with the important but politically charged issue of policing and its effect on crime. Your first task is to decide whether you want to test the causal relationship between policing and crime (positivist methodology) or make sense of the underlying concepts (interpretivist methodology).

If you opt for the positivist approach, your research design may include a comparative **large-N** quantitative analysis (your method) of cities with different rates of crime, examining whether the number of police on the streets plays a role in explaining variation in crime rates. The cities or other jurisdictions you choose to examine – your **cases** – are a vital part of the overall research design. But you could also adopt a research design that entails an in-depth study of crime in a particular community (a single case), employing both qualitative and quantitative methods such as interviews with local officials and statistical analysis of crime data over time.

Alternatively, if you decide to take an interpretivist approach, you might interrogate the underlying knowledge, concepts, and assumptions behind the proposition that more police on the streets will lower crime. How did we arrive at what we think we know about policing and crime? Why can we assume that police help to reduce crime in the first place? How do we know for sure that crime is on the increase? To address such questions, you could trace the development of police-centric approaches to combating crime as rooted in particular histories. This might entail a research design that employs methods such as close analysis of texts like the laws governing the police, or the practices of politically powerful police unions. Alternatively, you could explore the meanings certain communities assign to policing.

However, as you will learn in the pages of this textbook, it is not helpful to think too rigidly, or dichotomously, about ways of doing research in PIR. Indeed, you could also choose a hybrid methodology, one that addresses causality but also the development and meaning of certain concepts and practices. What is important is that you are consistent in your assumptions, and transparent about your choices.

We will return to the philosophies behind these different methodologies, as well as their associated research designs and methods, in Chapter 2. For now, we would like to reiterate that you have choices when it comes to methodology. But these choices have consequences for the kind of tool, or method, you will use to analyze the data. For methodologies that emphasize causality, you could use **statistical analysis** to explore how much levels of policing account for changes in crime rates relative to other possible explanations, such as poverty. But there are other methods you could use to search for causality, such as the **comparative method**. Alternatively, for methodologies rooted in interpreting and interrogating our assumptions, we might turn to methods such as in-depth examinations of institutions, practices, and the lived experiences of communities through interviews, textual analysis, or **participant observation**.

Focus Box 1.2

Spotlight on pluralism in methodology and methods

This book avoids narrow binaries, such as ‘quantitative vs. qualitative research’ or ‘positivism vs. interpretivism.’ While we will use these terms as markers for various ways of doing research, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive, nor do we claim one is inherently better than the other. However, we do insist that it is critical to understand the underlying logics of different approaches to knowing and ensure consistency in every step of the research process.

We emphasize that research practice in PIR is both *pluralistic*, in the sense that there are diverse ways of producing knowledge, and *rigorous*, in the sense that each of these ways of producing knowledge has its own internally consistent standards for evaluating research. While there are common standards for good research (credibility, reliability, and integrity), we also set standards for ourselves in thinking about our research questions and research design. What is important is that we follow a consistent logic and that we are transparent about the choices we have made.

One goal of this book is to avoid discussion of concepts such as research design, case selection, data collection, and data analysis techniques in the abstract. Thus, we have included the feature of two exemplary research projects that will illustrate the key themes of each chapter. The 'Research in Practice' learning feature will appear at the end of each chapter – and occasionally, within the chapters themselves – to help you bridge the gap between learning about concepts and tools and seeing how to use them in your own work. We will return to these projects in each of the forthcoming chapters to illustrate how your research choices will shape your own project.

Research in Practice

Research in practice example 1: Determinants of populist success

The first of our two 'Research in Practice' sample projects focuses on why voters support *populism* and *populist political parties*. **Populism** has been in the news a great deal over the past decade. Events such as the Brexit referendum in 2016 and Donald J. Trump's election to the White House the same year suggested that populism as a political ideology was resurgent. From North America to Latin America and from Western to Eastern Europe, populist politicians and political parties have enjoyed growing support, but also significant defeats. As a political movement and brand of politics, populism has an extensive genealogy that stretches across continents and centuries.

What is populism?

Populism is a political approach that strives to appeal to ordinary people who feel that their concerns are disregarded by established elite groups. Populist parties and politicians often divide society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elite.' Populists claim to speak for ordinary people against the elite, whom they accuse of placing their own interests above the welfare of the broader population. Populists typically position themselves as opposed to the establishment or status quo, criticizing mainstream politics and sometimes the media and other institutions, which they claim are out of touch with or actively working against the interests of the ordinary citizen. Populism tends to offer straightforward, appealing solutions to complex social, economic, and political problems. This can be attractive to voters who are disillusioned with traditional political discourse that they find evasive or overly complicated. In some contexts, populism may also have a strong cultural or social dimension, where it articulates resistance against changing social norms or demographic shifts, often framing these changes as threats to the traditional way of life.

Meanwhile, the study of voter behavior and political party systems has long been central to the field of **comparative politics**, a subfield of PIR. Given that populism is understood to at least be partially driven by the adverse effects of globalization on ordinary citizens, it is clear that the theories and findings associated with subfields of PIR such as political economy also need to be part of the conversation.

Indeed, there are many ways to study the appeal of populism. For example, we can focus on populism as a set of ideas or a political ideology. What do populists believe and why is it attractive to voters? Alternatively, we can focus on how populists mobilize support.

Are there specific words or phrases associated with populist politicians, movements, or political parties that one can readily identify, and what makes them resonate with voters? Or, should populism be studied as a way of organizing political movements or parties and mobilizing supporters around a single charismatic leader?

As you learn more about the topic of populism, other questions are likely to arise: Why is there significant variation across countries when it comes to the electoral appeal of populist political parties? How and why did issues such as migration and globalization, which are understood to drive populist support, become politically salient during the 2010s? Recalling our earlier discussion of crime and policing, think first about which methodological strategies can best provide a framework for answering a particular question about populism, and why. Do you want to understand why populists win or lose, or do you want to interrogate the meaning of populism itself?

At this point though let's zoom out and ask some even broader, **classificatory questions** to try to more clearly define our topic of interest. This will help us in subsequent chapters to better understand our methodological assumptions, engagement with theory, research design, and the methods that will best help us get to the answer we are seeking. Questions you might want to consider in this regard could include: What is my topic a case of? How does my topic relate to other topics? How is it similar? How is it different? You might think of this task as creating typologies.

In the context of the project on populism you could ask: How do we understand the foundations of political party support in general? To what extent do material versus non-material concerns motivate voters? How should we understand the role of ideology in a political party?

The first step toward addressing these questions, as it should be in every research project, is to explicitly define what we aim to study. Indeed, there is a long history of movements that have been labeled as populist which are quite disparate in both ideology and time. From the *narodniki* of nineteenth-century Russia to Juan Peron in mid-twentieth-century Argentina to Julius Nyerere in late-twentieth-century Tanzania, there are numerous leaders and movements that have been labeled populist across significant periods of time (Taggart 2004). When looking for definitions of populism in scholarship, you might come across the work of Canovan (1981), who argues that while populism comes in many different forms, they all converge on a shared distrust of elites, juxtaposed against appeals to the people. Mudde (2004) arrives at a similar definition, arguing that populism is a 'thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups: "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite," and argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.'

If we adopt Canovan and Mudde's definitions, we can begin to classify parties across countries as populist and start to consider how we will study them. Note, however, that the answers to the classificatory questions posed above are at this point largely descriptive. They tell us about what populist parties are, and are not, but they do not offer any form of answers to questions about their electoral success or failure. How do populist parties attract voters? Or, what are the strategies populist parties might deploy to maintain power once elected? These are questions in which your strong interest will also hopefully translate into interest among a broader scholarly community and even the public. Soon, you will face core methodological choices which we will explore in depth in subsequent chapters. For now, however, it is helpful to reflect on what it is you want to know or explain about populism.

(Continued)

Research in practice example 2: Human rights and foreign policy

The second 'Research in Practice' example, which we will reference at the end of each chapter and throughout the book, focuses on how human rights figure in the foreign policies of states. Traditionally, IR explored questions of war and peace among states, and thus had a heavy security focus. For IR realists, the goal has been to explain state behavior through the pursuit of power and relative power distributions among states. As such, the study of human rights was peripheral to early theoretical debate in mainstream North American IR. However, this changed in the 1990s as the end of the Cold War brought about a new-wave impetus to understand how and why human rights came to be perceived as increasingly important in global politics.

Understandings of security evolved from narrow state-centric views that saw the role of foreign policymakers as jealously guarding state survival and sovereignty, to more human-centered approaches that sought to emphasize the security of those living within states. Concepts like the **Responsibility to Protect (R2P)** emerged that challenged absolutist views of state sovereignty by suggesting sovereignty was not absolute, and that through the commission of crimes against humanity or genocide, state leaders could forfeit their sovereign protections and other states could intervene across national borders. Parallel to these developments, human rights and democracy promotion were increasingly incorporated into the foreign policies of Western states.

As you begin to learn more about the topic of human rights and foreign policy, you will undoubtedly begin to ask yourself questions such as: What role did the end of the Cold War play in opening up space for non-security-related issues? What role do transnational networks of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play in pressuring governments to advance human rights? When and why do the European Union and the United States emphasize human rights in their foreign policies? Do media and **public opinion research** encourage western leaders to incorporate human rights into their foreign policies? Just as we have done with questions drawn from the populist political parties project above, start by reflecting upon the object of study, human rights in foreign policy. How and why did human rights emerge as an issue in what was traditionally a field focused on great power conflict? Furthermore, reflect on the assumption that international human rights diplomacy can actually bring about domestic change in other countries.

Here are some generalized classificatory questions that you might want to consider up front to help you focus your interests. What are international human rights? What do human rights mean in international relations? How do states reconcile security and economic interests with human rights concerns? What are some major cases where human rights mattered in foreign policy?

As with the populism example above, the first step toward addressing these questions is to better understand the object under study in our project. If we think of human rights as a **norm**, we might start by understanding what the norm is and how it developed. A body of theory exists that could help us in this regard. Here, we can begin to see the foundation of a research project beginning to take shape. But, as with the project on populism described above, we still need to consider methodology and methods.

Mapping the road ahead

Now that we have previewed some of the major concepts that will be addressed in this textbook, we turn to providing you with a roadmap of what will come next. However, it is important to preface this map with a reminder that research is not a linear process, and you are likely to refer to various chapters as needed. At times, individual chapters may be useful as stand-alone tools that you can return to at any point in the research process. Table 1.1 provides a broad mapping of how the chapters relate to core stages of the research process.

Table 1.1 The research process

Stage of research process	Chapter(s)
1 Selecting a topic and formulating a research question – what interests you and how can you begin to translate your interest into terms and questions that are researchable?	Chapters 1, 2, 4, & 5
2 Situating your research – how has your topic been studied, understood, or explained in existing scholarship and theoretical debates?	Chapters 3, 4, & 6
3 Crafting your research design – what is the purpose and scope of your research and what does this suggest about your methodological approach? How will you go about answering your research question? How many cases will you study, and will you choose them?	Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, & 9
4 Collecting data – will you access existing data or generate new data that you will analyze to respond to your research question? How will you collect the data? What sources will you use?	Chapters 4, 10, 11, & 12
5 Analyzing data – which tools, or methods, will you use to analyze the data that you have collected and respond to the question you have posed? Will you rely primarily on qualitative or quantitative methods?	Chapters 4, 13, 14, 15, & 16
6 Writing up – how will you write up your findings in a manner that is clear and transparent to the reader about the methodological and methods choices you have made, and the data you have collected and analyzed? How will you ensure that your research is published and read?	Chapters 4, 17, & 18

You may have noticed that Chapter 4 appears in each stage of the research process. For reasons that will become clearer in the chapter outline below, this is because research ethics must be taken into account throughout the research process, from start to finish.

Each chapter includes a ‘troubleshooting’ feature, where common hurdles, obstacles, and challenges will be presented alongside helpful tips and strategies to address them. This will be followed by a set of questions at the end of each chapter to reinforce key learning objectives.

Chapter outline

How to build the foundation of a PIR research project

The present chapter, **Chapter 1**, ‘Getting started,’ defines the core characteristics of research practice: methodology, methods, and research design. It explains that research methodology and research methods are a framework for making research choices, and shows how methodology and methods allow us to evaluate knowledge claims. It explains why research matters for the ‘real world’ of policymaking and delineates some common standards of what constitutes ‘good research practice.’

Chapter 2, ‘Methodology and methods in Politics and International Relations,’ helps you to map the terrain of diverse answers to questions such as: How do we know what we know? What can we know? Or how do we know whether we are right or wrong? It illustrates that methodology and methods allow us to establish a shared understanding of what constitutes good research practice and provide us with standards by which we can evaluate a wide range of claims posited in the study of PIR. It also examines the concepts of **ontology** and **epistemology** to highlight diverse research practices in PIR.

Chapter 3, ‘The purpose of theory,’ is new to the second edition. It describes what we mean when we talk about ‘theory’ in PIR and other social sciences, while explaining why theory matters. It discusses how to write papers that contribute to theoretical debates, drawing a distinction between theory-generative and theory-testing research designs.

Chapter 4, ‘Research ethics,’ emphasizes the centrality of ethical considerations in all stages of the PIR research process. It engages with ethics in three distinct contexts: (1) **reflexivity**; (2) the research process with a focus on data collection and analysis; and (3) academic dishonesty. Chapter 4 also provides guidance on practices such as applying for human subject review through your university.

Chapter 5, ‘Formulating a research question in PIR,’ explores how to craft a good research question, which lies at the foundation of any good research project. It outlines the core characteristics of a good research question, emphasizing that it will guide you throughout your project while steering you toward particular research designs, methodologies, and methods.

Chapter 6, ‘Compiling and writing a literature review,’ explains how to situate your project in an existing body of PIR scholarship and theory. It describes how to carry out an analytical survey of published research on topics related to your research question and then how to analyze, organize, and contextualize the existing scholarship so as to identify gaps that your essay, dissertation, or thesis will address, all while situating your approach and argument in that scholarship.

How to craft a research design

Chapter 7, ‘Research design,’ discusses how to create a ‘roadmap,’ or overarching strategy, that you will use to answer your research question – one that is logically consistent with your chosen methodology. It discusses experimental and observational design within the context of positivist approaches to PIR research. The chapter also introduces research design in the context of scientific and critical realism and discusses approaches to interpretivist research designs. Moreover,

it discusses the relationship between your research purpose and the research design you choose, explains how to define a case, and highlights how case selection impacts research findings.

Chapter 8, ‘Single case study design,’ delves into one of the most popular research designs among undergraduates. The chapter explains how to select a single case and justify that choice. It also explores the advantages and drawbacks of focusing on one case.

Chapter 9, ‘Comparative case study design,’ lays out the logic of the comparative method, especially for research designs that include a smaller number of cases and emphasize causality. What makes cases comparable? What is the value of comparison? How do I choose cases for my study? The chapter presents several models for research designs using the comparative method and also introduces **Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA)**.

How to collect data in PIR research

Chapter 10, ‘Interview research,’ offers guidance on using interviews as a form of data collection. It presents different interview formats, such as **unstructured**, **semi-structured**, and **structured interviews**, and discusses the comparative advantages and drawbacks of each. It also provides an introduction to conducting **focus groups**.

Chapter 11, ‘Surveys and questionnaires,’ provides a ‘how to’ guide for data collection through surveys and **questionnaires**. It introduces **sampling** and contains practical advice on how to create a survey or questionnaire, formulate questions, and scale responses. It discusses how surveys can be used to generate quantitative data that will then allow you to deploy methods such as statistical analysis to explore potential causal relationships among variables.

Chapter 12, ‘Documents, texts, and archival research,’ explores a tool of data collection that is becoming increasingly valuable and accessible as more and more archives and document libraries are being digitally archived. It introduces practical strategies for conducting **archival research**, discusses common challenges, and presents some valuable resources where you can find textual data relevant to PIR research. The chapter also discusses using media and visual sources.

How to analyze the data you have collected

Chapter 13, ‘Discourse, thematic, and content analysis,’ describes tools you can use to interpret and analyze textual or visual data, helping to uncover meaning and context. While **discourse analysis** is usually a qualitative method, **content analysis** is more commonly understood to produce data that are valuable for quantitative projects where large amounts of text are analyzed through the process of **coding**.

Chapter 14, ‘Descriptive statistics,’ explains how to summarize and visualize quantitative data to support your argument and present your findings, by looking for patterns, trends, and associations. It shows you how to calculate key measures of central tendency and how to use tables, graphs, and charts to visualize **descriptive statistics** in PIR and thus enhance your thesis or paper.

Chapter 15, ‘Inferential statistical analysis,’ explains how you can use quantitative methods to go beyond descriptive statistics and explore causal relationships. It describes how to define concepts in such a way that they can be translated into numerical form, a process known as **operationalization**. The chapter discusses how to locate and obtain datasets for use in statistical studies.

Chapter 16, ‘Correlation tests and regression analysis,’ further examines inferential statistics by looking at specific analytical techniques such as the **Pearson correlation coefficient** and the **Pearson’s chi-squared test**. It describes the logic of correlation and regression, explaining how to interpret the results of each, and guides you through the process of selecting appropriate models, interpreting results, and critically evaluating the limitations and potential biases inherent in statistical analyses.

Chapter 17, ‘Writing up your paper,’ offers strategies to turn all the work you have done into a coherent written product. It outlines the basic structure of a research paper, from title and **abstract** to conclusion. It also offers practical tips on how to formulate a title and how to present data.

Chapter 18, ‘Final hurdles and looking forward,’ reflects on the challenges inherent in bringing a draft research paper to completion. It begins by addressing common challenges faced by writers, including **writer’s block** and time management. It also looks forward, examining what you can expect from assessment and feedback while exploring venues in which to share your research with a wider audience.

Now that you have a clear roadmap of what to expect going forward, we turn to common challenges that you might encounter in this very first phase of your research project, and more importantly how to solve them.

Troubleshooting

1 What if I am still not sure about what to expect to learn from this textbook? In other words, why do methodology and methods matter?

Think of a social, political, or economic issue that is important to you. Why are you passionate about this issue? How do you know what you know about this issue? How do you know that what you know is accurate? What kind of information can you rely on to learn more about this issue? What would it take to arrive at a satisfying answer? All of these questions lie at the heart of methodology and methods.

2 How can I think of my research topic in more conceptual and analytic terms rather than just descriptive ones?

Consider why your topic is of interest to you and what the aim of your project is. What are the underlying concepts and practices, and what are your assumptions about them? Are you seeking to interrogate how these concepts or practices emerged, or are you trying to explain a particular event or outcome?

3 How is thinking about pluralism in research practice different from saying that anything goes in research practice?

Methodological pluralism starts from the understanding that there are different ways of knowing, and thus, different ways of going about research. Each one of the approaches covered in this textbook has its own logic and therefore it is important to fully understand that logic and use tools that serve your research purpose. But regardless of our chosen approach, there are common standards to which we should adhere, from transparency to ethics (Chapter 4).

Chapter summary

This book is designed to empower you to carry out PIR research that you find to be meaningful using the methodology and methods that will help you achieve your research goals. Always keep in mind that methodology and methods are not ends in themselves, but instead a way to discipline your thinking about what you want to know and how you aim to go about knowing it, thus enabling you to effectively carry out a PIR research project from start to finish.

PIR research is a systematic activity in which we analyze or interpret the world of domestic and international politics. As researchers, we should think critically about how we are going to make sense of complex practices and processes that are the subjects of PIR research.

When undertaking undergraduate or postgraduate essay- or thesis writing, there are a number of choices you will have to make even before thinking about a research question, research design, or the methods you will use to analyze your data. These issues include: What is your topic of interest and how is it relevant to both the real world and PIR? What is the purpose of your study? Is it to explain a certain event, trend, or phenomenon in politics? Or is it to interrogate the meaning of a particular concept, identity, or practice in politics?

Your response to the first question should be fairly straightforward, but will nevertheless require some review of the literature to make sure that your topic is novel and to begin thinking about how to situate it within the existing body of research. The second requires you to think about what it is you want to do. What kind of knowledge do you want to contribute? The third and fourth questions point to your choice of methodology, and by extension, methods.

At the center of research practice are questions about how we develop and share knowledge, as well as the standards we use to evaluate generalized claims and common assumptions about Politics and International Relations. These standards, in turn, lie at the heart of good research practice.

The skills to which you will be introduced in this book won't only help you to conduct your own research and evaluate knowledge generated by other scholars in PIR and other fields. They will also hopefully serve you as an informed global citizen.

For some scholars of PIR, there is no reason that the standards of research should differ between the natural sciences and the social sciences. They maintain that PIR research should be narrowly focused on uncovering causality. Yet other scholars argue that the standards and practices we use to learn about natural phenomena like the weather are ill-suited to furthering our understanding of complex social practices. This textbook does not take a side in the debate, instead introducing diverse methodologies and methods reflecting various positions in this debate. Indeed, there is no reason why different methodologies and methods can't provide satisfying answers to different kinds of questions in PIR.

While an ethos of plurality and choice lies at the center of this book, there are certain shared standards for all good research, all of which transcend PIR as a discipline. First, good research needs to be credible and reliable. And, as researchers, we are assumed to have integrity. If research is based on credibility, reliability, and integrity, our findings can shape, and even change, public and elite understandings on important policy questions. Credible research convinces, compels, or persuades. Reliable research can be trusted and replicated. In order to allow for replicability, we strive to be transparent about our choices of methodology, methods, and overall research design.

Good research practice, furthermore, requires us to maintain an awareness of ethical dilemmas. These include the proper handling of human subjects, the honest presentation of data, and meticulous citation of others' work. Common ethical red flags such as plagiarism are more acute in an age of AI-driven writing aids.

Although we may have no trouble identifying policy-relevant topics of interest such as populism and human rights – not to mention climate change, human trafficking, migration, and international or civil conflict – the gap between interest in a particular topic and the process of distilling that interest into a methodologically cogent and theoretically informed research paper often results in essays that fall into the trap of either *overgeneralization* ('I have studied a particular case and

claim, without the proper research design, that my findings can explain all cases'), or making *unsubstantiated* claims ('I argue that there exists a relationship between two variables, but have not designed my study in a way that actually substantiates this claim'). Avoiding this requires a strong grasp of research practices in PIR.

Once you have established your research topic and purpose, you can then go on to formulate your research question with an awareness of how the question you pose will determine which methods are most appropriate for your research. However, before going any further, we first turn to a deeper interrogation of methodology and methods, the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter review questions

- 1 What distinguishes research in PIR from other forms of writing?
- 2 What are some of the criteria we can use to evaluate whether PIR research is 'good'?
- 3 What is the difference between methodology, methods, and research design?
- 4 What is the scientific method?
- 5 What is the relationship between research and the real world?

Suggested further readings

Booth, Wayne C., Colomb, Gregory G., Williams, Joseph M., Bizup, Joseph, and Fitzgerald, William T. 2016. *The Craft of Research*, 4th edition. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

It provides a broad introduction to research practice that goes beyond PIR. It is helpful for reinforcing some of the themes raised in this chapter exploring the logic of research. The text explores research from the perspective of presenting an argument.

Harrison, Lisa, and Callan, Theresa. 2013. *Key Research Concepts in Politics and International Relations*. London: Sage.

This resource can be consulted at any stage of the research process for further information on the key terms and concepts that you will encounter in the field of PIR. This can be particularly helpful in relation to theories and concepts that are not strictly methodology, methods, or research design focused that are covered here.

Lipson, Charles. 2005. *How to Write a BA Thesis: A Practical Guide from Your First Ideas to Your Finished Paper*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. See Chapters 1 and 2.

Lipson's practical guide to BA thesis writing provides a number of practical tips for negotiating the thesis-writing process. Chapters 1 and 2 address some of the nuts and bolts issues that you should be thinking about and planning for when embarking on your research project.

Lobo-Guerrero, Luis. 2013. Wondering as Research Attitude. In Mark B. Salter and Can E. Mutlu (eds.), *Research Methods in Critical Security Studies: An Introduction*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, pp. 25–28.

This chapter provides a brief snapshot of how your interest in a topic can help you negotiate the methodological choices that you will confront during the research process.

Moses, Jonathon W., and Knutsen, Torbjorn L. 2012. *Ways of Knowing: Competing Methodologies in Social and Political Research*, 2nd edition. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. For an overview of methodological perspectives see Chapter 1 (pp. 1–18).

This is an accessible text that provides in its first chapter a concise overview of the major methodological debates and traditions in the social sciences.