



**Corina  
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# **Qualitative Research in Politics and International Relations**

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# About the author

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# 1

## What is qualitative research?

### Chapter summary

This chapter introduces readers to the main concepts linked to research designs and research methods using qualitative data, which are most commonly used in Politics and International Relations. It discusses the methodological commitments and disciplinary conventions separating quantitative and qualitative research as well as significant attempts to push against these distinctions. Importantly, the chapter situates qualitative data in these methodological debates and emphasises their predominance in Politics and International Relations. Finally, this introductory chapter presents the methodological and conceptual scope of the textbook and an overview of its content.

### Introducing this book

So, you've been asked to do a research project – most likely your dissertation. If you're anything like me, you're probably feeling a bit excited and mostly terrified. It's the largest piece of work you've ever had to write. From what you've heard, it doesn't look at all like an essay or any other assignment you've done so far. You will need to read a lot, speak to people as part of your research, and you may even need to collect your own data and then analyse it. Where will you even start? Well, the good news is that you've come to the right place. If you intend to use qualitative data in your research, this book will offer advice on how you can plan that research and guide you through all the steps you need to take to carry it out.

## 2 Qualitative research in Politics and International Relations

In my many years of experience in teaching and supervising research, I have found that students of Politics and International Relations tend to think of research design and research methods courses in contradictory terms. These courses are described as very hard, really dry, sometimes (if not often) boring, but nevertheless very useful. How can the textbooks used in an academic course be at the same time terrifyingly tough, dead boring, and fundamentally useful?

To the best of my knowledge, this textbook is the first both to articulate general principles and to offer practical guidance on the use of qualitative research in Politics and International Relations. Taking a broad view of where qualitative methods are most useful – both in positivist and interpretive research – this textbook offers an accessible route to using qualitative methods in your own research project – at undergraduate and postgraduate level. It also helps you to become well-informed consumers of published research. A practical approach informs each chapter; you will learn first *by doing* with step-by-step methods in practice, and consolidate your knowledge with in-depth analysis of published research which illustrates the use of qualitative methods by experts. Chapters closely reflect how researchers go about doing research – they are organised using a unique, integrated approach that avoids an artificial separation between each step of the research process. This makes the process of conducting qualitative research both simpler and more realistic. Featuring chapters on all the most commonly used methods – from discourse analysis to interviewing – this is the ideal text for upper undergraduate and postgraduate students of Politics and International Relations.

What is the *integrative approach* used in this textbook? Many existing textbooks adopt a ‘cookie cutter’ approach, showing each ‘step’ of the research process as abstract, standalone steps in an iterative process. While at first glance this might look easy, it’s more complicated than it need be, and doesn’t reflect how social scientists really go about doing a research project. Reality is messier, but this isn’t something to worry about. In this book, I show how the research process is intuitive and flexible. I show how and why qualitative research may be best suited for your own research, charting the entire research process, from selecting a research topic and defining a research puzzle, to identifying a ‘gap’ in existing research and formulating a theoretical/conceptual framework, to considering the ethical implications of research, collecting, and analysing data, as well as articulating a research contribution. Each chapter presents a practical approach to research, which facilitates learning through the critical examination of published qualitative research and step-by-step guidance on how to use this knowledge when conducting research.

Before I introduce you to the topics covered in this textbook, I will shed some light on some fundamental concepts and principles of quality in qualitative research – what is qualitative research and how is it different from other types of research in Politics and International Relations?

## Qualitative and/or quantitative

Politics and International Relations research helps us make sense of politics in the world around us. In their work, students and experienced researchers alike uncover the political meaning behind some of the main elements of our lives. Much like the image on the cover of this textbook, politics is about a mix of emotions and rationality, and researching politics is just as much a labour of love as it is a matter of good training. There's a 'search' in 'research', and that search is a principles-based process of exploration of a political reality and also a process of self-discovery in which you learn a bit more about yourself with every step of the research process. As is the case in all academic disciplines, political research is conducted according to some key 'rules of the game', which are conventions that define what good research is, the tools you can use to carry it out, and how to share it with others. These 'rules of the game' are what methods and methodology courses are all about.

Best practice in the fields of Politics and International Relations calls for students to pick either the quantitative or the qualitative 'camp' when defining research interests as they work on required coursework or as they develop their dissertation. Research using a mix of quantitative and qualitative elements is generally not part of undergraduate studies and is only sometimes included in postgraduate training. Despite being widely used, however, the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research can sometimes be unhelpful. A strong focus on the differences between the two types of research, without an openness to consider similarities and areas of overlap, has led to rifts in the discipline and to strong open disagreement among researchers in the field. Moving beyond personal opinion, this division can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. An arbitrary criterion to define the value of academic training and research, it can become a feature of disciplinary distinctions across regions, where students in North America tend to receive increasingly more training in quantitative methods, sometimes at the expense of qualitative research training. Published research also reflects these differences, where more qualitative research appears to be published in academic journals based in Europe.

Nevertheless, focusing only on the differences between the two types of research without being willing to see that there are similarities and areas of overlap is not helpful and can be downright unconstructive. After all, just because some research makes use of numerical data, it does not necessarily mean that it is definitely quantitative research or that it is better or worse than interview-based research. The reverse is also true – the use of textual analysis in research doesn't necessarily make it qualitative research (although it can do so, as I will explain in Chapter 8 in this book). Numerical data can be generated using the tools of qualitative data collection. You will see concrete examples of how this plays out in practice in Part 2 of this book. I'm not alone in making this argument. In fact, some scholars in our discipline have questioned the dual classification of research in International Relations as qualitative or quantitative,

considering this typology to be unhelpful and misaligned with the philosophical underpinnings of methodological choices in our field (e.g. see Jackson, 2016).

The world we research is complex. To increase the chance of capturing some of its complexity in our research, the toolbox of methods, approaches, and data social scientists use must be sufficiently diverse and open to complexity. It is equally important to make sure that all students of Politics and International Relations receive solid training in as wide a range of research methods as possible, to better evaluate the work of all researchers and to offer a full suite of tools to ask and answer compelling questions about global political issues. Looking past personal preferences for certain methods or the appropriateness of different labels used to describe them, there is no denying that qualitative research is very important for the study of Politics and International Relations. Qualitative research is also widely used outside academia, in the world of policymaking, in development practice, and in a corporate setting.

### Spotlight example 1.1

#### How can qualitative data be used?

International development practitioners, for instance, use qualitative data at different stages of the programme, for planning, design, development, and evaluation. Qualitative research is key for creating person-centred development practice. As Flora Cornish and Morten Skovdal (2015) propose in their qualitative methods textbook, good quality development programmes rely on in-depth formative research that is usually (but not exclusively) qualitative in nature to understand the local context in which a programme will be implemented. In such a setting, the direct engagement of communities who will ultimately benefit from the development programme is a must. For instance, ethnographic data collection is particularly well suited, allowing researchers to observe realities on the ground and to conduct interviews. If they aim to hear the voices of more community members on their projects, they can also design a survey and distribute it in these communities.

In this book, qualitative research is understood broadly as research that is concerned with the in-depth study of a theoretical concept or an idea, or the in-depth empirical exploration of a single case or a small number of cases. This does not rule out the reality that researchers can use quantitative data to explore a single case study (for instance, you can focus on Italy as your single case study and use quantitative data to explore voting patterns in different regions). However, the focus of this book is on the use of qualitative data. The main goal of qualitative research in our discipline is to understand the political reality of individuals, groups, governments, and other institutions as nearly as possible to the experience of the participants themselves.

Thus, people, governments, and institutions are studied in their natural environment. Qualitative researchers immerse themselves in the field or, if working with written material, develop a close understanding of the natural context and the visual and textual materials under investigation. Essentially, qualitative research is about encouraging the objects of research to ‘speak for themselves’, to have a voice, and provide their perspectives using language, words, and other actions.

Qualitative research encompasses several different approaches and methods, and empirical qualitative research makes use of different types of data – ethnographic data, interviews, textual analysis, visual analysis, etc. The second part of this book will introduce the most common analytical approaches, research methods, and data in Politics and International Relations.

Qualitative researchers are not concerned with using numerical data to make causal inferences about domestic or international politics. Rather, qualitative researchers are more interested in delving deep into a single case or a small number of cases. This is not to say that qualitative research cannot make use of numerical data (for instance, to describe in a graph different characteristics of a certain context). Rather, qualitative researchers are not primarily interested in making causal claims about a large number of cases, based on the analysis of statistical detail. Given the trade-off between the number of cases and the depth of an analysis, qualitative researchers err on the side of analytical depth. Compared to a quantitative researcher, a qualitative scholar plays a special key role in their research. They are not only designing and conducting the research, but they can also be an integral part of the data (as I will discuss in greater detail below, this is particularly the case when researchers use an inductive approach to data collection). In other words, qualitative data only exists with the active participation of the researcher. This relationship between researcher and the data raises important questions about reliability, validity, and ethics. I will address these later in the book.

Writ large, qualitative data is important when the main goal of the research is ‘to develop a new concept, uncover a new hypothesis, or shed light on an unknown causal mechanism’ (Gerring, 2017: 20). Qualitative data is particularly well suited for exploratory analysis, although it can also serve researchers who are in pursuit of a causal explanation. In other words, you can turn to qualitative data in your research if you are aiming to add to our knowledge about an existing theory or if you want to uncover a new explanation for a phenomenon or a causal relationship. For instance, you may want to understand what explains the behaviour of democratic countries that ratify the Optional Convention on the Prevention of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (OPCAT) but choose to commit, facilitate, or not oppose acts of torture. Put differently, you want to explore in greater depth the lack of compliance with the OPCAT by the ratifying states. Once you read extensively on the topic of compliance with international treaties, you learn that there is no research on the surprising relationship between democracy and torture (i.e. on



non-compliance for democracies). Hence, you embark on qualitative research, selecting three democratic countries as case studies – Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America – that are located in different regions but share cultural characteristics. You collect data through interviews with staff at the UN Committee on Torture and through interviews with a range of actors in each country to whom you gain access – government officials, civil society organisations, victims of torture, etc. Based on your qualitative data, you uncover some possible explanations for this behaviour and these explanations represent a valuable contribution to both our theoretical understanding of compliance and to our empirical knowledge of states' behaviour regarding the OPCAT.

## Variables and case studies – what's the difference?

An important ongoing methodological debate across the social sciences questions the utility of 'variable-oriented' versus more historically sensitive case-oriented methodologies of investigation. To clarify, a variable in research simply refers to a person, place, thing, or phenomenon that you are trying to measure in some way. For instance (related to the above example), you may want to investigate how many countries ratified the OPCAT and why. In other words, you may be interested in measurement with the intention of categorising and analysing the 'things' that you measure.

It is also important to clarify from the start that scholars can organise their research around case studies and can make use of statistical data to analyse these case studies. In other words, case study research designs don't preclude you from using quantitative data. In fact, statistical studies are interested in exploring patterns in how variables change across a large number of cases at a point in time or across time. However, researchers who make use of qualitative data always use case studies, often focusing on a single case study or on a very small number of cases.

Although some qualitative researchers choose to use variables in their research, they usually are not interested in numerical quantification. Importantly, however, variable-oriented research lies at the centre of quantitative research. Both are useful for the conduct of research, yet some scholars argue that there is indeed a gulf between case-oriented research and quantitative work that can be bridged (Ragin, 2000). Much has been written on the topic (for good summary of debates, see Collins, 1974; Redding, 2005; Tilly, 2001). Variable-oriented studies are undoubtedly 'powerful vehicles of generalisation', but they only work on the basis of a set of assumptions, which can be homogenising (Ragin, 2000: 5), that aim to reduce complexity into measurable units. For instance, gross domestic product (GDP) per capita is often used as a variable that measures the degree/level of economic

development for countries around the world. While it is undoubtedly a useful measure of income in statistical studies that involve a lot of countries, it has been criticised for not capturing other important aspects linked to countries' development, such as income inequality among the citizens of a country or different dimensions of social, political, or institutional development.

In contrast, case-oriented research that makes use of qualitative data is generally good at capturing complexity and diversity. It assumes that the apparent unity of political order belies incredible diversity that cannot and ought not to be 'simplified' for the sake of variable-based measurement. In other words, case-oriented approaches disaggregate the political process itself into its different historical constituents (Halperin and Palan, 2015). From this perspective, GDP is not an acceptable measure of a country's development as it is fundamentally incomplete. Qualitative research is more interested in focusing on one case study of a single country (or on a few case studies) to examine in greater detail and nuance the various dimensions of a country's development, including social, political, and economic aspects.

After so much consideration of the differences between quantitative and qualitative research, you may be wondering how best to decide which one is better suited to your research paper or dissertation. I will discuss this in more detail in subsequent chapters. For now, keep in mind that a lot will depend on your research topic and the research question you want to answer. Some of the decisions will also be dictated by your personal preference for a certain type of research over others, by your methodological skills, by time, and by the access you have to primary data.

Some research questions are best answered with qualitative data; other research questions are best answered with quantitative data.

## The book's structure and its rationale

I organised this textbook in two main parts. In Part 1, *Foundations of Qualitative Research*, I provide a broad introduction to the concepts and processes involved in conducting qualitative research. Part 1 is made up of five chapters which together give a 'big picture' overview of the research process, equipping you with a sound basis of knowledge of the concepts and language of qualitative research. In Part 1, Chapter 2 discusses the fundamental role of theory in research using qualitative data, highlighting that you can use theory to formulate hypotheses or expectations that can be verified (or tested) in the empirical analysis. Alternatively, your research may not be driven by hypotheses or expectations as you may be interested in advancing an argument (perhaps a critical or a theoretical one, as I'll discuss in Part 2 of this book) and you will use theory to formulate this argument that you can later illustrate with qualitative data. Chapter 3 teaches you what a good research question is and how you

can formulate one. In addition to discussing different types of research questions, the chapter guides you to choose a type of question that will be right of your research and to formulate a question that can frame and drive your research.

### Spotlight example 1.2

#### Exploring different avenues to study social media use

For instance, you may be interested in studying why social media were used to advance populism in the electoral campaigns of the two presidential candidates in Uganda's January 2021 election, Yoweri Museveni and Bobby Wine. You can address this question in different ways, depending on the theoretical perspective you take on social media use and on populism, the time you have available, on your skills (or willingness and availability of training), and the access you have to primary data. Below are just a few suggestions out of many possibilities.

- 1 Let's say that you are interested in the strategic use of social media communication to advance populist themes and ideas. If you have access to the political candidates directly and/or to their electoral campaign staff as well as other members of Ugandan society relevant to your study and you can travel, you can carry out ethnographic research on the ground. You can collect data through participant observation, open-ended or semi-structured interviews, or visual ethnographic tools. Later, you can use discourse analysis to interpret the data and analyse populist communication to advance the two electoral campaigns.
- 2 Perhaps you are more interested in the prevalence and nature of populist themes and ideas in the content the two candidates disseminate through their social media accounts. In that case, you can collect social media data, such as tweets and Facebook posts by the main presidential candidates. If you collect data manually, you probably want to carry out a type of textual analysis for smaller bodies of data, such as discourse analysis, or for medium-sized bodies of data. Then, you can use qualitative content analysis.
- 3 Instead, you may want to understand the dissemination of populist ideas via social media by the two presidential candidates to their voters and in Ugandan society more widely. You can carry out quantitative content analysis with the help of specialised computer software, where you can map and analyse the spread of populist themes and ideas (as defined by existing scholarship) through re-tweets and re-posts originating from the social media accounts of the two main presidential candidates.

In Chapter 4, I discuss the different strategies you can use to collect qualitative data, the preparatory steps you need to take ahead of data collection and, once you have collected your data, how to prepare it for analysis. The chapter examines how you can identify reliable sources of data, how you can select a suitable sampling strategy in the context of your research, and the data collection tools you can use to collect data that is appropriate to address your research question. In this chapter you will also learn what you can do to safely store your data and how to prepare it for analysis. Chapter 4 ends with a discussion of data quality, including the steps you need to take to ensure the validity and reliability of your data and research findings.

In Chapter 5, I introduce you to the main types of research design and the analytical approaches that are used most often in political research using qualitative data. I speak about the value of description for good research and the importance of causality in political research, and continue with a discussion of the differences between researching one case study and choosing more than one case study to research. I conclude Chapter 5 with a brief discussion of the role computer-based tools can play in qualitative research.

In Chapter 6, I introduce the main ethical principles you need to consider in your qualitative research, including consent, the preservation of anonymity, and guaranteeing the security of participants. I offer practical guidance on the steps you can follow to ensure that you can abide by ethical standards, including institutional approvals and risk assessment protocols for data collection and storage.

As its title suggests, Part 2, *Doing Qualitative Research*, is dedicated to actually *doing* your qualitative research. I introduce you to concrete methods, provide examples of how each method has been applied by other researchers of Politics and International Relations, and offer guidance on how you can apply the methods in your own research. Each substantive chapter in Part 2 contains a type of qualitative research design and focuses on one or two types of data. Chapters in this part follow a similar structure, with slight adaptations to the specificities of each type of data and approach. They offer foundational information about each type of research, encompassing the main constitutive elements (research questions, data, analysis, etc.) and the key considerations about the relationship between theory and data, as it applies to each type of research (i.e. theory-informed expectations, hypothesis testing, concept-building, etc.). Each substantive chapter explains how researchers apply these abstract principles in their own research projects. Examples from published research illustrate each method (i.e. a scholarly research article), identifying and critiquing the main elements of each research design in practice. I conclude each chapter in Part 2 with some practical advice on how you can use each type of data to conduct your own research, including checklists, practical exercises, and activities.

Chapter 7 introduces you to ethnographic field research and focuses on two main types of ethnographic data – participant observation and interviews. You will

first learn what the ‘field’ is and what is distinctive about it in the context of political research. Then, you can learn about the practicalities and complexity of carrying out participant observation and/or interviews, and linking them to theory in your analysis.

Chapter 8 is dedicated to the analysis of text, specifically to thematic analysis and qualitative content analysis, which are the types of analysis that political researchers commonly use. You will learn about what text is and how you can systematically collect it and analyse it, including how to generate a coding scheme and how to use computer software (NVivo) to analyse a larger corpus of textual data. In Chapter 9, I introduce critical discourse analysis, which is qualitative research using textual data for the dual purpose. Discourse analysis aims to understand a particular social and political context from which the text originates and, in addition, offers an analysis of discursive representations that replicate societal power dynamics more generally. In Chapter 10, I present historical research using different primary and secondary sources, such as archives and artefacts. I discuss the main types of historical research and the steps you need to take to prepare and conduct historical research in Politics and International Relations.

In each chapter I include different learning materials, such as examples, activities, and exercises for you to engage with. They help you to deepen your learning of the material by seeing how scholars have employed the same type of data in their own published work. At the end of the chapters, you find two abstracts taken from articles that make use of the type of data discussed in each chapter, followed by a discussion of all the research elements the scholars used when they carried out their own research. These discussions of published articles allow you to identify elements of research design specific to each type of qualitative data – for instance, they point to the research questions scholars asked, to the gaps in the existing literature that they aim to fill, and to the ways they collected and analysed their data. These examples are meant to provide inspiration so you can make decisions about your own research. Following these examples, you find exercises that prompt you to define the parameters of your own research project. Each chapter also contains practical tips, as additional guidance, and learning objectives to help you keep track of your own learning.

For teachers who want to use this textbook, be they course organisers, lecturers, or seminar (small-group) teachers, the textbook also offers an online (password-protected) teaching guidebook with suggested lessons plans and exercises. I hope that everyone reading this book, whether in part or in its entirety, will find plenty of useful, accessible material and practical advice. I very much hope that this book can offer some inspiration and motivation to do your own research, and to have fun while doing it.

### Learning objectives

This chapter has introduced you to several complex concepts. To assess your understanding, you can use the following list of learning aims. Ideally, after reading this chapter, you are able to:

- Understand the difference between quantitative and qualitative data
- Make sense of the main goals of research when employing case studies
- Make sense of the roles that variables play in research
- Decide whether or not the content of this book will be useful to you

### Discussion questions

- 1 What are variables and why are they important in political research?
- 2 How do researchers make use of case studies?
- 3 Why would you use qualitative/quantitative data in your own research?
- 4 Once you've decided which case study (or case studies) you will focus on in your own research, explain why you have selected them.