

# **International Relations and Political Studies Research Methods: A Preliminary Survey**

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## *International Relations as a Social Science*

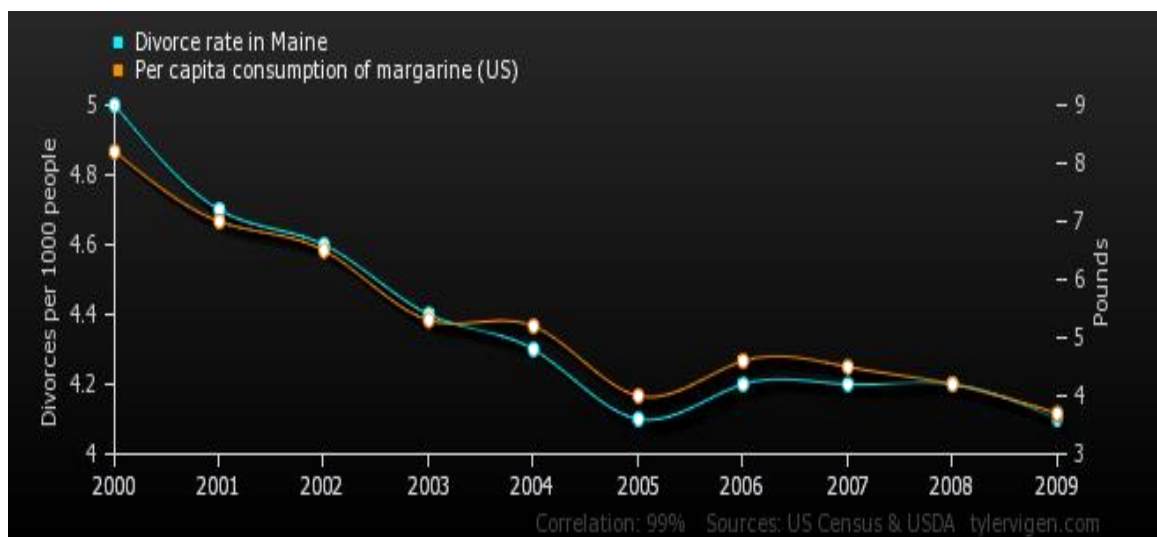
The field of International Relations (IR) and Political Studies social sciences. At least there is a sizeable portion of IR scholars who identify as such. What does this mean? It means that insofar as one carries out research under the umbrella of IR, one does so under the protocols and research methods that are as close to the scientific method as possible. The scientific method in turn is rooted in the notion that your findings should be interested in correctly discerning patterns of cause-and-effect so that your findings are (1) observable, (2) replicable, (3) objective, (4) predictive and an additional factor may be its (5) usefulness in terms of policy interventions (i.e., since you have drawn seemingly correct conclusions about the cause of some unwanted/wanted state, or in turn the obstacles to a desired state your findings can be used to properly diagnose and respond to a policy phenomenon by either introducing a course of action, continuing a course of action, ceasing a course of action or introducing no new actions). For scholarship, it is vital to demonstrate that a focus on mechanisms can serve two key functional roles that paradigms played for the IR subfield: first, providing a framework for cumulative theoretical progress; and, second, constituting a useful, vivid, and structured vocabulary for communicating findings to fellow scholars, students, political actors, and the public.

## *Pursuing Proofs of Causality*

The hallmark and aim of any good research project is in its proof of causality between two phenomena; a cause and an effect, also labelled as an independent variable and a dependent variable. But this is a rather difficult process, with many potential philosophical loopholes. To begin with, how does one dissociate between actual causation and mere correlation?<sup>1</sup> An example of correlation without causation is seen in the chart below:

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<sup>1</sup> A statistical term that explains relationship between two variables or events. The strength of the relationship can be calculated by Pearson Correlation Coefficient. A positive correlation between two variables or events simply means that both the variables move in the same direction (it is very important to note here that one variable does not have to cause the other variable to move). Similarly, a negative correlation means that both the variables move in opposite directions. Correlation does not have to be linear. It can be exponential, quadratic, etc.



In the chart, there appears to be a correlation between divorce rates and per capita consumption in the entire United States. But this is mere correlation and has statistical significance but no descriptive value. In this scenario, the researcher who hypothesises that there is a causal relationship herein would have to stipulate which the two variables which causes the other. They would also have to account for *how* the hypothesised IV causes the stipulated DV. Causation can be much more clearly discerned when there is a direct relationship between the two variables. There should be a hypothesised causal mechanism between the two variables.

“To take an IR example, the covering law view would admit the correlational finding that democracies do not fight wars with other democracies as a suitable ‘explanation.’ A scientific realist approach requires instead a search for the mechanisms that might explain such a correlation.”<sup>2</sup>

The most general definition is that causal mechanisms are processes in the world that generate outcomes, but within this general view scholars have offered more than a dozen different formulations. The most contested definitional questions are the distinction between mechanisms and theories and the issue of whether causal mechanisms are in some sense unobservable. We have theories about how the mechanisms that generate outcomes work. Using language that treats theories and mechanisms as synonymous is an easy trap to fall into, but the distinction is critical. Ultimately, Alexander George and Andrew Bennett have defined causal mechanisms as “‘ultimately unobservable physical, social, or psychological processes through which agents with causal capacities operate, but only in specific contexts or conditions, to transfer energy, information, or matter to other entities,’ thereby changing the latter entities’ ‘characteristics, capacities, or propensities in ways that persist until subsequent causal mechanisms act upon it’.”<sup>3</sup>

Causation, however, can never be truly and definitively proved – and the issue is when to be satisfied with the apparent cause-causer relationship:

“As a pragmatic matter we cannot research the limitless possibilities of ‘mechanisms within mechanisms’ at infinite degrees of detail, yet there is no general rule on the level

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Bennett (2013) “The mother of all isms: Causal mechanisms and structured pluralism in International Relations theory,” *European Journal of International Relations* 19(3) 459–481.

<sup>3</sup> George AL and Bennett A (2005) *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

of detail at which we should stop our research. Choosing when to stop involves a kind of epistemic and professional wager. We always risk one of two possible mistakes: if we choose to stop too soon, we could later be proved wrong by research that goes to a more detailed level of analysis, but if we choose to stop too late, we will have wasted our time and efforts.”

This last point draws attention to one of the main costs of focusing IR theorizing of causal mechanisms: a loss of parsimony (i.e., the use of as few and as direct as possible variables to explain phenomena). Then, therefore, the aim is to point to as few hypothesised causes as possible, as few as 1. Further, the advancement towards the correct causal relationship may take place in stages. Being as parsimonious as possible, therefore, allows for ease of replication of the study; another scientist interested in the same research question can also study the same phenomena and reverse engineer the paper/book/monograph and should reach the same conclusions, or posit alternative explanations if they find otherwise.

In International Relations and Political Studies, we therefore have to clearly and precisely see to the operationalisation of variables by being clear and offering indicators of what is meant by either variable. This involves unpacking a relatively vague phenomenon and indicating place holders for it; thus, when one speaks of trade, one should be clear whether they mean ‘imports’ or ‘exports’ and by what unit of measurement they will study it (currency, or volumes in tonnes).

In International Relations, we also make use of case studies. The aim of each case study is to act as a microcosmic representation of a larger, more general phenomenon in a particular aspect. Thus, each case study should be representative of similar case studies, or, alternatively, act as an example of falsification (i.e., chosen for its absence of the IV, and therefore to act as a control group). In selecting a case study, therefore, one should be clear; what universal characteristic is it representative of?

It is crucial in case selection to controlling for selection bias. Thus case selection should be justifiable; either study the entire universe of cases within a given period, or ensure that there is variance on the dependent variable (i.e., such that there is room for falsification to give proof of the independent variable’s effect without the researcher’s prodding of the data).

In working with cases on a comparative basis, the methods of comparison are the ‘method of most similar,’ and the ‘method of most different’. In the first method, the aim is to prove causality through assessing cases which are similar in their IV, but differ in their outcome. Whereas the latter is an example of a research whereby the cases are different in IV, but are similar in their outcomes. This is to discern, in comparative terms, what the presence or absence of a certain factor leads to.

Working with process tracing (in instances of within-case analysis) also draws from before and after comparisons that take place within the same case study if the case study is an outlier and a unique case.

Qualitative content analysis (QCA), unlike conventional research methods described above, the variables are not meant to compete with each other in the traditional way they compete in variable-oriented research methodologies. Rather, it is “interested in uncovering how the causal conditions usually interact with each other to produce the outcomes of interest instead of testing whether one particular theory has a better explanatory power than others.”<sup>4</sup> This

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<sup>4</sup> Mthembu, Philani. 2018. *China and India’s Development Cooperation in Africa: Rise of Southern Powers*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 5.

phenomenon is known as equifinality and stems from, as Mthembu describes, the fact that “causation in the social sciences is not linear, but instead multiple and conjectural.”<sup>5</sup>

While interested in the set of causes which can result in an effect, QCA differentiates between sufficient and necessary causes. The first are those causes which, seemingly *by themselves* along, cause the effect, whereas the latter are those causes which, *in combination* with others, result in an effect.

*Conclusion: The place of methods in an International Relations and Political Studies text*

The methodology section is the earliest sections in a journal article or in a monograph. After stating the research question, the text should ideally then state and operationalise the variables, along with an account (rationale) for the causal mechanism. This sets the stage for the oncoming section on data, and discussion of findings. In other words, methodology frames the study.

Extreme vague and general research questions:

1. Is capitalism good for people?
2. What triggers world peace?

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 8.