

UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

Title

A New Qualitative Methods Section

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2mb5z89k>

Journal

The Political Methodologist, 11(1)

Authors

Collier, David

Elman, Colin

Brady, Henry E

Publication Date

2002

Peer reviewed

A New APSA Organized Section for Qualitative Methods

Colin Elman, Arizona State University,
colin.elman@asu.edu;

David Collier, UC Berkeley,
dcollier@scocrates.berkeley.edu &

Henry E. Brady, UC Berkeley,
hbrady@csm.berkeley.edu

A diverse group of APSA members has launched an initiative to form a new Organized Section for Qualitative Methods within the American Political Science Association.¹

If approved by the APSA, the proposed section will sponsor training and research focused on the several branches of methodology associated with the qualitative tradition. The section will also seek to promote an integrated understanding of these methods and their relationship to other branches of methodology, including quantitative methods. The goal is both to complement the activities of the Political Methodology Section by emphasizing the qualitative side of methodology, and to develop productive avenues of cooperation with the existing section.

Qualitative methods are understood as a diverse set of approaches that partially overlap with one another, and some of which are congruent with the concerns of the Political Methodology Section. These approaches include the case study method, small-N analysis, the comparative method and the comparative-historical method, the ethnographic tradition of field research, constructivist and interpretive methods, concept analysis, and related areas of social and political theory.

¹This report is adapted from the petition that has been circulated in the process of forming the new section. The full petition is available at <http://www.asu.edu/clas/polisci/cqrm/qualsect.htm>. The transitional officers of the section are David Collier, President; Elizabeth Kier, University of Washington, Vice-President; and Colin Elman, Secretary-Treasurer. The Transitional Executive Committee Members are Andrew Bennett, Georgetown University; Theda Skocpol, Harvard University; Kathleen Thelen, Northwestern University; Alexander Wendt, University of Chicago; and Deborah Yashar, Princeton University.

Specific Goals

Training in Qualitative Methods. Although qualitative research methods are widely employed in political science, inadequate attention has been devoted to teaching these methods. A central objective of the section will be to address this deficit. Training institutes and workshops on qualitative methods will be designed to serve users of qualitative methods, as well as scholars who have a more specialized interest in teaching and research on methodology.

Bridging Methodologies. The section will be centrally concerned with integrating the insights and research tools offered by the different methodological approaches and traditions enumerated above. At present, these different qualitative approaches are somewhat balkanized. For example, the comparative method is closely identified with the fields of comparative politics and international relations; comparative-historical method has strong links to the discipline of sociology; important new debates on constructivism are centered in the field of international relations; and some branches of concept analysis are linked to the field of political theory.

Yet these different approaches sometimes address similar analytic problems, and they constitute a shared intellectual and methodological enterprise to a greater degree than is often recognized. In training workshops, APSA panels, and other fora, the new section will explore the commonalities among these different branches of the qualitative tradition, their distinctive contributions, and—crucially—complementarities vis-à-vis the quantitative tradition. Thus, while a compact name, “Qualitative Methods,” has been adopted for the section to identify a central aspect of its focus, the section will also be strongly concerned with exploring ways to bridge qualitative and quantitative methods.

Logical Foundations. In conjunction with the first and second goals, and in the framework of the pluralistic approach to methodology reflected in these goals, another objective will be to strengthen the interrelated branches of qualitative methods by drawing on statistical theory and mathematical reasoning (especially probability theory) as a source of logical foundations. New research on these foundations is increasingly providing valuable insights into some types of qualitative analysis, and the new section will actively encourage this new line of inquiry.

Participating Groups

Two pre-existing organizations are playing a central role in forming the new section.

The APSA Committee on Concepts and Methods is an official Related Group of the American Political Science Association. This Committee is closely affiliated with Research Committee No. 1, the Committee on Concepts and Methods, of the International Political Science Association. Over the past few years, the APSA Committee has organized a number of panels and short courses at the annual APSA meeting, often in co-sponsorship with the Political Methodology Section. In the event that the proposed organized section is approved by the APSA, the Committee on Concepts and Methods will be merged into the new section.

The Consortium for Qualitative Research Methods (CQRM), located at Arizona State University, supports an annual Training Institute and other scholarly communication focused on methodology. CQRM collaborates closely with APSA organized sections and committees. Its inaugural Training Institute, held in January 2002, brought together a talented group of 45 graduate students and junior faculty from across the United States. Many of the participants were nominated by the universities that are sponsors of CQRM, and others were drawn from a national pool of 200 applicants. The second Training Institute in January 2003 will be expanded to accommodate approximately 60 participants. The new section will help administer the Training Institute and other CQRM activities. Information on CQRM may be found at <http://www.asu.edu/clas/polisci/cqrm/>.

Cooperation with the Political Methodology Section

The proposed section intends to continue the cooperative relations that the APSA Committee on Concepts and Methods previously established with the Political Methodology Section, including co-sponsorship of APSA panels and short courses. The goal is to join forces in broadening the discussion of methodology within the political science discipline. Future cooperation might include working together in providing electronic access to working papers, syllabi, and other scholarly material, as well as collaboration in initiatives connected with the journal *Political Analysis*.

We see a clear division of labor between the two sections. The Political Methodology Section has made an outstanding contribution in sponsoring research and

scholarly communication focused on quantitative methods, and the new section will certainly not seek to duplicate this effort. At the same time, we believe that both the qualitative and the quantitative tradition can be strengthened by drawing insights from the other tradition, and close links between the two sections will therefore be essential if the new section is to achieve its intellectual goals.

The proposed section is currently seeking formal approval from the APSA. For more information, please contact Colin Elman colin.elman@asu.edu or David Collier dcollier@socrates.berkeley.edu.