

WRITING RESEARCH PROPOSALS

Goals

A research proposal outlines the plan for your scientific work. It helps both the author and his or her supervisor identify the answers to the following questions:

- What relevance does the research question have for the field of politics/political science?
- What exactly/which phenomenon is being explained? (= dependent variable)
- Which factors explain the phenomenon? (= independent variables)
- How can the relationship between the factors and the phenomenon be explained? (= generation of hypothesis und theoretical classification)
- How will the analysis be conducted? (= methodological approach)

The research proposal should not be longer than two pages.

Research Questions

To begin, you should formulate a concrete, analytical research question for your project. Questions that start with the word “why” are particularly useful. Such questions ensure that, in your paper, you will have to explain (in general) causal relationships in an analytical manner and not simply describe related circumstances and developments.

Example:

- “Why have consolidated (liberal) democracies developed in some former Soviet states and not in others?”

Please consider how and if you will be able to answer your question. In order to make this task easier, you should formulate a question with clear limits (a certain time period or region and/or well-founded reasons for choosing certain case studies when performing comparisons).

Using the example question, for instance, you could concentrate on just two of the 15 former USSR republics, selecting one that possesses a consolidated democracy and one that represents a non-democratic state (e. g. in 2009).

Selecting the Variables

In order to answer your research question, you need to select variables¹. The dependent variable (DV), or the situation or phenomenon that you are seeking to explain, can be derived from your research question. After identifying the dependent variable, you then need to determine which factors influence and/or control the situation or phenomenon in question and which you will therefore use to explain it. Depending on the scope of your research paper, you may choose to identify up to three of these independent variables (IV). These variables should be selected on the basis of your paper’s theoretical foundations (explained below) and can, under certain circumstances, be considered when answering the research question. There are a great number of possible influencing factors. What is most important, however, is that the factors you chose to examine in your paper are the ones most likely to be relevant for explaining the particular case you are focusing on. All other possible influencing factors should be excluded from your analysis.

Example:

- Identify the situation/phenomenon you wish to explain (= dependent variable, DV): the degree to which democracy has developed

¹ This handout presents an example of a positivist research design. You can, of course, select another approach to scientific writing and use a more constructivist or other post-positivist method for your work.

- Identify the most relevant influencing factors (independent variables, IV)
 - IV1: degree of economic development
 - IV2: level of education
 - IV3: external incentives
- *IVs that have been excluded from the analysis: continuity of elite groups, institutional arrangements*

Operationalizing the Variables

In order to be able to measure the effects of your selected variables, they must be adequately defined. To this end, you should determine indicators for each variable. Then you should identify exactly which data or sources (statistics, indexes, legal texts) you are planning to use to measure these indicators. The determination of indicators and the way in which they will be measured is called *operationalization*.

Example:

- Possible indicators for the DV (degree of democracy): rule of law, free elections, freedom of the press
(> Indexes such as Freedom House, Polity IV, the Democracy Index of the magazine *The Economist*, and/or the Bertelsmann Transformation Index)
- Possible indicators for IV1 (degree of economic development): income per capita or purchasing power parity
(> statistics)
- Possible indicators for IV2 (level of education): percentage of the population with post-secondary degrees
(> statistics)
- Possible indicators for IV3 (external incentives): the EU Copenhagen Criteria and their implementation in the selected state
(> legal texts)

Forming the Hypothesis

The definitions of “independent variable“ and “dependent variable“ indicate that there is (in general) a cause-and-effect relationship between the factor that needs to be explained (DV) and the factor that provides the explanation (IV). In your hypothesis, you should clearly demonstrate the relationship between the IV(s) and the DV by describing the exact effect that an independent variable has on the dependent variable.

You should formulate one hypothesis per independent variable. In the end, you should have presented exactly as many hypotheses as you have independent variables. These competing hypotheses should then be compared and evaluated in terms of their explanatory relevance for the dependent variable.

Explanation:

- H1: “The higher the degree of economic development a country possesses, the higher the degree of democratization will be.”
- H2: “The higher a country’s level of education is, the higher the degree of democratization will be.”
- H3: “The degree of democratization increases when external incentives exist.”

Theoretical Integration

As a part of your argument, you should indicate relevant theoretical approaches or concepts (deductive approach). Referring to an appropriate theory, you can explain how and why certain influencing factors can determine and/or influence a particular phenomenon (= hypothesis), as well as how and why an independent variable leads to the dependent variable. Accordingly, the choice of a theory and the selection of the independent variables are connected.

Example:

- Hypothesis 1 is derived from a theoretical approach of Martin S. Lipset, in which he argued that economic prosperity influences democratic processes.

However, research results can also lead to new or reframed theories (inductive approach).

Methodology

In your research proposal, you should also briefly explain how you plan to approach your research question.

- Which method(s) will you choose? (e.g. comparative case studies, a single case study, discourse analysis, evaluation and interpretation of interviews, etc.)
- Where are you planning to obtain your information? Which type of sources do you want to use? (primary or secondary literature, your own evidence obtained through personal interviews, etc.)
- How will your paper be structured? (Your proposal should encompass roughly 2 pages and should contain an introduction, a literature overview that includes the theoretical part of your argument, a section outlining your research question(s), your variables, their operationalization, and your hypotheses, as well as a section on the method(s) chosen, a conclusion, and a short bibliography.)

Other Requirements

- Please use correct English, especially correct grammar and spelling (use spell check). Mistakes in the usage of the language can have a negative impact on the evaluation of your proposal.
- Please submit the research proposal online as a Word document so that any comments can be included directly in the text.