

Gov 62 Section 9

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Gov 62 Update

- ▶ Student Research Workshops coming up
 - ▶ April 24, 3-6pm
 - ▶ Research memos due April 21, 3pm
 - ▶ Comments due no later than April 23, 3pm
 - ▶ May 1, 3-6pm
 - ▶ Research memos due April 28, 3pm
 - ▶ Comments due no later than April 30, 3pm
- ▶ You must arrive 5 minutes early to ensure a prompt start to the workshop.
- ▶ See Prof. Soroka's memo on Canvas

Gov Dept Quantitative Research Workshops:

- ▶ Thursday 4/18, 7-9pm in K050
- ▶ Friday 4/19, 12-2pm in S020
- ▶ TF: Mike Olson

Interviews in Political Science

Today's plan:

- ▶ Why do interviews?
- ▶ Respondents as units of analysis vs. expert informants
- ▶ Interview subject selection
- ▶ Preparing for interviews
- ▶ Conducting interviews

Why do interviews?

What are some of the benefits of doing interview research?

- ▶ Interviews bridge gap between positivism (testing hypotheses) and interpretivism/social constructivism (interpreting accurately the meaning of actions or preferences)
- ▶ Provide causal process observations or other data points that are unattainable through other means, such as surveys or archival research
- ▶ Observe connections between variables, rather than inferring
- ▶ (they can be fun)

Types of Interview Research

Two main types of interview research, or two types of respondents:

- ▶ Interview subjects are the unit of analysis.
 - ▶ Representative sample
 - ▶ Hypothesis-testing and/or individual case studies (interviewees usually the case) for process tracing or hypothesis generation
 - ▶ Tendency toward specific, neutral, comparable questions
 - ▶ More structured interviews
 - ▶ Often can lead to statistical testing
- ▶ Interview subjects are informants about some other unit of analysis.
 - ▶ Non-representative sample - need to talk to the “experts” or “elites”
 - ▶ Best for process tracing, qualitative historical analysis, hypothesis generation
 - ▶ Tendency toward broad, open-ended, conversational questions
 - ▶ Less structured interviews
 - ▶ Less frequently amenable to statistical testing - more about generating causal-process observations

Who to interview?

- ▶ Depends on your ultimate inferential goals
- ▶ If you're trying to identify the characteristics of a population or test a broad causal relationship:
 - ▶ Random sample is mandatory (or an ideal to strive for)
 - ▶ Random sample important if you want to use subjects as units of analysis for hypothesis testing
- ▶ If you're doing exploratory research, hypothesis-building, or process tracing in specific case studies:
 - ▶ Randomization is neither necessary nor useful
 - ▶ When looking for smoking gun, goal is to identify individuals/institution responsible for some action
- ▶ Compare characteristics of those who individuals or units who agree to be interviewed to those who don't

Who to interview?

- ▶ Identify the appropriate sample: how to do so depends on the question
- ▶ For elite/informant interviews:
 - ▶ Use news sources and other public sources: Washington Post, Roll Call, The Hill, CQ Weekly, national Journal, online sources, interest groups, think tanks, exec officials, etc.
 - ▶ Conduct background interviews - provide a catalogue of players, point people for each case
 - ▶ Keep searching for subjects - “who else should I speak to? Can I use you as a reference?”
 - ▶ Definition of “elite” is broad and varies by topic
 - ▶ Make a large, well-organized spreadsheet of potential contacts, with many more contacts on the list than you will be able to interview
 - ▶ Be sure you’re capturing all relevant perspectives or kinds of sources of elite knowledge

How to obtain interviews

Landing the right informant:

- ▶ Start with a “toe-hold” respondent, then “snowball”
- ▶ Look for preexisting connections with relevant elites: alumni, close to university, gov’t relations knows them, professor/advisor connections, etc.
- ▶ Try to avoid cold calls (though you may have to do it)
 - ▶ Snowball is effective, but be wary of bias
- ▶ Could do background interviews with people who are well informed and well connected but are not your main subject - e.g. if you want congressional officers, start with lobbyists for background.
- ▶ Refusals are more likely early in the process, so start with less essential interviewees (this is a bit time-dependent)
- ▶ Could increase access by framing it around a goal relevant for the interviewees

Preparing for the interview (not inclusive list)

- ▶ Decide on the level of structure you need for the interviews
 - ▶ Do you want to compare answers to the same questions?
 - ▶ Do you want to leave it as open as possible?
- ▶ Prepare detailed list of questions (see Appendix for examples)
- ▶ Make sure you have a recording device (and backup if possible)
- ▶ Create and print consent forms (see Appendix)
- ▶ Do your research!!!

Preparing for the interview (Questions)

- ▶ Use plain, simple language - no academic jargon
- ▶ Ask about behaviors rather than preferences, attitudes, or explanations for behaviors (unless these are your topics of interest)
- ▶ Question wording precision less important for elite interviews
- ▶ If relevant, can use paper responses

During the interview

- ▶ Logistics: Briefly recap project, obtain consent, ask about recording
- ▶ Leech et al: Start with a “grand tour” question - ask informants to walk the interviewer through an area about which they’re an expert
 - ▶ e.g. What did you do on this issue? What are you seeking to accomplish?
 - ▶ Targeted yet broad, give them space to talk
- ▶ Beckman & Hall: Give detailed overview of your case (to the point of putting the interviewee on their heels), then launch into specific questions
- ▶ Fenno (via Shepsle/Olson): Start by being flattering almost to a fault, then show that you know something the first chance you get
- ▶ tl;dr: Some tension between directing the interview to the conversation you want to have and trying to build rapport with your interview subjects

During the interview

- ▶ Be sure you're speaking the same language, don't shy away from clarifying questions.
- ▶ Use general and specific probes: tell me more about "x" (sometimes a note will help with this)
- ▶ Don't shy away from specific questions if what you want to know doesn't come up
- ▶ Usually don't ask "why" or about a specific hypothesis you're testing or interested in (but sometimes this is useful if you're careful not to state it as your hypothesis)
- ▶ End of interview: ask if there's anything else you need to know, anyone else you should talk to

During the interview

Tips from Prof. Hochschild:

- ▶ Ask the opposite question of what you just asked
- ▶ Ask about contradictions in what the subject says
 - ▶ Is this ambivalence? Confusion? Genuine change? Nuance?
- ▶ Play the student
- ▶ Can try out a hypothesis - “Does that sound right to you?”
- ▶ Try to have a “doorknob conversation”

Broad takeaways

Interviewer in an unstructured interview must:

- ▶ Have a clear idea about the type of information that needs to be collected
- ▶ Understand the topic that the interview subject is discussing
- ▶ Be able to improvise and follow up on the fly