Qualitative and Archival Methods: Field Requirements

Yale’s department is one of the few — indeed, we are not aware of any other — that offers qualitative and archival methods as a comprehensive doctoral field. Many departments offer graduate courses in qualitative methods. However, it appears that we are unique in offering a comprehensive field that certifies expertise in these methods.

Yale faculty members see the department’s commitment to doctoral training in qualitative and archival research as part of our overarching commitment to methodological pluralism. We regard these methods as complementary to statistical and formal methods, all of which have varied strengths and weaknesses in confronting the challenges of descriptive and causal inference.

We define “qualitative methods” broadly, including interviews, participant observation, ethnographic mapping, the recording of oral histories, focus groups, archival research and historical source analysis, as well as some aspects of surveys (particularly less structured protocols) and experiments (e.g., debriefing after experiments). Such methods are used for research on a wide range of topics ranging from state building to political violence to welfare state policies to practices of local governance, etc.

These methods generally pose similar challenges to descriptive and causal inference, and are often combined with other qualitative methods (and of course often also with formal and/or statistical methods) towards greater inferential leverage.

As in most other comprehensive fields, doctoral students can qualify in the field either by passing a written exam that assesses mastery of a list of relevant readings, or by taking three courses and writing a seminar paper in one of them.

However, faculty members strongly encourage students to qualify through coursework as we believe that learning these methods is best done not only through the discussion of key works and methods but also by carrying out projects requiring significant field or archival research.

Participants carry out their projects in a wide range of sites and archives in the greater New Haven area, from New York City to Boston. Recent field research projects, for example, include analyses of the social networks of Serbian immigrants; relations between African American congregations and criminal justice institutions in New Haven; the culture of those protesting outside Planned Parenthood every Saturday; and the experience of young Muslim men from various countries as immigrants new to New Haven.
Doctoral students specializing in all substantive fields of political science take courses in this field and some qualify in it as one of their three required comprehensive fields.

These are our QAM course offerings, all at the doctoral level:

*The Philosophy of Science of the Study of Politics (PLSC 630)* focuses on topics such as causation; deduction, induction, and prediction; description, explanation, and interpretation; and the differences between the natural and social sciences.

*Qualitative Field Research (PLSC 505)* focuses on developing skills in qualitative methods and expertise in descriptive and causal inference with qualitative data. Each student develops a project close to her own research interests, secures IRB approval, and engages in various qualitative methods to address her research question. Recent projects include analyses of the social networks of Serbian immigrants; relations between African American congregations and criminal justice institutions in New Haven; the culture of those protesting outside Planned Parenthood every Saturday; and the experience of young Muslim men from various countries as immigrants new to New Haven.

*Archival Methods and Historical Approaches in Political Science (PLSC 778)* and *Micro-historical Analysis in Social Science Research (PLSC 799)* analyze classic and contemporary works on some of the most important topics across social science disciplines, prioritizing a ‘hands-on’ approach based on discussion of the salient design choices and replication of the results. Class projects include GIS projects that combine historical with contemporary data, text-analysis that uses archival and historical parliamentary sources, and the formulation of research projects that leverage historical natural experiments.

*Mixed Methods Research (PLSC 523)* bridges training in quantitative and qualitative methods. The course is intended as an overview for creating and critiquing sophisticated research designs using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, data, and analyses. The course begins with the logics and assumptions underpinning qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research, and then moves on to analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of specific combinations of quantitative tests, case studies, and narrative and interpretive work. The final assignment builds on the course material to produce a mixed method research design proposal, and is ideal for students in the prospectus writing stage of their dissertation.

*From Concept to Measure (PLSC 527)* focuses on the operationalization of abstract concepts into concrete measures that can be used for analysis and inference, a task common to qualitative, quantitative and mixed-method research. Course readings include “classic” theoretical texts dealing with broad concepts of interest to political scientists, empirical work that develops/applies novel strategies to measure their operationalization.
Foundational concepts, and work that combines conceptualization (developing new concepts and/or reimagining old ones) and measurement. The final assignment focuses on the measurement strategy for a key concept in a research design of interest to the student.

To qualify by coursework, students entering the program Fall 2020 must take three courses in the sequence. All must take both the field research and one of the archival courses, as well as either Mixed Methods Research or From Concept to Measure (if they are empirical scholars) or the philosophy of social science course (if they are theorists). They must also write a seminar paper in one of the courses, which must be approved by the course instructor as a qualifying paper.

To qualify by coursework, students entering the program Fall 2019 may qualify following the requirements above. Alternatively, they must take three core courses from the following four categories, Qualitative Field Research; Micro-historical Analysis in Social Science Research (or Historical and Archival Methods); Mixed Methods Research (or From Concept to Measure); Philosophy of Science for the Study of Politics. And they must write a seminar paper in one of the courses, which must be approved by the course instructor as a qualifying paper.

To qualify by coursework, students who entered the program before Fall 2019 must take two of the following courses, Qualitative Field Research, Micro-historical Analysis in Social Science Research (or Historical and Archival Methods); Philosophy of Science for the Study of Politics, as well as a third (from a different category or one drawn from the below list of a dozen courses from all fields of political science that include classic and recent works drawing on qualitative methods, see below). And they must write a seminar paper in one of the three courses, which must be approved by the course instructor as a qualifying paper.

Students who entered the program before Fall 2019 can choose as their third course another core course or one drawn from the list below:

- American Political Development, PLSC 828
- American Progressivism in Theory and Practice, PLSC 812
- The American Presidency, PLSC 820
- Comparative Politics I, PLSC 777
- Comparative Politics II, PLSC 778
- Capital, Labor, and Land in Advanced Democracies, PLSC 719
- IR: Philosophy, History, Sociology, PLSC 671
- Nationalism and Identity, PLSC 655
- The Politics of Public Policy, PLSC 810
- Causal Inference and Research Design, PLSC 508