INTRODUCTION

Module Description

This module prepares you for and guides you in writing your MA/MSc dissertation. It covers the philosophical foundations of science (Philosophy of Science), their real world applications (Research Design) and the dominant idiom of explanation in Political Science (Rational Choice Theory). The first part deals with questions like: What is science? What is Social Science? What exactly is a theory? How do Hypotheses relate to theories? Does science have to make predictions about the future?.

The part on research design clarifies how the ideals of the philosophy of science can be applied in the ‘real world’. Questions include for instance: How do I find an interesting research question? How do I come up with a theory that answers my question? Comparison should be made amongst similar cases - how do I find similar cases? How do I write a scientific dissertation?

The third part covers Rational Choice Theory in detail and provides a toolbox of theories and games that are suited to explain a huge variety of political phenomena. They will come very handy when you have to find a neat explanation in your dissertation.

In general, the module is structured to help you progress in writing your MA/MSc dissertation. In the second half of the year and once you had to submit your research topic to the Department, students will give short presentations in class about their research.

Module Aims

The aim of the module is to:

Provide students with an understanding of the basic issues in the philosophy of science, research design and rational choice theory. Thereby, students will learn how to write a scientific dissertation.
Module Objectives

By the end of the module the students should be able to
- discuss basic issues in the philosophy of science,
- formulate research questions,
- develop a scientific theory and derive hypotheses from it,
- understand and apply basic rational choice theory to explain political phenomena.

Module Organisation and Structure

Teaching on the module will be in form of classes.
The weekly classes will consist of 110 minute units.
In preparation you will be expected to have read the set reading for that week (see below).

Module Administration

The module administrator is Miss Alex West. Her office is open 10:00-13:00 and 14:00-16:00, Monday to Friday. She can answer general queries about your course or the Department. You should refer any other questions you have to the instructors of the module.

Assessment

Assessment is split into three parts: At two points in the module (Weeks 10 and 24), you can decide whether to submit an essay discussing questions dealing with topics covered in class, a draft of a section of your dissertation, or a research proposal.
For the essays, individual questions are provided for the different essays (see end of syllabus) and you have to choose one of the corresponding questions for each essay.
Alternatively, you can submit drafts of your dissertation’s theory (week 10) and research design (week 24).
Third, you can submit a research proposal for a PhD project (or the like).

Even if you have submitted an essay in week 10, you can still submit a research design chapter in week 24.

Each of the submission must not be longer than 3000 words.

All submissions should be submitted to FASer before 09.45 on the day of the lecture
Students are able to access the online submission via the ‘myEssex Portal’ or https://www.essex.ac.uk/e-learning/tools/faser/students

In either case, you have to take the final exam. The questions in this examination will be based upon all of the classes and reading material for the year. The exam lasts 3 hours and you will be expected to answer 3 questions from a choice of 5.
The first assessment counts 20%, the second assessment 30%, and the exam 50% towards the final mark.
Trouble Shooting

If you have problems with any part of the module, you should consult the module instructor via email (rdlehr@essex.ac.uk) or during office hours (Tue 3-4pm, room: 5A.214).

If you encounter more general problems—keeping up with the study schedule, or, for example, with accommodation—you should consult your Adviser. If you cannot remember the name of your Adviser, get in touch with Alex West who keeps a central register. If all else fails, contact the Department’s Senior Adviser, Dr Theresa Crowley (Room 5.306; tel 3486; e-mail crowtx@essex.ac.uk)
Since we do not cover a single classical topic (but three), there is no book that exactly matches the module’s content. I recommend that you have a look at the list of assigned texts for each session. Most of the time, there are multiple books or articles that cover roughly the same content and it does not really matter which text you read. Therefore (and because some of the books are hard to get hold of), I usually list multiple but rather similar texts for each session.

I do not expect that you read all the texts before class. However, I strongly recommend that you look at some of them after class to make sure that you understood the concepts and arguments correctly.

For class discussions, I assign additional texts (highlighted with an ‘*’). These texts are mandatory reading and you should have read them before class. Please note that I will add texts to the reading list during the module.
GV 958 Theory and Explanation in Political Science

MODULE OUTLINE

Week 2: Introduction; What is Science?; What is Social Science?

Week 3: Explanation; Deduction; Induction; Causality; Theory
*Philip A. Schrodt. Seven Deadly Sins of Contemporary Quantitative Political Analysis. Section about Predictions.*

Week 4: Positivism; Falsification; Empiricism; Theories and Hypotheses
Week 5: Bayesianism; Mechanisms

Week 6: Research Programmes; Scientific Revolutions; Summary Philosophy of Science

Week 7: Research Design: Finding Research Questions; Finding a Theory; Observing Causality; Selection Bias

Week 8: Research Design; Writing a Research Paper
And one of these:
(*)University of Essex. “How to improve your academic writing”. Available at https://www.essex.ac.uk/myskills/How_to_improve_your_academic_writing.pdf.
Week 9: Basics of Rational Choice Theory

Week 10: Game Theory
J. Morrow. Game Theory for Political Scientists, chpt. 1, 2, 3, 4.

Week 11: Collective Action

Week 16: Spatial Models and Strategic Voting

Week 17: Institutionalism

Week 18: Institutional Choice
Week 19: Social Choice Theory

Week 20: Veto Players

Week 21: Selectorate Theory

Week 22: Principal Agent Theory

Week 23: Bounded Rationality
Week 24: Other Types of Explanation: Evolution, Constructivism


Week 25: Other Types of Explanation: Neuro-Politics


Week 30: Revision

Week 31: Revision

Week 32: Revision
GV 958 Theory and Explanation in Political Science

Essay Questions

Essay 1:

- Pick a subfield of Political Science (e.g., voting behavior). Would you call the appearance of Rational Choice Theory a “scientific revolution” (Kuhn) to this subfield?

- Can Popper’s idea of Falsification distinguish Political Science effectively from other means of generating knowledge about politics (e.g., journalism)?

- Pick a subfield of Political Science (e.g., inter-state conflict). Is Political Science at risk of becoming a “degenerative research program” (Lakatos) in this subfield? Or has it become a “degenerative research program” already?

- Pick an idea from the Philosophy of Science. To what extent is it applicable to Ideology and Discourse Analysis or to (normative) Political Theory?

Essay 2:

- In what circumstances can institutions help to solve collective action problems (e.g., the production of collective goods)? Provide examples to support your argument.

- Is Veto Player Theory better suited to explain domestic or international politics? Or does it perform equally well in both arenas? Provide examples to support your argument.

- What aspects of how parties compete for votes do rational choice models highlight and what aspects do they omit?

- What aspect of democracy can Principal-Agent Theory explain? What aspects are left unexplained, and why are they left unexplained? Provide examples to support your argument.

- What normative implications do Arrow’s Theorem and the McKelvey-Schofield-Theorem have for modern democracy?