

Research Design Project: Statement of Research

In Lecture 5, you are to submit a two-page statement describing your research question and explaining why it was selected.

Think hard about your research question – you will be spending a great deal of time on this question over the course of the semester. So you should pick a topic you find interesting (see Van Evera pp 97-99 on the question of interesting research topics).

After you find a topic of interest, it may be helpful to try to frame your project in the form of a question. Say that you want to examine the effect of voter registration laws on turnout in the United States. You might ask, “What are the effects of electoral reforms – such as voting by mail and day-of-election voter registration – on turnout?” or, better still “Are some electoral reforms more effective than other reforms at increasing turnout?” Phrasing the problem in terms of a question will lead you to think about both relevant theories and relevant data.

First, consider how phrasing the problem in terms of a question will help you identify and develop relevant theories. In the case of voter registration laws, you might look at existing theories of the decision to turnout on Election Day to identify reforms that you think would be particularly effective. For example, many scholars have framed the decision to vote in terms of cost/benefit analysis. Voting is a costly act; you need to inform yourself about the candidates and their issue position then, on Election Day, you need to actually get to a polling place. By this logic, laws that more effectively reduce the direct costs of voting will stimulate turnout at greater levels than laws that do not effectively reduce these costs.

Phrasing the problem in terms of a question will also lead you to think about relevant data. With your question in hand, you can ask yourself, “what data would I need to provide a convincing answer to my research question.” In the case of the effects of voting reforms, for example, you might want to collect state-level data on turnout rates and lists of electoral reforms adopted by various states. If you wanted to examine a small set of cases, you could look at turnout figures before and after the adoption of a particular reform in a given state (for example the effect of day of election registration in Maine). Or you might do a large-N cross-state comparison of the effects of registration laws. Making a precise statement of your research interests will focus your data collection efforts, no matter what research design you choose.