

Political Science Scope and Methods

Case Selection

Onto the Nuts and Bolts...

- This week: Case selection
- Next week: Measurement
- Overview
 - How to choose cases
 - Large N vs. Small N analysis
 - Sampling cases

What Is a "Case"?

- **Unit of analysis:** definitions
 - "The objects that a hypothesis describes or explains and are the focus of study."
 - "A unit is the unit of analysis for an effect if and only if that effect is assessed against the variation among units."
- **Case:** what is the unit?
 - "Observations used to draw inferences at whatever level of analysis is of interest."

What Is a "Case"? (continued)

- Units of observation vs. areas of study
 - Areas of interest?
 - My use of the term
 - What varies in your variables?

Case Selection: What to do?

- For Theory Testing: Don't "cook" the data
- Goal is "conditional independence" – no systematic factors guide case selection

Case Selection: Rules of Thumb

- Don't select on DV if testing theories!
 - Restricted range on DV misestimates effect of IV; Faulty inferences result
 - Example:
 - Achen and Snidal on rational deterrence theory
 - Selection of "acute crises" give an incomplete picture
 - No variation on DV – can't learn anything
 - Example:
 - Skocpol on revolutions
 - Does have some information on non-revolutions; events at "moments of revolutionary crisis."

Rules of Thumb (cont).

- Random Selection?
 - Good for large-N analysis
 - Problematic for small N; need some deterministic selection criteria
 - Stratified sampling
 - Group your sample into sub-populations of interest
 - Then randomly sample from those groups
- Select on Another variable
 - Unrelated variable: maybe loose important cases
 - Select on IV

Large-N vs. Small-N Analysis

- So what is possible with small-N work?
 - Put cases in context; be aware of limitations
 - Example: Kohli on poverty policy in India
 - In-depth analysis
- Choose important cases, but explicate selection criteria
 - Big point: can't just pick cases and pretend that the background standards of inference are met
 - Internal vs. External validity.

Case Study of Case Selection

- Goldhagen Hitler's Willing Executioners
 - Theory: The particular brand of anti-Semitism in Germany – "exterminationist" anti-Semitism – caused the Holocaust
 - Wants to look at actions of "ordinary Germans"; see if they participated in acts driven by this ideology
 - Examines:
 - Police squads
 - Work Camps

Case Study Continued

- Makes inference from data:
 - "the conclusions drawn about the overall character of the members' actions can, indeed must be, generalized to the German people in general. What these ordinary Germans did also could have been expected of other ordinary Germans" (p. 402).
 - Questions of external validity

© [Vintage]. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <http://ocw.mit.edu/fairuse>. Source: Goldhagen, Daniel. "A Note on Methods." Appendix 1 in *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. Vintage, 1997. ISBN: 9780679772682.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

17.869 Political Science Scope and Methods
Fall 2010

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.