

POLITICAL ANALYSIS

Technique and Practice

Louise G. White & Robert P. Clark



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Preface

A well-known adage warns that in many social settings it is well to avoid discussing either politics or religion; presumably such conversations generate more heat than light. *Political Analysis: Technique and Practice* is an effort to counter at least half that proposition. The text presents and applies a series of techniques for thinking logically and systematically about political questions. In particular, we stress those skills that involve collecting and examining empirical evidence in order to support or refute political arguments. Often these skills are presented as a series of steps in designing and carrying out a research project or writing a term paper. We prefer to emphasize the generic quality of these skills and to demonstrate that they have several applications; they are useful in evaluating political statements, in developing one's own political positions, and in carrying out formal research projects. Therefore, examples used throughout the book will draw from data and arguments presented in the media as well as from classical research in political science. We assume that you both adopt political analysis in your reading of the daily press and scholarly journals, and also generate analysis in your own research and conversations. The book is designed to help you become more proficient in both these roles.

This text is also based on our conviction that while political inquiry and analysis rely on the use of specific techniques, they also involve imagination and creative insight. The teaching of English composition, when done well, illustrates this effort to combine both structure and creativity. Students learn some essential rules for writing clear prose; at the same time, they are asked to express themselves in creative and innovative ways. We believe that the art of thinking about political events involves the same two characteristics. There are essential tools and skills we need to master; there is also a need for imagination and creativity in applying those skills. Whereas the

text emphasizes the skills and techniques, the examples and exercises are designed to stimulate original and creative adaptations.

We assume that people learn by doing, by applying what they read and study. Therefore, we have included exercises throughout the chapters that are designed to illustrate and reinforce chapter content. In addition, at the end of the book we present five exercises that require you to review the various steps in the analytic process and to apply them to particular problems. These exercises ask you not only to analyze an event by examining actual data but to present your data in an effective manner. Presentations, both written and graphic, are crucial aspects of an effective analysis. Prior to doing these five exercises, you will read an article in which one of our students applies these skills to an analysis of political power.

Both of us teach an introductory course in political analysis. The book has grown out of the materials, examples, and exercises developed in this course. We are especially grateful to our students for sharing their questions and problems and for their specific comments on the materials. They have stimulated us to look at traditional skills from a fresh perspective and to consider ways to make these skills relevant to the contemporary political arena—an arena in which careful thinking and creative insight are more important than ever. We invite you to join us in the technique and practice of political analysis.

Several readers and reviewers have been very helpful in offering their comments on earlier drafts of this text. We thank them, but note that responsibility for what has been included remains ours alone. They include Donald G. Barker (Texas A & M University), Stephen P. Brown (State University of New York at Stony Brook), Jeffrey L. Brudney (The University of Oklahoma at Norman), Sandra Davis (George Mason University, Virginia), Alan C. Isaak (Western Michigan University), William Lyons (The University of Tennessee, Knoxville), Jesse F. Marquette (The University of Akron, Ohio), Roger B. Parks (Indiana University, Bloomington), Dennis Sandole (George Mason University, Virginia), and W. Phillips Shively (University of Minnesota, Minneapolis).

Finally, we are grateful to the Literary Executor of the late Sir Ronald A. Fisher, F.R.S., to Dr. Frank Yates, F.R.S., and to Longman Group Ltd., London, for permission to reprint Table IV (table 8.23 on page 213) from their book *Statistical Tables for Biological, Agricultural and Medical Research* (6th Edition, 1974).

Louise G. White
Robert P. Clark

Note to the Instructor

Political Analysis: Technique and Practice has been developed by both authors in the process of teaching an introductory course in political analysis required of sophomores majoring in political science. The book has been written as an introductory text and is geared towards sophomores and juniors. It assumes no prior knowledge of quantitative analysis. The text will introduce students to the uses of statistics, but it will not serve as a course in statistical analysis.

In Part One students are introduced at an elementary level to most of the basic skills involved in analysis and research. Part Two gives students a series of five political problems to analyze. In their analyses, students will have to review the various skills, decide which ones are relevant to the problem at hand, and present their data and analyses in a well-organized essay. Our students have benefited from this emphasis on carrying out analyses at the end of the course, because it allows them to review and apply what they have learned. This practical experience also means that students must learn to conceptualize research problems and to handle quantitative analysis. The text reflects this dual emphasis on conceptualization and quantitative analysis.

We have also found that, in order to learn the skills presented during the first part of the course, students need experience in using and applying them. For this reason we have included practice exercises throughout the book. Most of these are very straightforward, requiring only that students stop and think about what they have just read. Three exercises require that students go to the library and research some material. Students can be asked to turn in the text exercises as each is completed. Alternatively, the exercises can be assigned as homework and then used as a basis for discussion during the next class session. Perhaps you will develop other assignments that reflect current political issues.

We have designed the material so that it will serve two purposes: students will learn to formulate and carry out their own research, and they will learn to read critically and to evaluate others' research and arguments executed in the political arena. We have drawn examples both from current events and from the traditional political-science literature. In addition, we have included material from American national politics, comparative politics, local and state politics, political theory, and public administration. Thus, we hope to engage students in creative thinking about the political world they experience and about the scholarly interpretations of that world encountered in their substantive classes.

Chapter 1, "Politics and Analysis," provides the context for studying the skills of research and analysis. It emphasizes that we often adopt very imprecise abstractions when talking about the political world we study and in which we participate. Moreover, these abstractions or concepts often reflect values we hold or interests we want to protect. For all these reasons, the ability to think systematically about politics becomes particularly important. We believe that this chapter, with its many examples of the ambiguities of political terms, enables students to understand the particular challenges as well as the importance of thinking clearly and systematically about political events and ideas. The major points that should be emphasized are the meaning of the word *empirical* and the differences between concrete and abstract terms.

Chapter 2, "Building Propositions," is particularly essential in that it discusses the uses of analysis both to describe and explain events, and it introduces many of the basic terms and concepts that students need in order to begin formulating research problems. Many of the examples ask students to identify the implicit propositions and assumptions in the arguments of others.

Chapter 3, "Exploring Relationships," expands on the material in Chapter 2 and helps students think through causal relations in more detail. The chapter suggests that there are various ways to approach a problem and that in most cases there are both multiple causes and multiple effects. It also discusses the important concept of control and reviews several research designs. The chapter could be used later in the course, probably between Chapters 7 and 8. By considering the complexity of political events and relationships, students are encouraged to think about the political arena as they actually experience it.

Chapter 4, "Measuring Our Variables," is an important chapter that helps students to think through the crucial task of operationally defining and measuring concepts and terms. Most of the chapter helps students find ways to define terms that are of interest to them and discusses the problems of validity and reliability. We also indicate some of the ways in which our political system makes use of such terms as *unemployment* in order to show how general and crucial the task of measurement is. This chapter also introduces the subjects of levels of measurement, unit of analysis, and degree of generalization.

Chapters 5 and 6 cover a variety of data sources and data-gathering skills. The emphasis is on introducing students to data that they can reasonably be expected to collect on the basis of an introductory course. Chapter 5, “Collecting Data: Questions and Observations,” covers survey and field research; and Chapter 6, “Collecting Data: Working with Secondary Sources,” covers the uses of aggregate data. In dealing with survey research, the emphasis is on teaching students how to interpret surveys done by others, rather than on equipping them to actually construct and implement a survey. The remainder of Chapter 5 introduces interviewing and observational skills. Chapter 6 emphasizes comparative research, but also includes exercises that require students to become acquainted with data sources on American national and local politics. This chapter also covers coding and indexing.

Chapter 7, “Organizing and Presenting Data,” covers three topics: reading tables, creating tables, and creating graphic displays of data. The section on creating tables helps students move from describing a single variable to portraying a simple bivariate relationship and to adding a control variable. The material and data used to illustrate this process are taken from actual data on Third World nations. The chapter builds on many of the concepts introduced in Chapters 2 and 3 and translates these concepts into tabular and graphic form. The section of the chapter on graphic displays helps students think through how to display data for each level of measurement, and introduces some of the background for Chapter 8, the final chapter on analysis.

Chapter 8, “Analyzing Political Data,” covers a great deal of material in fairly concentrated form. We do *not* assume that students have any background in statistics. The chapter is seen to be a good way to introduce students to statistical analysis in the hope that they will later take a full course in the subject. It teaches students how to compute measures of central tendency, and to interpret measures of relationships and of statistical significance when they encounter them in tables or texts. We realize that some instructors may choose to emphasize statistical analysis and some may not. This chapter is written in such a way that each part stands on its own, and portions of the chapter only may therefore easily be selected for study.

Chapter 9, “A Case Study of the Virginia General Assembly,” provides an example of research carried out by a student, Lucy Church. Her work illustrates the integration of the basic skills in a single study—one that undergraduates could do. The chapter is important in that it shows how all of the components of systematic analysis fit together.

The text concludes with five in-depth exercises that require students to review the steps in the analytic process and apply them to particular aspects of political research. Exercise 1 emphasizes the development of hypotheses and helps students identify hypotheses in journalistic accounts of contemporary events. It presents different interpretations of U.S. involvement in the war in Vietnam and asks students to identify the differing assumptions and implicit hypotheses in each. Hopefully this exercise will sensitize stu-

dents to the assumptions that lie behind other interpretations of current events.

Exercise 2 asks students to interpret a simple bivariate relationship and then to examine this relationship when it is controlled for a third variable. They will be working with cross-tabulations of survey data and will be asked to analyze data. Those who have covered these subjects in Chapter 8 will also be asked to interpret the measures of relationship and statistical significance that are given in the tables. Students will be working with three sets of tables, all having the same dependent variable, so that they have to use the measures to draw comparisons. As in each of the exercises, they will be asked to write an analytic essay.

Exercise 3 provides students with aggregate cross-national data on various measures of political and economic development in Third World nations. Students are asked to formulate hypotheses, indicators, and an index, to present the data in bivariate tables, and finally to write an essay.

Exercise 4 provides students with data on participation in primary elections and nominating conventions in the past decades. The exercise also presents some arguments from contemporary analysts and classical theorists on participation in the nomination of candidates. On the basis of these arguments, students are asked to formulate hypotheses, to select the relevant data from all that are provided, and to analyze and present their conclusions. In this exercise, they are most likely to develop tables describing single variables, graphs, and time lines.

Exercise 5 is different from the other four exercises in that the data are not provided. The main point of the exercise is for students to collect their own data on the basis of interviews in their communities. The exercise presents various writings on citizen participation in contemporary local government, with an emphasis on the problems that arise as citizens become more active in local affairs. The assignment for the student is to identify relevant people in his or her areas, and to interview them to find out whether the same problems have occurred locally and to gain an understanding of why these problems occur. One faculty may choose to omit this exercise; another may believe that it is very important to give students such an experience in field research.

We have not provided any material on computer analysis. However, both of us have included computer analysis in our course. We have done so by using one of the exercises developed by the American Political Science Association in their SETUPS series. The particular one we have selected presents exercises using data from surveys taken by the Survey Research Center at the time of the 1980 U.S. election. Each booklet in the series contains all the necessary instructions for students to use SPSS in analyzing the data provided, using the school's computer. Those who order one of the SETUPS exercises will also receive a computer tape containing the relevant data. For more information write to Dr. Sheilah Mann, American Political Science Association, 1527 New Hampshire Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

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PART ONE

Techniques of Analysis

The title “Techniques of Analysis” may suggest to you that we are going to immerse you in quantitative exercises. In fact, chapters 1–7 contain very minimal quantitative analysis. Instead, we emphasize the importance of thinking clearly and logically about political events, of being systematic in examining ideas, opinions, and arguments. We begin by exploring the nature of political terms and the challenges they present. *Power* and *apathy* are examples of terms that are vague but often used to make a point. Therefore, in dealing with political ideas and terms, we have to pay particular attention to the importance of being precise and clear. After reflecting on the nature of political words and concepts, we introduce a series of techniques that enable us to analyze them: forming propositions, examining relationships, and measuring terms. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss different sources of political information, ranging from evidence we collect ourselves to existing material. Finally, chapters 7 and 8 explain how to present information in tables and graphs and then how to analyze data using a few simple statistical measures.

