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978-1-107-00603-4 - Field Research in Political Science: Practices and Principles

Diana Kapiszewski, Lauren M. MacLean and Benjamin L. Read

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## Field Research in Political Science

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Field research – leaving one’s home institution in order to acquire data, information, or insights that significantly inform one’s research – remains indispensable, even in a digitally networked era. This book, the first of its kind in political science, reconsiders the design and execution of field research and explores its role in producing knowledge. First, it offers an empirical overview of fieldwork in the discipline based on a large-scale survey and extensive interviews. Good fieldwork takes diverse forms yet follows a set of common practices and principles. Second, the book demonstrates the analytic benefits of fieldwork, showing how it contributes to our understanding of politics. Finally, it provides intellectual and practical guidance, with chapters on preparing for field research, operating in the field and making analytic progress while collecting data, and on data-collection techniques including archival research, interviewing, ethnography and participant observation, surveys, and field experiments.

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Practices and Principles

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## Preface

This book emerges from a trend toward new thinking, teaching, and writing about fieldwork in the discipline of political science since the early 2000s. We see at least four interacting dynamics prompting these scholarly discussions. First, political scientists of all epistemological, methodological, and substantive persuasions have paid increasing attention to the critical links among theory, research design, and analysis. This focus has opened the door to conversations about the fundamental role that the systematic collection and careful consideration of data play in the development and success of each.

A second factor that has led political scientists to more actively and critically assess the processes and challenges of collecting data in context is the ongoing development, institutionalization, and systematization of qualitative and interpretive methods. The effective use of these methods often relies heavily on data collected through interpersonal interactions, encouraging scholars to consider the conduct and meaning of those exchanges.

A related development is the evolving dialogue about pluralism in the discipline, and emerging debates and innovations in multi-method research. Even as scholars who are passionate about their particular approach to research are writing and organizing amongst themselves in subgroups, discussions have emerged across the discipline about the intellectual benefits of using multiple approaches to analyze data. A logical next step is to consider the strengths and weaknesses of the multiple approaches available to collect, scrutinize, process, and combine them.

An additional factor encouraging a steadier focus on fieldwork is the increasing emphasis on reflexivity and transparency in political science. Both at the level of the discipline's flagship association as well as among many individual political scientists, greater attention is being paid to transparency with regard to how research is designed, how data are collected and analyzed, and how conclusions are drawn.

These dynamics together have encouraged and inspired political scientists to begin to think more carefully about how to plan and execute field research.

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**Preface**

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That, in turn, has fostered consideration of how we can share and benefit from the immense amount of collective knowledge accumulated by the generations of political scientists who have ventured out from their home campuses to explore field sites near and far. Every scholar who has conducted fieldwork has learned invaluable lessons about how to do so effectively. Yet, while practically every scholar has also passed some knowledge on to others, this informal and piecemeal transmission is inefficient and inevitably incomplete. In short, to date political scientists have not fully capitalized on the significant yet scattered stock of knowledge about conducting field research in the discipline.

In combination, we submit, these dynamics and realities have produced a growing trend toward thinking and writing about field research in political science – scholarship that draws on and complements the wealth of literature about fieldwork in cognate disciplines, but also stands apart, reflecting disciplinary differences. This trend has had its most visible instantiation in the various short courses on field research and archival methods taught annually during the American Political Science Association (APSA) meetings since 2001, and the modules on fieldwork, ethnography, historiography, and archival research taught at the Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research (IQMR) each year since 2002. As a result of these courses, hundreds of graduate students have received training in field methods.

These courses also serve as the most direct origins of this project. Through teaching these courses, which all three co-authors have done, and through additional presentations on field research we have offered around the United States as well as in intensive workshops in a variety of international settings from Romania to Botswana, we have been repeatedly struck by how hungry many colleagues, and particularly graduate students, are for guidance on how to plan and carry out field research. That hunger, we believe, has two main sources, which bring our discussion full circle. It springs in part from gaps in the methods curricula of many political science graduate programs, as methods courses tend to focus heavily on the analysis, rather than the collection, of data. It is also rooted in the absence of a disciplinary consensus on, and (the increasing amount of scholarship notwithstanding) the lack of an established corpus of texts about, field research in political science – what it is, what constitutes *good* field research, and what value it adds to scholarship.

This book is our response to these evolving dynamics, pressures, and needs. It has several ambitions. First, it offers an empirical overview of political scientists' field research practices and how they have evolved, based

on a large-scale survey of political science faculty and an extensive series of in-depth interviews. Second, it elucidates the analytic benefits of field research, showing how it contributes to our knowledge about politics. We demonstrate the creative ways in which scholars use many types of data-collection techniques, and how they iterate among data gathering, data analysis, and research design. All these processes enhance conceptualization, measurement, the formulation of descriptive and causal claims, the identification of causal mechanisms – and thus theory building. Third, the book provides intellectual and practical guidance for those embarking on fieldwork. Indeed, one of our central themes is that field research in political science takes very diverse forms, yet is bound together by common concepts, logics, and practices. These fundamental similarities and synergies allow us to offer this guidance – and to identify a set of principles that underpin good field research. In short, the book aims not merely to serve as a primer on field research, but also to fill gaps in the discipline’s growing methods literature.

We anticipate that the book will be of interest – and hope it will be of assistance – to those who are preparing to strike out on field research for the first time or embarking on new kinds of fieldwork, be they undergraduates, master’s students, Ph.D. candidates, or faculty. Yet we also believe it will be useful to other constituencies: to faculty who advise graduate students; to scholars considering the tradeoffs among different data-collection techniques and forms of data for the research they plan to do; to all political scientists who are reading, reviewing, or otherwise evaluating scholarship based on field research; and to anyone who teaches methods courses at any level. We also expect that the book will be of use to those working in the policy world, and to non-governmental organization and donor groups that want to evaluate programs and initiatives they have put in place.

In addressing all of these groups, we are reaching across what may seem like stark dividing lines, speaking to scholars in different subfields, who employ different analytic methods, and who have contrasting epistemological philosophies. Our eclecticism is intentional. We strongly believe that fieldwork is a common disciplinary good, one in which all political scientists can productively engage, and one from which all can learn. As such, while we acknowledge disciplinary divides and realize that scholars hailing from different traditions think about the processes and products of field research differently, we hope that our guidance, examples, and arguments will resonate with all political scientists, and that all types of scholars can adapt what we are saying to their own intellectual predilections and sensibilities.

To be clear, this book is hardly the first or the last word on the conduct of field research in political science. Rather, we see our contribution as advancing an ongoing, vital, vibrant, and extraordinarily fruitful conversation about fieldwork in the discipline. Indeed, as part of our effort to foment that debate and dialogue – in political science and cognate disciplines as well – we have created a companion web site for this volume ([www.psfieldresearch.org](http://www.psfieldresearch.org)). The purpose of the site is to disseminate information and lessons about field research in a comprehensive and dynamically updated fashion. Ultimately, we envision the site including interactive features that will allow those who conduct fieldwork to share their knowledge and experiences more easily, quickly, and effectively.

In this spirit, and as a real-life demonstration of the ongoing discussion of field research in the discipline, we wish to acknowledge the many people to whom we owe a debt of gratitude for inspiring, encouraging, and making possible the writing of this book. First we would like to give very special credit to Evan Lieberman, Julia Lynch, and Marc Morjé Howard, who taught the first version of the APSA short course in 2001. Their vision and pioneering spirit provided the foundational inspiration for this project, and they deserve credit for some of the ideas on the process of field research that are developed here in Chapters 3, 4, and 10 (Lieberman, Howard, and Lynch 2004). We also acknowledge the other scholars who have co-taught the APSA short courses or IQMR modules on conducting field research, including Melani Cammett, Naomi Levy, and Sara Watson. We are indebted to the editors of the Cambridge University Press Strategies for Social Inquiry series – Colin Elman, John Gerring, and James Mahoney – for proposing the idea for this volume, for patiently fielding our many questions and requests, and for offering guidance and insights on the project. And we are grateful for the support and assistance of our editors, John Haslam and Carrie Parkinson, and the rest of the team at Cambridge.

We would like to thank the many political scientists who so helpfully discussed draft chapters of the book at several Midwest Political Science Association and APSA conferences; those who read a draft of the book (and helped us refine our survey) as part of the weekend Research Group during IQMR in June 2010; all who took part in the manuscript review session at Indiana University in December 2011; those intrepid individuals who “test drove” the draft manuscript in their graduate seminars and whose students gave us extraordinary feedback (in particular, Jaimie Bleck at the University of Notre Dame, Jennifer Brass of Indiana University, David Siddhartha Patel at Cornell University, and Hillel Soifer at Temple University); the dozens of

colleagues who pre-tested our survey on field research practices in the discipline; the survey methodologists at UC Berkeley, Northwestern University, and Indiana University who helped us design a better instrument; the 1,142 political scientists who took the survey; and the 62 scholars who were kind enough to grant us interviews, spending hours revealing the “scaffolding” and evolution of their projects and offering their thoughts on the underpinnings, conduct, and future of field research in the discipline. We thank APSA’s administrative committee for helpfully allowing us to sample from the organization’s list of US-based political scientists for our survey, and we thank Sean Twombly for facilitating this. We are also grateful to all those involved in the several institutions whose existence and influence have been supportive as we developed the ideas in this book, including the Consortium for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research and APSA’s Qualitative and Multi-Methods Research section and Interpretive Methodologies and Methods group. Finally, we are thankful to our graduate students, Neil Chaturvedi (UC Irvine) and Katie Scofield (Indiana University) for their research assistance at various points in the writing of the book.

We also owe a huge debt to the people from whom we learned about field research, and those who demonstrated so clearly to us its importance and value. Diana thanks the justices, clerks, government officials, academics, and so many others in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Brasília, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo, Brazil, who gave selflessly of their time to help her understand their country. Lauren extends thanks to the many people and communities in Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Kenya, and the United States who have shared their time and insights about politics and life. Ben thanks the many people in Beijing, Taipei, and elsewhere who sat for in-person interviews, filled out questionnaires, or responded to phone surveys; he is especially grateful to the neighborhood leaders who put up with his presence and questions during his “site-intensive” loitering.

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