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Research Design Example

Here is a useful list of questions that will help you to structure your thinking about the research design. These are adapted from Barbara Geddes' book Paradigms and Sand Castles : Theory Building and Research Design in Comparative Politics (2001). I would recommend answering these questions before you try to start drafting your final paper.

In the following example, I have answered the questions using Milton Lodge's impression driven model. You can see that this is what he was thinking about as he carefully designed his experiment. He clearly identifies a main and rival hypothesis and develops a critical test to distinguish between them with very concrete information.

1. What is the big picture question that you are asking in your research?

How do people develop their evaluations of political candidates when they seem to remember so little of the information about the candidates that they encounter?

2. What is the more narrow hypothesis that you want to test?

People follow the impression driven model in which candidate evaluations are updated on-line as information about the candidate is encountered.

3. What are the observable implications of your hypothesis?

People who are unable to recall specific details of the campaign material they have been presented with should, nonetheless, demonstrate that their political evaluations have changed as a result of exposure to that campaign material.

4. What is a rival hypothesis?

People follow the memory-based model in which they retrieve specific memories and use those to construct and evaluation of the political candidate.

5. What are the observable implications of your rival hypothesis?

People recall specific memories of material they were previously exposed to and those memories are strongly correlated with the attitude that is formed and reported by the study participant.

6. What concrete evidence would be consistent with the observable implications of the main or rival hypotheses?

Evidence indicating that subjects reported an opinion consistent with considerations they encountered without having memory for those specific considerations would be consistent with the main hypothesis of the online model. Evidence indicating subjects reported an opinion consistent with considerations they previously encountered and the subjects could easily report on specific memories of those considerations would be consistent with the memory based model, the rival hypothesis.

7. What crucial test would distinguish between the main and rival hypotheses?

Randomly assigning subjects to various conditions in which they were given a task of evaluating campaign information for its readability or they were asked to evaluate the candidate as they read the campaign information creates a critical test in which we can identify the role that recalled memory plays for the group given the readability task (and distracted from forming a political judgment) and the role that the online evaluation plays for the group asked to evaluate the campaign messages as they are encounter (and who may actually forget the specific campaign messages.) We expect to see that low levels of factual recall do not impinge upon the ability to form candidate evaluations that are coherent with the information that the subjects were exposed to.

8. What other factors would you need to control for?

You would need to control for the age, gender, race, and socioeconomic states of the research participants. You would also want to assess the strength of the party affiliation, their frequency of voting, and other measures of civic engagement and political knowledge.