

# Qualitative Methods

Newsletter of the  
American Political Science Association  
Organized Section for Qualitative and  
Multi-Method Research

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## Letter from the Section President

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.996501>

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First off, I want to thank Craig Thomas and Hillel Soifer for putting together an exciting set of panels, roundtables, and poster presentations for this year's APSA meetings, to be held in Boston (see pages 39-43 for the listings). The section received a record number of submissions. Even with our large panel allocation, the division chairs were faced with some very difficult choices. Although they were able to field a substantial proportion of these proposals, there were of course some that the section was not able to include. The long-term solution is to secure a larger number of panels. Let me, therefore, take this opportunity to remind everyone that the section's panel allocation at APSA 2009 depends not only on our submission rate but also, more importantly, on our attendance rate (which is carefully monitored by APSA). So, *Methodologists Unite!*—preferably at our panels. I also hope that you'll come to the section's annual business meeting (6:15pm–7:15pm) and reception (7:30pm–9:00pm) on Thursday, August 28.

At this year's APSA, the section will be also organizing and co-organizing its usual broad range of activities. These include two short courses (see page 38), the Methods Café (see page 40), and a working group (“Methodology: New Perspectives on Qualitative and Quantitative Tools”).

I also want to thank all of those who served this past year on the nominating committee, the executive committee, and our book, article and paper awards committees. Most of all, I want to thank Jim Mahoney (the departing president), Colin Elman (the current secretary-treasurer), and Gary Goertz (the current newsletter editor). Thanks largely to Jim, Colin, and Gary, the section continues to thrive. Indeed, we are one of the largest sections of the American Political Science Association, with approximately 1,000 members.

Next year, the annual Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research will move from Arizona State University to its new home at Syracuse University, where it will be co-hosted by the Moynihan Institute of Global Affairs in the Maxwell School. Respecting the force of climate, the date of the next institute will be moved from its habitual January slot to summer 2009 (see page 38).

As a final note, I want to reiterate my commitment to methodological and epistemological diversity across the manifold

activities of the section. As I see it, the job of this section is to represent a broad range of methodologically relevant perspectives and to do so in a productive fashion—so that contending ideas meet one another in specific terms, rather than simply restate philosophical positions, engage in abstract labeling exercises (“positivist,” “interpretivist,” et al.), or ad hominem attacks. Speaking for the section (at least to the extent that I am entitled to do so), let me say that we really don’t care about the views of your pastor, or whether you were greeted with sniper fire at last year’s convention. We do, however, care about including your views on social science methodology in the

section’s activities.

A broad view of methodology is essential to the conduct of a professional body whose purposes include facilitating debate, encouraging the development of new methods, and helping to disseminate them. This commitment to diversity is reflected in the section’s recent name-change—from “Qualitative Methods” to “Qualitative and Multi-Method Research.” Although something of a mouthful, the new label is more capacious, as well as more in keeping with the actual diversity of methods and methodological perspectives that we find among our current membership. Well worth the extra syllables!

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## Symposium: Historical Causation

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### *Causation in Time*

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Social processes are rarely instantaneous. *Periodization*—specifying the beginning and ending of the temporal context within which a causal process plays out—is essential for a great many of the political processes that we study. Historically oriented political science research, in particular, is notable for its theoretically based expectation that various aspects of the temporal context matter for explaining outcomes. If comparative historical research is insufficiently attentive to the methodological importance of specifying completely the temporal context within which causal mechanisms work, then we can be sure that fault plagues other modes of political analysis, as well. We consider here some of the pitfalls inherent to the standard periodization techniques utilized by even those researchers most sensitive to temporal context.

As Pierson (2004) notes, a variety of aspects of time may be relevant to political explanation—not least because of the way they affect the functioning of causal mechanisms. Sequencing—*when things happen*—, either in world-historical time (Wallerstein 1974), in relation to signal events in political development like the development of working-class parties, or in relation to more contingent events or processes closer at hand (e.g., the availability of certain policy models), may affect how and whether a specific mechanism works. Falleti (2005), for example, shows that if a process of decentralization *begins* with what she terms “political,” rather than “administrative,” decentralization, the process will likely activate a policy-ratchet mechanism—the creation of a group of subnational supporters—that will affect the second round of decentralization reforms and lead to an increase in the amount of power transferred to subnational officials. The policy-ratchet mechanism is typically absent, however, if political decentralization occurs *after* administrative decentralization, a sequence that re-

sults in a lower degree of autonomy for subnational authorities. In this example, the sequencing of different types of decentralization policies affects which causal mechanisms come into play and its effect on the outcome of interest.

Tempo and duration—*how long things take*—may also suggest a likely set of plausible mechanisms. Outcomes that come about slowly, gradually, or after a long lag are likely to be produced by different kinds of mechanisms (policy drift, increasing returns) from those that produce outcomes that occur swiftly or suddenly (tipping points, rational choice) (see Pierson 2004, Chapter 3). Indeed, those political scientists who focus on *longue durée* processes have tended to emphasize structuralist, systems-oriented, and/or macro-social causal mechanisms, while scholars interested in the consequences of shorter-term processes often are more attuned to mechanisms posited at the level of individuals or collectivities of individuals.

In this essay, however, our focus is on a third aspect of temporality: *when things start*. Starting points have had particular relevance for historical institutionalist analysis because the notion of path dependence, which is at the center of many such analyses, relies on a well-specified starting point. Historical institutionalist scholars typically use starting points and critical junctures to delineate one context, “before,” in which a mechanism does not function, from a second context, “after,” in which it does function. We argue, however, that the act of periodizing as a way of marking shifts in context is often insufficiently theorized in historically oriented research, and runs into particular difficulties when confronted with causal mechanisms that operate at the aggregate- or structural-level rather than at the individual level.

### **Context and Periodization**

In our previous collaborative work, we define causal mechanisms as *relatively abstract concepts denoting processes that can travel* from one specific instance or “episode” (Tilly 2001: 26) of causation to another, *and that explain how a hypothesized cause creates a particular outcome in a given context*. In turn, we define context as *the relevant aspects of a setting* (temporal, spatial, institutional, or analytical) *in which an array of initial conditions leads to an outcome of a defined scope and meaning via a specified causal mechanism*