

# Qualitative Methods

Newsletter of the  
American Political Science Association  
Organized Section on Qualitative Methods

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### Letter from the Editor

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In the Fall of 2002, APSA created its 37<sup>th</sup> Organized Section, devoted to the study, development, and dissemination of qualitative methods. Since that time, I have served as the editor of this newsletter. My job, as I saw it, was to bring to the attention of our members the most interesting, innovative, and (it follows) contentious issues in the field of political methodology, regardless of whether they might be categorized conventionally as 'qualitative' or 'quantitative.' (Issues of import solely to quantitative work have been deferred to the Political Methodology section—no need to duplicate effort.) With that caveat, the mission of the newsletter was interpreted broadly to include all methodological issues of relevance to the study of politics. Symposia have ranged from broad philosophy-of-science issues to narrower debates about technique. For the most part, these topics have been chosen in response to ideas from our members and as extensions of APSA panels and roundtables. Usually, the management of a symposium was delegated to the person taking the initiative to organize a discussion on that topic.

As editor I took a *laissez-faire* approach to the newsletter, asking authors to follow only a few stylistic and substantive guidelines: contributions should be short, accessible to a broad readership, written with some flair, and encompassing a range of viewpoints on the chosen subject. The aim, while retaining some of the intellectual rigor associated with more traditional academic journals, was to give writers scope to opine—that is, to use the first-person pronoun and to adopt a more discursive manner than would be usual in a more formal academic venue. In this manner, I hoped to reproduce the lively and candid views exchanged with each other in emails and over cups of joe. "What do you really (in your heart of hearts) think of X?" This is the sort of conversation that I wanted to foster.

During the last three years, the newsletter has covered a lot of ground. In Spring 2003, we ran a symposium on teaching qualitative methods, which featured a comprehensive review of textbooks and discussions of courses and various approaches to the subject. In Fall 2003, our symposium addressed the knotty issue of "interpretivism," with contributions from several scholars, including Clifford Geertz. In Spring

2004, we ran two symposia, the first on techniques of field research and the second on content and discourse analysis. In Fall 2004, we tackled Charles Ragin's complex and innovative technique of Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), and its recent variants. In Spring of last year we ran symposia on the qualitative/quantitative distinction (with contributions from both sides of the divide), and on the use of necessary-condition causal propositions. This past Fall we featured a discussion of where new hypotheses originate, by Richard Snyder, along with two symposia, one focused on Ian Shapiro's *The Flight from Reality in the Human Sciences*, and the second devoted to the subject of concept formation in the social sciences.

Every year we take notice of recent methodological publications that may be of interest to our readers. (For the reasons mentioned above, we don't cover work that is narrowly tailored to statistical analysis.) The *Book Notes* and *Article Notes* features are intended to list work that either has an explicit methodological focus or uses an innovative technique to good effect. If you know of a book or article published since 2000 that has not already appeared in these pages—and has a strong methodological theme or innovation—do let us know. (Self-nominations are encouraged!)

In this issue, we are fortunate to be able to feature two roundtables focused on the work of scholars who have had

enormous influence on the discipline. The first examines the career of David Laitin, whose work incorporates ethnography and rational choice—methods often deemed to be antithetical—and the second solicits comments on the recent landmark publication by Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development* (MIT Press, 2005).

The following issue (Fall 2006) will begin the tenure of a new editor, whom I am delighted to introduce. Gary Goertz has written widely on international relations and on methodological issues and teaches regularly at IQRM, the winter graduate training institute at Arizona State University. Having engaged with both quantitative and qualitative methodological issues, he is well positioned to foster a productive debate among scholars who utilize diverse approaches to the study of politics. I know that Gary is looking forward to engaging with the QualMeth community and wishes to hear your ideas on how to maintain the newsletter as a vital part of our research community. Please join me in welcoming Gary, and please accept my thanks for your participation in the newsletter's ongoing activities. Finally, let me take this opportunity to thank Joshua Yesnowitz, who has served as our assistant editor for the past several years and will continue under Gary's tenure. Josh has done a superb job of keeping track of the details and putting everything together. We are grateful for his stewardship.

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## Symposium: Ethnography Meets Rational Choice: David Laitin, For Example

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### *Introduction*

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One of the more encouraging developments in political science over the last few years has been the appearance of work that is self-consciously multi-methodological. An increasing number of dissertations and publications combine formal models with statistical analysis of large-n data sets and comparative case studies.

Less evident are efforts to combine ethnography, or the recovery of the intersubjective world of actors themselves, with more mainstream traditional or formal methods. David Laitin is one of the rare scholars who has engaged in serious ethnography (*Hegemony and Culture*), combined ethnography with other methods (*Identity in Formation*), and applied rational choice techniques, with James Fearon, to issues of identity. ("Explaining Interethnic Cooperation") His work provides the opportunity for this symposium.

Each of the authors has critically engaged Laitin's work, with an eye toward assessing the merits and possibilities of combining serious ethnographic scholarship with rational choice. While conclusions are best left to readers themselves, it is fair to say that the authors share concerns with how eth-

nographic sensitivity to contextual realities can be squared with the a priori simplifications necessitated by rational choice approaches. But, importantly, each of the authors also believes it is a combination well worth attempting.

Each of the papers in this symposium was originally presented as a Qualitative Methods Roundtable at the September 2005 American Political Science Association meetings in Washington. David Laitin's responses to these papers concludes this symposium, but begins a long, continuing conversation with his many critical admirers.

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### *Theory, Data, and Formulation: The Unusual Case of David Laitin*

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In two influential articles David Laitin laid out a tripartite method for comparative politics and for social science more generally (Laitin 2002, 2003). The three methods that Laitin advocated were Formal Theory, Quantitative Analysis, and Narrative. In this paper I take issue with Laitin's categorization scheme for the methods, and I consider the criteria and constraints on choosing methods.