Jessica Fortin-Rittberger & Berthold Rittberger

A guide to writing a thesis proposal in political science

What's the point of a research proposal?

This is a short guide to help you through the process of writing a thesis proposal in political science. This guide is intended to be general so that it can be adapted to many types of proposals, i.e., BA and MA theses, but also for a doctoral dissertation (but here a bit more is involved).

The purpose of research proposals is to show your supervisor(s) that you have a feasible pathway to go about your research. It is a blueprint for what you are about to do in the longer version of the thesis/paper/assignment. A strong research proposal requires you to formulate a relevant research question, formulate preliminary hypotheses, to have conducted some preliminary research, to lay out the research methods you will use to answer your research question, and advance some provisional arguments for what you expect to find.

In essence the proposal is your own action plan, so you want this plan to be as detailed as possible. The more thought you give to your proposal, the less likely it is that your research project will derail later down the road. These are some common problems that can arise when your research proposal is half-baked:

- You find out that someone else has already answered your research question. This makes your research muss less relevant and worthwhile.
- You realize that there are serious feasibility problems: For instance, the scope of your thesis is too broad; the data you need to answer your research problem is unavailable; or the method you need to answer your research questions requires training that you do not have.

The three key objectives of a research proposal are thus as follows:

- Objective 1: Convince your reader your research is interesting/worthwhile.
- Objective 2: Convince your reader your research is sound/feasible.
- Objective 3: Provide a detailed outline of what you need to do in the actual research. A good proposal will be your plan for the weeks/months ahead of you that details all you need to do.

What's in a research proposal?

I.   Title.

At this point, this can be provisional, but you should try.

II.   Problem statement.

This is the introduction to your research proposal. And it is the most important but also the most difficult part of the proposal, because it forces you to present your research in a condensed manner. This will be the part of your proposal you will rewrite most often, because you will become more knowledgeable about your research problem as you start working on the proposal. Think about it as an extended abstract and a succinct road map that will guide you and your research for the coming weeks, months, and – in the case of a PhD – years.

In the problem statement you introduce your topic and the research problem you have identified and wish to explore in your research. The proposal should begin with a brief explanation of the problem you are interested in and its significance for the field. Think about the problem statement as a set of three questions that you need to be able to answer: What, why and how?

<u>What</u> are you going to do?

- First, you need to formulate a research question. Make sure it is **specific** and not too broad (we have never encountered a research proposal where the initial research question was too narrow). The question "why did Brexit happen?" may not sound overly broad, but it actually is (much) too broad, because it actually contains a myriad of questions: What explains the referendum outcome? How successful were the pro-EU and Leave campaigns in mobilizing voters? What explains the timing and decision to call a referendum in the first place? What explains the specific type of Brexit "hard" or "soft" Brexit) that was negotiated between the UK and the EU? By breaking down the "Brexit question" into smaller components, you do something very important: You specify the boundaries of the research so that it is clear what is being included and what will be left out.
- Secondly, every research problem speaks to a broader issue. Brexit can be many things: It's a referendum, it's a case of EU-disintegration, it's a case of populist politics, it's even a case of international negotiations, etc. In other words: You need to ask yourself **what is this a case of?** If I'm interested in the outcome of the Brexit vote, Brexit is a case of voting behavior in referendums. If I'm interested in the kind of Brexit the UK and EU have negotiated, Brexit is a case of international negotiations. Only if you can gauge what your problem is in more abstract terms (what is my case a case of?) will you be able to identify the relevant scholarly debates and tools (theories, methods) that you need to go about answer your question.

<u>Why</u> are you doing it?

- Formulate a statement on why it is important that your research problem should be addressed: What is the rationale that explains why this research problem is of interest? Most thesis proposals are inspired by some pressing real world problem, so that the relevance question appears to be all too easily answered: There is always a rationale why an issue is of **societal and/or political relevance**. It is harder to explain why a research problem has **academic relevance**. This requires that you have some knowledge about the relevant literature in your field of research (see 3. below). You need to be able to answer the question what exactly your research adds to what we

already know about the research problem you want to study. Do you look at some aspect of the political world that no one has looked at before? Do bring in an argument that has not be made in this context? Or do you even address a problem that is "puzzling", because existing theories cannot make heads or tails of it?

<u>How</u> are you going to do it?

- You need to demonstrate that you have thought about how you want to answer your research question. Your problem statement should thus contain information on the following: First, what body of **theory** do you use to answer your research question? Can you even think about some concrete hypotheses our causal mechanisms that can shed light on your research problem? The key here is to avoid overly general theories (e.g. rationalism, constructivism, behavioralism, etc.), but to identify the kind of domain-specific theories that allow you to derive concrete expectations about your research problem (if you are interested in the Brexit vote, you should consult theories about voting behavior!). Second, you should also say something about your research strategy: What kind of data will you need to collect to answer your research question? Which method is the most promising to analyze your data?

III.   Literature review.

There are many myths revolving around the concept of a literature review or "state of the art", as one can also refer to it. Rest assured, in the literature review it is much less important that you demonstrate mastery of all of the literature there is on your topic. What counts is that you can show that you have identified the **relevant debates** in the literature that you need to (a) put your research problem in context and (b) to answer your research question. As a very clever colleague once said: Think about the "state of the art" as your best friend (rather than your in-laws).

The literature review thus helps you to **contextualize** your research problem and substantiate on the **scientific relevance** of your research problem:

- It tells you what we already know about your research problem? A lot? Little? New topic? Old topic?
- It tells you if there are different viewpoints/debates on your research question and what they are about (e.g. theory, empirical scope, methods, analysis).
- It tells you if there are gaps in this literature and which questions remain unanswered.

In short, the literature review is the basic pillar that sets the stage for your thesis. If everything has already been done, why do you need to research your topic? And don't forget that one key assessment for theses is your research effort and ability. Supervisors will see very quickly the amount of effort you are investing (or not) here!

Since literature on every conceivable topic tends to be abundant (think: what is my case a case of?), where do you best start? Focus on scholarly (i.e. peer reviewed) sources: journals that are peer-reviewed and books from university presses or other important academic publishers (e.g. Springer, Routledge). Use Google Scholar to identify key articles (check how often they are

cited relative to other articles in your field). Work yourself through the bibliographies of the most important pieces you find. Make sure you look at recent citations as well, so you know what new research is coming out. Consult publications that provide overviews of the literature in specific areas of research. For instance, Oxford University Press publishes handbooks on every conceivable topic. It also publishes an online encyclopedia – the Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics – that offers state of art discussions of a multitude of topics. The Annual Review of Political Science is also an amazing source to get a grasp of the "state of the art" on relevant themes and questions.

IV.   Explanatory strategy.

How will you go about answering your research question? You will need an explanatory strategy as well as an empirical strategy. Let's begin with the explanatory strategy. To have an explanatory strategy implies that you have a clear idea about the theory/theories and hypotheses you intend to use to answer your research question.

Finding the "right" theory or theories is not always easy, but it gets much more straightforward if you have a concrete research question (you see, everything is connected). If you can answer the question "what is my case a case of?" (see "problem statement") you will also be able to identify appropriate theories with relative ease, because you know the **domain** to which they pertain. If I want to study Brexit as a case of EU disintegration, I will consult those theories that have something to say about EU integration and disintegration (rather than more general theories about international cooperation and conflict, such as realism). Also be aware that you choose theories that are pitched at the right **level of analysis**: If you want to study individual voting behaviour in the context of the Brexit referendum, you need theories that explain *individual* voting behaviour and not theories that explain, say, cross-national differences in how people vote.

If you have identified the relevant theory or theories, the next step is to think about hypotheses, stipulations of cause-effect relationships between an independent and a dependent variable. Every hypothesis you state must be embedded in a theory – hypotheses do not simply drop out of thin air. Hence, make sure you state the theoretical framework that surrounds your hypotheses. This is literally the meat that connects your variables, therefore a crucial part.

Also be aware that your theory of choice may not be the only one that can potentially explain the phenomenon you are interested in. One of the most common questions that you will hear from every supervisor or reviewer at some point is: What about **alternative explanations**? If you have done your research (see "literature review"), you will be aware of possible alternative explanations and can integrate them in your explanatory strategy (e.g. by controlling for them). You see, everything is connected with everything (it's repetitive, I know).

V.   Empirical strategy.

In this section you will develop your thoughts on how you will investigate your research question, i.e. you will present your research design and methodology.

The proposal is supposed to inform your supervisors about the feasibility of what you are about to research. To this end, you need to expand on what you intend to do in the thesis, namely, what kind of research design do you think you need to answer your research question.

- Do you intend to study one case, few cases, many cases? What does this imply for the method you intend to use, e.g. case study approach, the comparative method, statistical methods.
- What kind of cases will you draw on? A single country, institution, etc.? Many countries, institutions, etc.? One snapshot in time? A longitudinal design that involves many years?
- What are your main units of analysis? Are you planning on studying countries, institutions, parties, individuals? What makes sense considering your hypotheses?
- How do you intend to operationalize your dependent and independent variables?
- What data do you need? Does it exist? Do you have access? Do you have to generate the data yourself? Do you need a survey? Do you need an experiment? Do you need an archive?

VI.   Bibliography.

Write your proposal like you would write an academic paper, which means that you must refer to the relevant literature in the text and list it in a bibliography. You may use any format, as long as you use it consistently and it is recognized. Make sure you have identified the relevant literature (see "literature review"). Links to obscure websites and publications that are not widely cited (unless they are very recent) should be avoided. Start using a citation software (Citavi, Endnote, etc.) to organize your bibliography.

VII.   Schedule.

Provide a detailed chapter-by-chapter schedule, indicating in chronological order, the length of time required for each major task involved in researching and writing (per chapter). Do not underestimate the time you need for data collection, data analysis, and writing up your findings. Make sure you begin the actual (empirical) analysis early. You can easily get bogged down with literature review, theory and concepts, leaving you insufficient time for your analysis. This must not happen! Don't plan to submit on the last day, give yourself a buffer.