

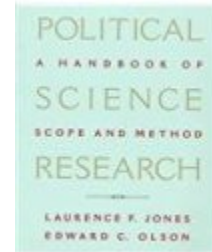
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Laurence F. Jones, Edward C. Olsen. *Political Science Research: A Handbook of Scope and Method*. New York: HarperCollins, 1996. xii + 433 pp. \$39.83 (paper), ISBN 978-0-06-501637-6.

Reviewed by Brian S. Vargus (Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis)
Published on H-Pol (February, 1997)



Not Just Another Methods Book

This is a research methods text with a twist. It is designed to provide political science students and public administration students with an introduction to the field in which they will do research. Thus, instead of the commonplace approach with descriptions of methods, formulae, and patterns of analysis, this textbook contains a brief, but relatively thorough, background to the subject matter in various subfields of political science. In turn, it purports to build upon that introduction to show students—second- or third-year majors in political science—the “scope” of political science and its research methods and to engage the student in “doing” some political research. The goals are worthy ones, and I must confess that the authors’ preface made me hopeful that I, as they, would finally have a methods book that did what students seem to need. The book succeeds more than it fails, though it is still not the perfect book. But then, find a textbook that is!

The chapters tell the story here, and they also show the results of the authors’ tough choices. They chose, quite consciously, to begin with a chapter that outlines research methods with a conscious link to political science problems. They discuss, thoroughly, the advantages and disadvantages of scientific knowledge and obstacles to it. With ample exercises at the end of this chapter and subsequent ones, they attempt to involve the reader/student in linking political science with the methods and actually doing a “systematic research” project. The second chapter, which might be combined in some ways with the first in classroom presentations, places the student in front of the “choice problem”—what to research

and why. This is an excellent chapter and gets most students, with ample lecture/discussion work, to the beginning of the research task. Chapter 3 introduces the reader to the problems and resources for a literature review. It is weak on Web/electronic sources, but it gets the main idea across, has ample lists of printed sources for the student to consult, and shows an admirable outline to prepare the literature review or bibliography.

Part Two of the book spends considerable time on “The Scope of Political Science.” It is basically a selective review of the discipline, and it is good for what it is aiming to accomplish. The authors announce their objective here as steering a reader/student to a research topic. The four “specialty” chapters—American politics, public administration/policy, comparative politics, and international relations—are selective, and the authors acknowledge that choice. Chapter 4, on the other hand, is a relatively unique attempt to discuss the political world and to introduce ideas such as concepts and variables, though not in those terms. This chapter might have served its purpose better at the beginning of the book, as chapter 1, but that choice is one of the several tough ones made by the authors. It works in both places, and an instructor could move it easily without destroying continuity of the course. Chapters 5 through 8 describe each of the subfields. Each contains research examples—some better than others—and each has exercises that could serve to move a student relatively rapidly to a research choice. This is a valuable and unique strength of the book. It sets the context well enough that students may actually understand that research is part of political science and

not a required course that is not “applicable.” The choices made by the authors were difficult ones, but most of the time they seem good ones. The chapter on comparative politics seems a bit heavy on theory, but redeems itself with excellent research examples and “hypothesizes.”

It is with Part Three, and after 181 pages, that we get to the implementation of research methods. The section is a discussion—organized in rather common units—of basic elements of political science research. Each of the seven chapters in this part of the book has clear and stated objectives and decent to excellent exercises for students. Some of the chapters require more “political” examples of the ideas, though all do well. The measurement chapter is the strongest, while those on bivariate analysis and multivariate analysis may be too complex for any but the best of undergraduates. The research design chapter seems a bit “theoretical” and without sufficient examples, but the data collection chapter does an excellent job of integrating sampling as a meaningful subject into the research process. Again, these are choices the authors have made. The univariate analysis chapter is very strong, and probably as far as many students can go in this subject/course. It has excellent student exercises. The bivariate and multivariate chapters—14 and 15—are quite complex for the level indicated and many students will be lost. However, an instructor who uses a more hands-on teaching style in class, with lots of lab time and consultation, will get the points over to students who are analyzing data and facing the problems described.

The final chapter—“Putting It All Together”—gets to both writing the research report and drawing implications from it. It is a strong chapter and the authors make no apologies for taking a student through a rigorous process. My only quarrel here is that, without am-

ple teacher-student introduction, few students will have stuck with the text. The first appendix, which should be used early in the course, shows two well-presented examples of research projects.

There are many textbooks in “research methods.” Few do as good a job as this one does in making a comprehensive but strong connection between the field and doing research. In that sense, it is a superior textbook. Its weaknesses are those of chapter organization—those authors’ choices that are difficult to make—and the technical nature of some of the later chapters. In many cases two or three simple examples would have made the chapters stronger, but that is not the book the authors chose to write and they should not be criticized for this ambitious set of choices.

This is a text that will be very good for motivated students and instructors. It will require instructors to spend considerable time in one-to-one interaction with students if it is to succeed. This is not a book for remedial students. Thus, I recommend it to all research methods instructors who have students, rather than “attendees.” Of the several choices available, this is one of the best for that audience. I would use this book with third- or fourth-year undergraduates with good reading and study skills. If my course has students without strong backgrounds in analytical thinking, I will lose most in the first few weeks of a semester. For those who prefer rigor to spoon-feeding, this may be a laudable goal. In summary, a good book for teachers and students who want to do research.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-pol>

Citation: Brian S. Vargus. Review of Jones, Laurence F.; Olsen, Edward C., *Political Science Research: A Handbook of Scope and Method*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. February, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=814>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.