

Politics research and study skills: Public attitudes to income inequality

About the course unit

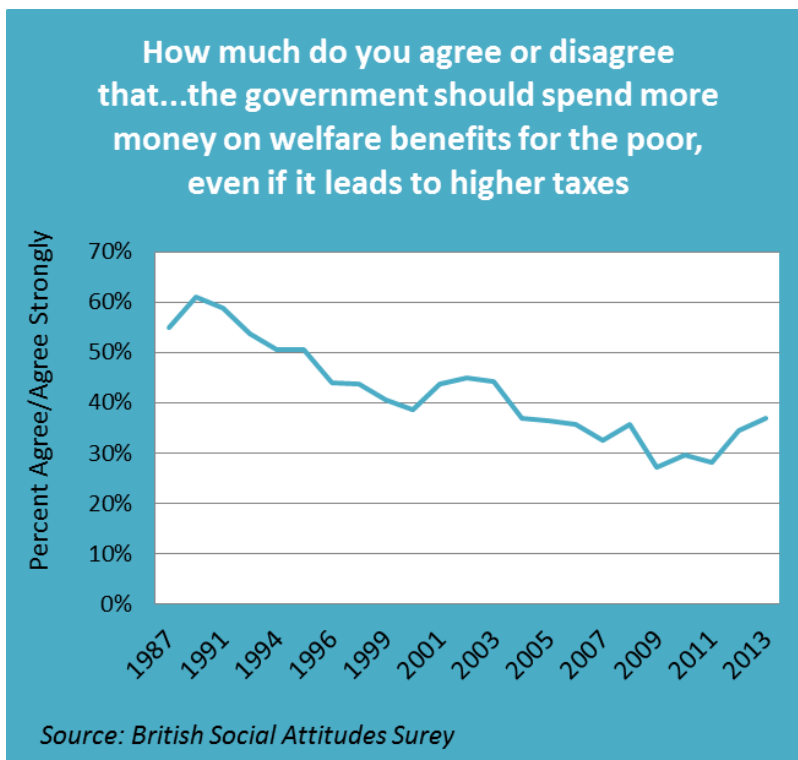
Research and Study Skills is a compulsory Year 1 course unit in Politics at The University of Manchester with about 70 students. The aim of the unit is to assist students with the transition to university-level study and research by developing crucial study and learning skills.

Each year, students devise a group research project in relation to a specified theme, which, in the year we developed the materials, was 'Public attitudes to income inequality and policies to tackle inequality'. Students are then assessed through a group report and individual essay discussing the research and its implications.

Working with the course unit convenor, Dr Liz Richardson, we worked on materials to introduce students to quantitative data and research methods. To feed into the assessment, the learning outcomes and activities were tailored to support students find, analyse and interpret relevant survey data on public attitudes.

A survey to make students part of the dataset

To get students thinking about how we can measure public attitudes, we started with a simple survey, which we ran through Blackboard. Using questions from the British Social Attitudes (BSA)



survey, our aims were to help students understand how data can be generated by creating data directly relevant to them.

Combining the student data with data from the BSA for the British public makes students 'part of the dataset' and provides interesting material for use in both a lecture and practical workshop.

Lecture

The lecture introduces the social survey as an important source of data and discusses key ideas in survey research such as sampling and question design. To support the discussion, the lecture uses both the student and BSA data.

Figure 1 Survey data shows changing public attitudes towards the role of government in addressing inequality

First, students see some results from the student survey, plus details of the response rate, and then how the class data compares to data for the British public. This exercise can highlight how, in terms of social attitudes, the class is unrepresentative of the wider British public. This insight supports learning about sampling and representative samples. Moreover, the data prompts students to consider the reasons for attitudinal differences within a society.

Further data from the BSA is then used also highlight how we use survey data to compare population sub-groups and to examine trends over time.

The practical workshop

The practical workshop builds on the lecture but the focus is on getting students to source and interpret data from a national social survey.

In the workshop, students use an online tool for exploring data from the BSA, the British Social Attitudes Information System (www.britsocat.com), to complete two core tasks.

1. The first task is finish comparing the class and the wider British public, by sourcing the remaining national level data. This task gets students familiar with navigating the website and reading data.
2. Student then examine how attitudes to inequality in Britain vary across social groups. Using a simple interface, they can crosstab the attitudinal variables with a predefined choice of demographic variables. Students choose which variables and indicate the pattern they expect to find.

Discussions in the practical workshop help students develop research questions for their project work. Plus, a final part of the workshop, usually completed in personal study time, is for the students to continue to search the BSA archive data for relevant to their group research project.

Formal link to assessment

The course unit includes a formal link between the workshop and assessment with students needing to include data on public attitudes within their group report. There was excellent attendance at the workshop and most students successfully included data in their assessed projects. Some projects effectively used statistical data to underpin and strengthen the qualitative research, with these students going on to receive some of the highest grades.

Learning outcomes

The lecture and tutorial support multiple learning outcomes such as students

- Evaluating the benefits and challenges of secondary survey data
- Learning about sampling
- Understanding and interpreting cross-tabulations and percentage based data.
- Actively using survey data to examine differences in public attitudes between groups and over time.
- Developing arguments
- Developing skills in data interpretation and presentation to support the use of data in independent work.

A change of topic

The structure of this course unit means the topic changes each year. Usefully, the BSA provides data on public attitudes for a wide range of key social issues and therefore the workshop can be easily adapted for other topics.

We have also made use of another, related, online interface when the course theme was Civic Participation. The organisation of the survey, lecture and workshop remained the same except we used a similar interface for the British Election Studies.

CCESD Information Systems

The British Social Attitudes Information System and the British Election Studies Information System are on-line facilities created and maintained by Centre for Comparative European Survey Data (CCESD). There is also the CCESD Information System (CCESD-IS) which provides facilities for analysis of major European social surveys.

We have found these online facilities work well in the practical workshop. The registration process is both simple and quick, with many students completing it prior to the class. We have had no difficulties getting 40 plus students to register and use the site. Students find the websites straightforward to use and within the 40-50 minute workshops are confidently producing outputs.

See the list of resources below for further details.

Resources

- Lecture slides (Powerpoint)
- Student Handouts: Attitudes towards inequality (Word) and Civic Participation (Word)
- Websites provided by the Centre for Comparative European Survey Data (CCESD).
 - CCESD Information System <http://www.ccesd.ac.uk/Home>
 - British Social Attitudes Information System <http://www.britisocat.com>
 - British Election Studies Information System <http://www.besis.org/>

About this resource

'Politics research and study skills: Public Attitudes towards Income Inequality' was developed by the ESSTED team in collaboration with Dr Liz Richardson, the convenor of the Research and Study Skills in Politics at the University of Manchester.

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