

Process Tracing Methods

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Course outline

This short course on Process Tracing aims to give the participant an understanding of the foundations of Process Tracing methods. The promise of process-tracing as a methodological tool is that it enables the researcher to study more-or-less directly the *causal mechanism(s)* linking an independent variable (or set of variables) and an outcome, allowing us to open up the ‘black box’ of causality itself. Within political science methodology, Process Tracing is arguably the only method that allows us to study causal mechanisms, allowing us to understand *how* an X (or set of X’s) produces Y instead of simply studying correlations and associations, and therefore is an ‘...invaluable method that should be included in every researcher’s repertoire.’ (George and Bennett 2005:224).

The course starts by differentiating Process Tracing from other methods; including both large-n quantitative, frequentist methods, but also other small-n methods such as analytical narratives, comparative case studies, congruence etc. Here we define Process Tracing by the interest in studying causal mechanisms in single case studies. We discuss the three overall variants of Process Tracing designs: theory-testing, theory-building, and explaining outcome PT and provides examples of the use of the different methods.

The short course also provides insights into the recent debate of the role of causal mechanism in political science. Topics include how we should understand causal mechanisms (as intervening variables or systems) and how they can be conceptualized.

Conceptualization deals with translating a causal theory into a theorized causal mechanism that can explain how X produces Y. We then turn our attention to how we would focus on the questions of case selection and mixed-methods research. In what research situations can Process Tracing methods be fruitfully employed? When it is inappropriate to use Process Tracing? How can Process Tracing studies be combined in mixed-methods research designs? The course gives an introduction to the underlying logic of inference that

underpins Process Tracing, namely the Bayesian logic that contrast it with both the frequentist/statistical and comparative logics of inference. The course then turns to the more practical, how-to aspects of Process Tracing, where we will work on translating an abstract theorized causal mechanism into a set of observable implications that can be empirically assessed. We will address the practical challenges relating to gathering and working with different types of evidence in Process Tracing scholarship. We focus upon archival material, elite interviews, and secondary historical sources. This includes questions such as how should we evaluate bias, what is a ‘good’ source, and how we deal with bias in secondary historical work.

Readings

Derek Beach and Rasmus Brun Pedersen (2013) *Process Tracing: Foundations and Guidelines*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Short Bio

Rasmus Pedersen is an Associate Professor at the University of Aarhus. His research areas include Foreign Policy, European Integration and Qualitative Methods development. He has taught numerous classes on Qualitative methodology on BA, MA and PhD-level. He has also been instructor on classes on Process tracing at the ECPR Summer School from 2011-2015. He has published several research articles, books and book chapters. He has co-authored a book on Process Tracing methodology and another on Causal Case studies that will be published in 2016 both on the University of Michigan Press.