Research Methods in Political Science and International Relations
Final Exam: Research Design Essay

As noted in your syllabus, your final exam period will include two components. The first will be a Unit 3 test, similar in design to your earlier unit exams.

The second will be a research design essay, written during the final hour of the exam period. This essay will assess your understanding of the main concepts of research design and how those concepts are appropriately applied in survey-based research.

Preparing to write the long essay:
To complete the essay, you will need **to identify in advance a research question that fits within your major (Political Science or International Relations) and can be answered by analyzing data from the 2024 American Values Survey**, fielded by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI).

You can download the dataset and questionnaire directly from PRRI or from the course website, where an SPSS-formatted version is available.

Your research question should focus on why some Americans think or behave in a particular way that is measured by the 2024 Values Survey while others do not. The survey item(s) that you use to answer your question will serve as your dependent variable(s). Do not have more than three dependent variables unless you combine items into some type of linear index measure. You will also need to identify one or more independent variables from the same survey and propose hypotheses that logically connect those independent variables to your dependent variable(s).

You are welcome—but not required—to discuss an intervening variable, meaning a factor that you think may mediate the relationship between your independent and dependent variables.

All of your variables must be either dummy or interval variables (you may need to describe how you would recode some variables if they are not originally in one of these two formats).

To prepare to write a strong research design essay, you will need to **use Google Scholar and, perhaps, Consensus.ai to review what other scholars have written about your topic (or closely related areas). The expectation is that you will identify and read at least *three* research papers** that are related to the topic area you are looking at. This background research will help you choose appropriate independent variables, define your key concepts, and develop theoretically grounded hypotheses.

Important: This is _not_ a research paper where you should plan on days of research and planning. This assignment assumes that you will spend a couple of hours in total:

(1) identifying a good research question and potential independent variables in the dataset and topline questionnaire (because some questions are truncated in the dataset),

(2) doing some preliminary research on Google Scholar and with Concensus.ai, and

(3) going back to the dataset to identify obvious control variables, which are factors that might explain variation on your dependent variable that might otherwise be inaccurately attributed to your independent variable(s). Note that demographic variables are in the dataset, but not listed in the topline questionnaire.

The main idea here is for you to take the first steps of a research project and to apply the basics of what you learned up through week 12 or so of the semester.

What needs to go into the essay?
Your essay will have three sections, and you should plan to spend about 20 minutes writing each one.

1. *An introduction*
   In this section, identify your empirical research question and explain why it is interesting or important. As you will see in your background research, most scholars introduce their topic by showing why it matters more broadly and by explaining how similar questions have been addressed in previous research.

2. *A theoretical framework and literature discussion*
   A theory does not need to be a formal, already-named set of concepts and ideas. Instead, use this section to identify and explain the main concepts in your study and to summarize what we already know about your topic based on prior studies. Use those studies in combination with logic to explain why and how you think your independent variables should be connected to your dependent variable. Keep this section tightly focused: everything discussed here should connect directly to the hypotheses and variables you will describe in more detail in the next section. Avoid going into detail about control variables or other issues in this section that are not part of your main theoretical argument.

3. *Operationalization and research design*
   Here you will describe how you would implement your proposed study using the PRRI dataset. Be sure to clearly state your hypotheses and briefly explain how they follow from your theoretical discussion. Describe how you would need to recode or construct each of your independent and dependent variables. Identify the control variables you would include and explain why they are important for isolating the effects of your independent variable(s). As we have practiced in class, all of these variables should be coded as dummy or interval variables so that you could use regression analyses to test your hypotheses while controlling for other potential explanations.

Expectations, resources, and assessment:
A good model for the kind of essay you are aiming for appears in Chapter 7 of the Forestiere textbook, which summarizes work by Besir Ceka and Pedro Magalhães. Their study includes an intervening variable (information about each respondent's national economic and political context), but your project does not need to include one. For a longer-length samples of this kind of writing, look at any of the research articles you have been asked to read this semester, reading from the article's introduction through the section on data and research methods.

Important: you need to do almost no SPSS datawork ahead of writing this essay. The only required SPSS work that you need to do is to r**un a codebook command for the dependent and independent variables** in your research design to give you some idea about the best way a research would recode those variables in a study (you do NOT need to actually recode or create any variables). The point here is to show that you capable of doing all of the preparation that would be required to execute your study if you had the interest and time. If you are curious about whether there is potentially some relationship between your independent and dependent variables, you can quickly explore the data by splitting your dataset by one independent variable at a time and running a frequency on your dependent variable; however, this is not required.

To help you stay organized, **you may bring one 3x5" notecard (writing/typing permitted on both sides).** The notecard should include an outline of your essay and any information you want to remember to include.

You will also need to submit a properly formatted bibliography, prepared in advance, listing the journal articles or other scholarly sources you consulted. The quality of your background research will be taken into consideration when assigning the content grade for your essay. You may consult the bibliography as you write the essay.

Your essay will be graded using the same criteria that I use short-answer questions on exams, with additional expectations for depth of analysis, organization, and use of evidence. The essay should correctly and systematically apply the terminology of political science methodology, demonstrate understanding of key research design concepts, draw meaningfully on at least three published studies on your topic, and show thoughtful organization and clear, logical writing.

There will be no deductions for spelling or grammar as long as your writing is clear and legible. However, since grades are due after you leave campus, please make sure your handwriting can be easily read.