Book Review: Political Science Research Methods: Exploring America at a Crossroads by Cal Clark

*With this textbook, **Cal Clark** aims to provide clear descriptions of the major statistical techniques used in political and social science research for undergraduate students. This is a rewarding read that flows coherently from concepts recognizable to most schoolchildren up to complex statistical techniques without losing its focus, finds **Nicholas Thomason**.*

Political Science Research Methods: Exploring America at a Crossroads. Cal Clark. World Scientific. October 2013.

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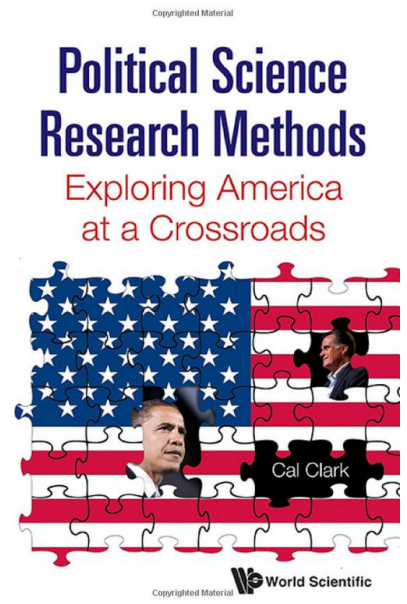
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"Political science research…is like piecing a jigsaw puzzle together. Pieces of information – statistical and non-statistical – must be assembled and interpreted both logically and creatively." So says the introduction to *Political Science Research Methods: Exploring America at a Crossroads* by Cal Clark, Professor of Political Science and the Director of the MPA Program at Auburn University.

So far so good, but what about the second part of the title: "Exploring America at a Crossroads"? For this the author turns to two seemingly simple, yet potentially puzzling questions: are Americans conservative or liberal in their political beliefs? And, how do economic and social outcomes in America compare to those in other developed democracies? Clark presents these questions within the contours of a broader societal transformation, arguing that present day America has reached a point politically where there has been a delayed realignment from the previous party systems of the 1960s-70s and economically whereby the economy is moving towards an information age and out of the previous paradigm of the industrial age.

By using these issues as a crux, the author seeks to describe both the tools of political science and to illustrate their use with meaningful statistical results – the premise being that students often grasp specific techniques more easily than they are able to interpret the output. The result is an excellent book, one that flows coherently from concepts recognizable to most schoolchildren up to complex statistical techniques without losing its focus.

This is best demonstrated early on when analysing some of the polling data used throughout the book. To get a sense of how conservative or liberal Americans are, questions from the National Election Study (NES) on how Americans rank themselves in terms of partisanship, ideology and issue positions can be represented in various types of frequency distribution tables. A simple snapshot of party identification in 2008 reveals Democrats to have a comfortable lead over their Republican rivals. Whilst this masks some significant changes over the earlier part of the century and a swing back to the Republicans after Obama's first election victory, reported partisanship amongst the population has generally been evenly balanced. Yet there is a seeming inconsistency when mapping partisanship to ideology. A comfortable majority of Americans identify themselves as ideologically conservative rather than as liberals – suggesting the traditional association between liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans to be overly simplistic. A more in-depth analysis of specific attitudes hints at some of the reasons for this. On government services such as education and social security, touchstone issues for most liberals and the bête-noir for many Republicans, the majority of Americans are all in favour of Uncle Sam's largesse. Yet on other economic issues, notably tax cuts, Americans are as equally enthusiastic as they are for more spending. The Bush tax cuts for example,

however economically or equitably questionable, were clearly a popular electoral strategy.

America at a Crossroads? Credit:

Highlighting such complexities is nothing new. Much has been written on the schizophrenic nature of American ideological and economic attitudes. The upshot for different politicians has been to give the public what they want: cut spending and triumph the role of a small government, all the while keeping in place the services Americans have become used to and are loath to give up. As the author succinctly puts it, this is a "tax-cut and spend' government policy, one paid for on a credit card with a repayment plan suitably far off in the future.

The primary focus here however is how these issues are brought to the fore. Sound data analysis techniques and various ways in which results are interpreted are as central to the text as the issues themselves. As the book progresses, these techniques and how they fit within the framework of political science research are nicely fleshed out and developed further. The author takes his time in the earlier chapters to introduce important research concepts such as reliability, validity, empirical theory, the nature of falsifiability and the role of statistical statements in political science. A nice chapter is dedicated to the different approaches to studying politics and how various methodological paradigms have dominated the field since the writings of Machiavelli, up to the present day emphasis on positivism and the centrality of the rational actor theory.

With some of the more basic tools introduced, the latter parts of the text move onto more complex analysis and focus more sharply on data interpretation. Under the Reagan administration for example, much has been made of the "reverse Robin Hood" policies of taking from the poor to enrich the rich. Whilst many contemporary studies of income inequality have traced its origin back to Reagan, even solid Republican writers at the time such as Phillips (see *The Politics of Rich and Poor*, 1990) predicted Reagan's policies would result in a backlash against the party. Clark demonstrates the flaws in such an argument however. Using Phillips' own data, inequality is shown to jump more during the years of the Clinton presidency, and as a long-term trend inequality has arguably risen primarily due to the transition from the Industrial to the Information Age.

Ostensibly the book has a simple concept: use a pre-defined research agenda to bring to life the range of tools modern political scientists employ. After all, examples are the bedrock of most textbooks. Here Clark goes one step further, and the book itself becomes embedded in an over-arching theme of America at a Crossroads. Whilst graduate students may wish to supplement with more in-depth statistical textbooks, undergraduate students and political enthusiasts will find this a very rewarding read.

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Nicholas Thomason currently works as an Analyst for an Alternative Investment firm. He completed his MSc in Political Science and Political Economy at the London School of Economics in 2011. Prior to this he received a BSc in Economics from the University of Bristol. Read more reviews by Nicholas .