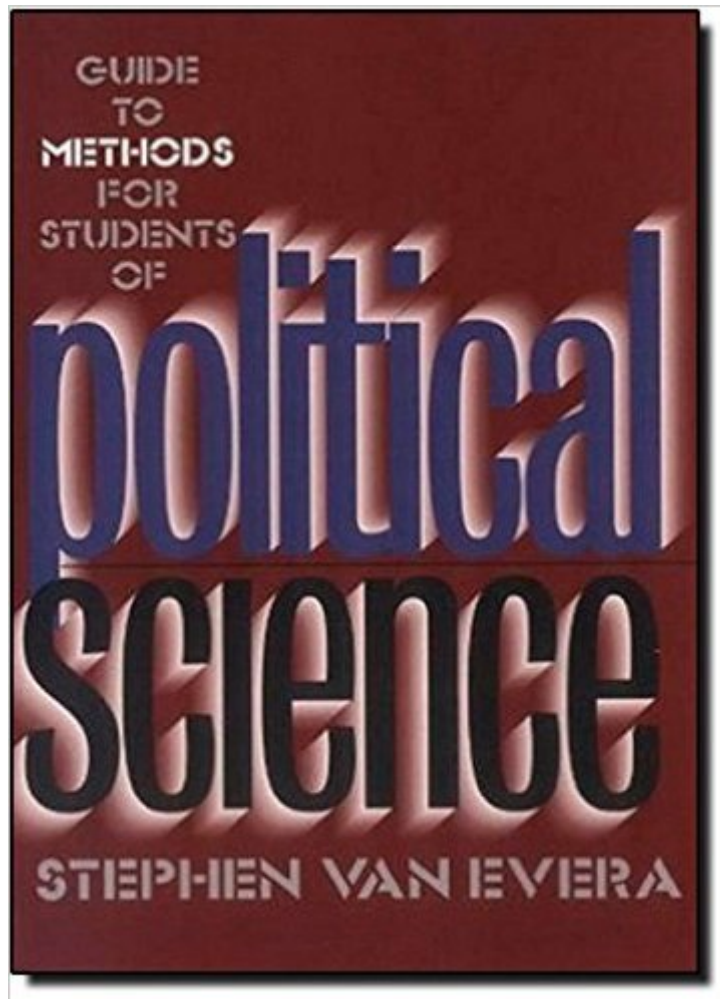


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Guide To Methods For Students Of Political Science



Synopsis

Stephen Van Evera greeted new graduate students at MIT with a commonsense introduction to qualitative methods in the social sciences. His helpful hints, always warmly received, grew from a handful of memos to an underground classic primer. That primer evolved into a book of how-to information about graduate study, which is essential reading for graduate students and undergraduates in political science, sociology, anthropology, economics, and history - and for their advisers. -How should we frame, assess, and apply theories in the social sciences? "I am unpersuaded by the view that the prime rules of scientific method should differ between hard science and social science. Science is science." -A section on case studies shows novices the ropes. -Van Evera contends the realm of dissertations is often defined too narrowly. "Making and testing theories are not the only games in town. . . . If everyone makes and tests theories but no one ever uses them, then what are they for?" -In "Helpful Hints on Writing a Political Science Ph.D. Dissertation," Van Evera focuses on presentation, and on broader issues of academic strategy and tactics. -Van Evera asks how political scientists should work together as a community. "All institutions and professions that face weak accountability need inner ethical rudders that define their obligations in order to stay on course."

Book Information

Paperback: 144 pages

Publisher: Cornell University Press; 1 edition (September 4, 1997)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 080148457X

ISBN-13: 978-0801484575

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.4 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 6.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.7 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (9 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #62,781 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #23 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Political Science > Reference](#) #31 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Methodology](#) #88 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Research](#)

Customer Reviews

Van Evera's book is simple, to be sure, but not simplistic; a prior reviewer's gibes at the notion of flow-charting a theory, with arrows, are a bit off the mark. As the reviewer notes, a theory

designates a causal relationship. If so -- no matter what its other "good" points (parsimony, explanatory reach, etc) -- you can draw that causal relationship between the various independent variables and the dependent variable they help to explain. You can even draw it with arrows. In general this book is recommended for 1st or 2nd year political science graduate students, and useful for advanced undergraduates (who will only care about the first 100 pages or so). It is clear and eminently practical. Other reviewers are right to imply there is little here in the way of philosophy of science in the broadest sense. But that merely makes this book a complement, not a substitute, to more esoteric explorations of the topic.

Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science by Stephen Van Evera is a straightforward guide on the basic elements of producing quality graduate-level theories and papers that are required of that level of study. To some, the advice found in these pages may prove to be repetitious and common sense, but I personally found the sections on theories and case studies to be a highly useful tool to reinforce the core ideas of graduate level writing that grad students sometimes forget in their zeal over their research interests and meeting those deadlines. One drawback, is that it is geared towards graduate students who study international relations where the case study method is most prevalent. In other segments of the field, the large-n- method is emphasized, meaning that other students using that method may need another book. Overall though, most students of political science should find something useful in this book.

Some say that this book is not a guide to methods, or that it is certainly no model of sophistication. As such, I was skeptical about reading it, but once I did, I realized that Van Evera never does say that he will make the book for such a purpose. "I make no effort to cover the methodological waterfront." (p.1) As such, I think many reviews it receives are unmerited. Instead, I found this book very useful, even as a graduate student who has done many research methods already. Beauty of Van Evera's approach is that he offers an ESSENTIAL guide to those starting social science (I wish I had read this book when starting university), but even for older students, they can find practical advice on different issues, and clarification on topics that others don't explain as clearly (particularly in my previous class we had a big problem over defining 'method of agreement' vs. 'method of difference'). The book puts many complex topics in simplistic terms which helps keep thoughts organized. As such it is a necessary but not sufficient guide to methods for students of political science.

Only an undergraduate student so I'm probably not the best person to review methodology. In the first section, Van Evera gives a good general overview of the basics. The most thorough section is on case studies. This is very helpful as case studies are often ignored by most, though, as the author notes, can be very helpful especially for IR. The third section also discusses in some depth what a dissertation should look like. This is helpful for someone new to the field and (I assume) for someone undertaking this. Just to note, Van Evera is an IR scholar and a lot of his examples and such are taken from the IR field. I enjoyed this, as that's my area of study, but if you're not you might find this annoying.

Just needed this for class, but it seemed like a well-written book.

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