

**Just Telling it Like it Is: Descriptive Work and Social Science Research**  
**Grant Proposal for Centennial Fund and Artinian Fund for Publishing**

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**Abstract**

The discipline of political science has, since the behavioral revolution, been largely driven by the logic of causal inference. The Perestroika movement, while questioning the methodological approaches of the behavioral revolution, did not fundamentally question this natural science-based model. Nevertheless, descriptive work in political science is a necessary component of both qualitative and quantitative work, in conceptualization, measurement, delimitation, and theory building. We propose a two-day workshop to address the question of the status and contributions of descriptive inquiry in political science. The workshop will include a day of discussion and presentations on description as a method, and a tool within social scientific inquiry. The second day will be thematically organized presentations and memos of work using descriptive inquiry as a tool within empirical research. Participants will edit and refine their presented memos and discussion after the workshop for publication within either an edited volume or a special issue of a journal to enhance the reach and impact of the workshop. Ultimately, our objective is to spur a conversation on the value and contributions of descriptive work, both on its own and in combination with causal inference.

## Project Statement:

Both the behavioral turn and the Perestroika movement, despite debates on methodological approaches, advocated a hypothesis-driven natural science model for social sciences. In their wake, what is the role of descriptive work within Political Science? How can description, either on its own or in complementing causal work, contribute to the aims of pursuing social science? We propose a hybrid online and in-person workshop to investigate these questions. The objective of this proposed workshop is threefold: 1) to address the status and role of descriptive research in political science, as well as its use in ongoing research, by collaborating with scholars who engage with descriptive work as a methodology and as a practice; 2) to use the forum of the workshop to brainstorm ways in which new descriptive work could build on existing theory in important conversations like human rights, conflict studies, and democratization; and 3) to take the products of this workshop and publish them as an edited volume or special issue, in turn widening the reach of our efforts and bringing both the resultant discussion and prescriptions to a broader audience in the discipline and beyond. Ultimately, our objective is to spur a conversation on the value and contributions of descriptive work, both on its own and in combination with causal inference.

The Behavioral Revolution in Political Science, articulated by Charles Merriam as an approach more closely aligned with the natural sciences (Merriam 1926), by V.O. Key as an effort to make research “on the political process more effective” (cited in Dahl 1961, 765), by Truman as “a primary emphasis on empirical methods...[in] the development of a science of the political process,” (Truman 1951, 37), and by Robert Dahl as “the modern scientific outlook” (Dahl 1961, 768), was a Kuhnian paradigm shift in the study of politics. Evolving through and with the vast expansion of computing technology that took place in the mid to late 20th century, the behavioral turn in Political Science and its emphasis on empiricism were deeply linked with the collection and ownership of data, and the application of empirical methods to that data to yield causal arguments. This approach was consistent through the elaboration of the natural science model in works like *Designing Social Inquiry* (KKV 1994), as well as in the Perestroika movement, which urged methodological pluralism (Renwick 2005), but did not question the underlying need for predominantly hypothesis-driven and causal arguments. The revolution in this case was methodological, but not epistemological.

This emphasis has led to a decline in the status of descriptive research in our field, both in publication and in the training of students. The decline, which can be observed qualitatively in the secular decrease in the number of descriptive articles published in major field journals, and in terms of the phrasing often accompanying such work, as merely descriptive (Gerring 2012). In the early 2000s, many scholars published work defending description within the discipline and pointing to the contributions of descriptive work, in theory-building (Shapiro 2002), measurement validity (Adcock and Collier 2001), and conceptualization (Wedeen 2002), among others. Yet, in many ways, the discipline still finds itself at a place that is largely dismissive of descriptive work or sees the utility of description only in the service of casual arguments, which degrades the quantity and quality of descriptive work in itself (Gerring 2012).

Yet, scholars who use quantitative or qualitative methods both use description in their work, in conceptualization, delimitation, and measurement. The question of what counts as a battlefield death in cross-national datasets on conflict provides a compelling example. The counts themselves are a descriptive endeavor, and they differ significantly between data sets (Restrepo, Spagat, and Vargas 2006). Yet the fundamental assumption in devaluing descriptive

work is that the data themselves are not the point of inquiry, but rather the mine from which results can be derived. The cumulation and generalizability of the work produced is also undermined by this assumption, as key terms remain under defined and conceptually disparate. For example, Eck and Hultman's dataset on violence against civilians counts deaths in the US in the context of incidences of international terrorism, as in the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, but not domestic terrorism or violence by the state, as in incidents of police brutality. While each of these is a potentially defensible choice, the ways in which such deaths are counted, or not, will have fundamental impacts on the results that are derived from methodological application on them. Without robust descriptive work, such an enterprise is not feasible.

### *Methodology*

In order to address the previous debates concerning descriptive work, we propose a two-day conference held in Spring 2022. The first day will consist of sessions on the idea of description as a method and its role in Social Scientific inquiry. Starting with these sessions updates the discussion concerning the role of descriptive work in the field, a question largely left unexplored since the publication of Gerring's 2012 article "Mere Description." Participants will then use this collaborative opportunity to brainstorm together ways in which descriptive work has changed theoretical priors and conversations where new descriptive work might challenge existing theory. The second day will consist of sessions that are examples of descriptive work, organized by theme from participant submissions. This allows participants to link the previous day's discussion about the position and utility of descriptive work in the field to the ways in which it directly contributes to thematic areas in Political Science. Moreover, the combination of a methodological and empirical approach can help foster working relationships between participants regarding both sets of conversations.

We are preparing a hybrid workshop in which participants will have the option of attending remotely or in-person. This flexibility increases the availability of the workshop to under-funded scholars, graduate students, and scholars in the Global South who may not have the resources to travel. In addition, it ensures an easier transition to an entirely remote conference if the pandemic requires this. Our intention is to have 8 in-person participants, and an additional 4-5 remote participants. Additionally, in recognition of the extreme disruption the pandemic has caused and is causing to scholars (disproportionately women) who have additional caregiving responsibilities, we plan to require shorter form memos from participants as opposed to full papers for attendance. We do not want to exclude voices which are currently struggling to find the time to produce full research papers during the pandemic.

After the conference, we intend to organize a series of follow-up panels for APSA 2023 in the Political Methodology section, and some thematic panels that accord with the call for proposals themes. In addition, we will also pursue the publication of an edited volume or a special issue, based on the discussion of participants and the existing submissions.

### *Timeline + Present Status*

- Fall 2021 – Call for applications to be circulated via relevant APSA and ISA section listservs, Twitter, and via email
- Spring 2022 – Conference held at University of Massachusetts, Boston
- Summer 2022 – Time for collaborators to work on their publication
- Winter 2022/2023 - Submit publication for consideration to either a special issue of a journal or for publication as an edited volume.

### *Relevance*

This workshop aims to bring together a diverse cohort of scholars in a cross-field workshop to support a broad disciplinary intervention into the role of description in scholarship. Defining key concepts, like democracy, conflict, or security, has become more complicated, because of changing global conditions, new voices in the study of politics, and emerging perspectives challenging long-held assumptions. Much like the moment in the aftermath of the Cold War, when the discipline had to contend with the stable categories around which their work was built collapsing, we argue that a new focus on description will allow political science to address these new complexities and remain relevant. As such, we hope it fits well under the objective of the Centennial Fund to facilitate such conversations and debates in the field.

### *Materials Used*

- Facilities:
  - o Hotels
  - o Flights
  - o Food
- Tech:
  - o Zoom platform
  - o Projectors
  - o Computers

*Budget (assuming 8 in-person participants (7 requiring travel) and 4-5 remote participants)*

<i>Item</i>	<i>Cost</i>	<i>Quantity</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Lodging in Boston (2 nights per participant)</i>	<i>Federal lodging per diem at \$281/night</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>\$3934</i>
<i>Roundtrip economy airfare (coming from outside the Northeast)</i>	<i>Estimated at an average of \$600/person</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>\$3000</i>
<i>Roundtrip economy Amtrak or airline tickets (coming from within the Northeast)</i>	<i>Estimated at an average of \$300/person</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>\$600</i>
<i>Per diem (per person, for transportation to/from airport, parking, and incidentals not covered)</i>	<i>\$71</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>\$497</i>
<i>Breakfast Days 1 and 2 (catered on campus)</i>	<i>\$150 (catered for 10 guests (minimum number allowed for orders))</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>\$300</i>
<i>Lunch spread (Day 1 and 2)</i>	<i>\$175 (catered for 10 guests (minimum number allowed for orders))</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>\$350</i>
<i>Group Dinner</i>	<i>\$45 per person</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>\$360</i>
<i>Coffee Break (Day 1 and 2)</i>	<i>\$40 per day</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>\$80</i>
<i>Student to keep minutes (hourly)</i>	<i>\$20/hr</i>	<i>10 hours</i>	<i>\$200</i>
<i>A/V assistance and on-campus room reservation</i>	<i>\$340/day</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>\$680</i>
<i>Total</i>			<i>\$10,001</i>

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