Key Research Concepts in
Politics & International Relations

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introduction

This book has been written as a contribution to the SAGE Key Concepts series, but, more importantly for us, we have produced something that we hope students will find an important resource throughout their studies.

Research methods are rarely the key reason for people choosing to study Politics or International Relations, yet they are recognized as a crucial element in any such degree. Just as we would expect to learn about political theory and explore examples of political case studies, we recognize that good graduates need to have a toolkit of skills to assist in answering 'Who?', 'What?', 'Where?' and 'When?' questions.

The discipline of Politics was lamentably slow in explicitly embedding research methods into the curriculum or providing suitable texts and guides in comparison to subjects such as Psychology and Sociology (and International Relations even more so!). Thankfully, this began to change in the 1990s and there are some excellent political research methods textbooks that take students through the process of research – many of which we reference.

By producing a Key Concepts guide, we have attempted to do something slightly different. We have focused on commonly employed concepts that students often struggle to understand and, at times, misuse. For each concept, we offer a succinct explanation that is cross-referenced to related concepts. In order to escape some of the 'dryness' often associated with political research methods we also, where appropriate, signpost the reader towards studies that engage with the concept. In doing so we wanted to show that what we know about politics and international relations *cannot* be explained without understanding the research process by means of which 'knowledge' is generated. A fundamental reason why we disagree about political explanations is because we ask different questions in different ways. Political researchers privilege different methodologies and methods – we do not make judgements here about which are 'better' or 'best', but we do believe that by recognizing such differences we develop a clearer understanding of why competing arguments survive and thrive.

Each concept is focused and intended to be illustrative. We cross-reference other concepts where possible and supplement each entry with

two types of bibliography. Further reading will take you to sources that explore the concept in further detail. Examples feature published research that engages with the concept to some degree – to us these are exemplars of research in the fields of politics and international relations as they are explicit in raising methodological issues emerging from the research process (either intentionally or accidentally).

Inevitably in preparing a text of this nature we have not been able to cover every concept – apologies if you are seeking something we chose not to include. The content was guided by proposal reviewers and our own experiences of teaching – we have found that students are often baffled by the chosen key concepts in terms of both their meaning and application.

We are grateful for Dr Jamie Munn's early input (regarding the concepts of action research, case studies, feminism, narratives, positivism and post-positivism), in addition to those colleagues, family, friends and supportive staff at SAGE who have all helped in seeing this project through to completion.

Finally, we hope that students will engage with the content – and feel that the challenging discipline of research methods is a little less mystifying than they thought it might be!

introduction

ix