

Course

Process Tracing Methods: Approaches and Applications

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13-14 October 2025

Room A | NASP Graduate School

Via Pace, 10 - Milan

Course description

Within-case qualitative causal inference focuses on the analysis of processes leading to specific outcomes in individual cases. The analysis of causal processes within cases via the method of Process Tracing allows us to establish the steps, temporality, and direction of the causal relation under scrutiny, test theories that involve causal chains and mechanisms, and, in some versions of the method, adjudicate between competing explanations.

The course begins by introducing students to important conceptual distinctions. What are causal mechanisms and causal chains? How are these different from independent and intervening variables? What are the explanatory standards of mechanistic social science, and how do these differ from those of other research traditions? Why is process tracing suitable for testing theories that imply causal chains and mechanisms?

We then examine the different ways in which scholars understand Process Tracing and related best practices, with reference to published work in Political Science. We will start with approaches that emphasize the importance of establishing productive continuity and achieving explanatory completeness, examining the implications of this variant of Process Tracing for theory specification and empirical testing. Next, we will examine explicit Bayesian approaches, evaluating the extent to which they differ from productive continuity approaches. Throughout these sessions, we will discuss how researchers ought to assess the probative value of the evidence they use for tracing processes and how they can align data collection during fieldwork with the demands and practices of process tracing.

The course ends with two applied sessions. The first one explores how to use elite and non-elite interviews when conducting process tracing. The second is a workshop during which participants present and discuss theoretical models of causal processes, ideally related to their own dissertation projects.

Programme & Syllabus

Day 1 | October 13, 2025

Session 1. h. 11.30am – 1.00pm

What is Process Tracing? Conceptual Building Blocks

Reading List

- McAdam, D., S. Tarrow and C. Tilly. 2008 “Methods for Measuring Mechanisms of Contention,” in *Qualitative Sociology* 31(4): 307-331.
- Gerring, J. 2010. “Causal Mechanism: Yes, but...”, in *Comparative Political Studies*, 43: 1499-1526.
- Hedström, P. and P. Ylikoski. 2010. “Causal Mechanisms in the Social Sciences,” in *Annual Review of Sociology*, 36: 49-67.
- Little, D. 2015. “Mechanisms and Method,” in *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 45(4-5): 462-480.
- Beach, D. and R. Pedersen. 2016. *Causal Case Study Methods: Foundations and Guidelines for Comparing, Matching and Tracing*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press. Chapter 3.
- Goertz, G. and J. Mahoney. 2012. *A Tale of Two Cultures: Contrasting Qualitative and Quantitative Research*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Chapters 7 & 8.
- Bennett, A. and J. Checkel. 2015. “Process Tracing: From Philosophical Roots to Best Practices.” In Bennett, A. and J. Checkel eds. *Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Session 2. h. 2.30pm – 4.00pm

Varieties of Process Tracing I: The Completeness Standard Approach

Reading List

- Waldner, D. 2014. “What makes process tracing good? Causal mechanisms, causal inference, and the completeness standard in comparative politics.” In Bennett, A. and J. Checkel eds. *Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Waldner, D. 2015. “Process Tracing and Qualitative Causal Inference,” in *Security Studies*, 24(2): 239–50.
- Runhardt, R. 2015. “Evidence for Causal Mechanisms in Social Science: Recommendations from Woodward’s Manipulability Theory of Causation,” in *Philosophy of Science*, 82(5): 1296–1307.
- Runhardt, R. 2016. “Tracing the Productive Continuity of Social Mechanisms,” in *Qualitative & Multi-Method Research*, 14(1/2): 22–28.

Session 3. h. 4.30pm – 6.00pm

Public Lecture by Prof. Ezequiel Gonzalez Ocantos

The Historical Roots of Legal Mobilisation: Evidence from Land Rights Litigation in Argentina’s Northeast

Programme & Syllabus

Day 2 | October 14, 2025

Session 4. h. 10.00am – 11.30am

Varieties of Process Tracing I: Assessing the Quality of Evidence to Achieve Completeness

Reading List

- Beach, D. & B. Pedersen. 2013. *Process Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press. Chapter 5-6.
- Collier, D. 2011. "Understanding Process Tracing," in *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 44(4): 823-830.
- Gonzalez-Ocantos, E. and J. LaPorte. 2021. "Process Tracing and the Problem of Missing Data," in *Sociological Methods and Research*, 50(3): 1407-1435.

Session 5. h. 11.45am – 1.15pm

Varieties of Process Tracing II: Explicit Bayesianism to Assess Probative Value and Adjudicate between Rival Explanations

Reading List

- Bennett, A. 2010. "Process Tracing: A Bayesian Perspective." In Box-Steffenmeier, J. H. Brady and D. Collier eds. *Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology*. Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Fairfield, T. and A. Charman. 2017. "Explicit Bayesian Analysis for Process Tracing: Guidelines, Opportunities and Caveats," in *Political Analysis*, 25(3):363-380.
- Fairfield, T. and A. Charman. 2022. *Social Inquiry and Bayesian Inference*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Zaks, S. 2021. 'Updating Bayesian(s): A Critical Evaluation of Bayesian Process Tracing,' in *Political Analysis*, 29(1): 58–74.

Session 6. h. 2.30pm – 4.00pm

Aligning Interviews with Process Tracing

Reading List

- Small, M. and J. Calarco. 2022. *Qualitative Literacy: A Guide to Evaluating Ethnographic and Interview Research*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press. Chapters 2 and 3.
- Gonzalez-Ocantos, E. and J. Masullo. 2024. "Aligning Interviewing with Process Tracing," in *Sociological Methods & Research*.

Session 7. h. 4.15pm – 5.30pm

[Depending on enrolment, this session might need to take place on Wednesday morning so both instructors can be present]

Workshop: Theorising Causal Chains and Deriving Observable Implications