



Primary Social Research in Politics and Society

Quantitative research: gets a little information from a lot of topics. It tends to be numerical and statistical. Think of it as ‘how many?’ (surveys, polls).

Qualitative research: gets a lot of information from a smaller pool of subjects. It tends to be based on themes and experiences. Think of it as ‘why or how?’ (interviews, focus groups, etc.)

Open-ended question: can not be answered with a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ response, e.g. “What are your thoughts on...?”

Closed-ended question: can be answered with a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ response, or from a list of options, e.g. “Which option best describes your work?”

1. Surveys / Questionnaires (Quantitative)

Definition: A set of structured questions used to gather opinions or facts from a group of people. These are great for collecting data from a lot of people quickly, but responses may lack depth.

Steps to use:

1. Design your questions – Use a mix of closed and open-ended questions relevant to your issue, organised in a logical way, and only asking questions relevant to your overall research issue. Clearly communicate standards on ethics and data recording for participants. Be sure to record demographic information, if necessary.
2. Choose your audience – Identify who will complete it (e.g., students, parents, community).
3. Collect and analyse – Distribute the survey, gather responses, summarise the findings, draw conclusions

2. Interviews (Qualitative)

Definition: These are usually one-to-one conversations used to explore personal opinions or experiences in-depth. These provide rich information with more detail than a survey, but they take time and planning. Importantly, the open-ended nature of questions allows the participants to lead the conversation.

Steps to use:

1. Prepare questions – Develop open-ended questions focused on your topic. Make sure they are easy to understand and are not ‘leading’ questions. Ask yourself why each question is necessary and useful to the research.

2. Arrange interview – Approach a relevant possible interviewee and explain your research, inviting them to share their experience/knowledge. Organise a date/location for the interview and a format (online, in-person, phone call, etc.). Clearly communicate standards on ethics and data recording.
 3. Conduct and reflect – Record (with permission), take notes, and identify key messages.
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3. Focus Groups (Qualitative)

Definition: A small group discussion to explore a topic through shared conversation. A focus group allows multiple viewpoints, but dominant voices may influence the outcome. The role of the researcher/moderator is to guide the chat, asking focused questions with follow-up ‘why’ or probing questions.

Steps to use:

1. Plan your topic and questions – Choose 3-5 open-ended questions to guide the chat (“Tell me about...”, “What are your thoughts on?”, etc.) This is a non-judgemental, enquiring, approach in a more relaxed environment.
 2. Select participants – Invite a small number of people with varied experiences to participate in the focus group. Clearly communicate standards on ethics and data recording for participants.
 3. Facilitate and note responses – Keep the discussion fair and record the key points. Ask questions to the group but try to facilitate conversation from all members. Tease out responses: ‘What do you think about...?’, ‘Why do you feel this way?’, ‘Would you agree with...?’, ‘What would you like to see?’, etc.
 4. Record and summarise common themes.
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4. Participant Observation (Qualitative)

Definition: Participant observation is a research method where the researcher joins a group to observe people’s behaviour, actions, and interactions. It’s great for gaining first-hand insights into how people behave in real-life settings, but may be limited by what is visible or understood.

Steps to use:

1. Choose your setting and get in touch – Ask subjects in the area you are studying if you can observe them. Clearly explain what you are researching

and how observation can help you find answers. Clearly communicate standards on ethics and data recording for participants.

2. Create a field notes diary: include dates, times, what happened, who was involved, why you consider it important, and what 'bigger questions' it may help to answer. Create a reflective diary to take note of your own feelings and experiences throughout the process.
 3. Observe and record – Write down what you see, summarise, and reflect on its meaning.
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5. Polls (Quantitative)

Definition: A quick survey of opinions on one or two questions; good for getting instant feedback but gives limited detail.

Steps to use:

1. Pick a clear question – Keep it simple, non-leading, and relevant. Clearly communicate standards on ethics and data recording for participants.
 2. Ask a group – Use paper, online, or hands-up voting.
 3. Share results – Use a graph or chart to explain what people said.
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6. Case Studies (Qualitative and Quantitative)

Definition: An in-depth examination and analysis of one example (person, group, or project) related to your topic; helps understand real-life experiences but doesn't always reflect wider trends.

Steps to use:

1. Choose a case – Find an interesting or relevant example.
 2. Research deeply – Use interviews, online information, or observation. Use the *WWWWW* approach, keep in mind the trustworthiness of your sources, and be mindful of seeking out different perspectives.
 3. Report – choose a format to report your findings and outlines key information and sources used, as well as a summary of your findings.
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7. Fieldwork / Site Visits (Qualitative)

Definition: Visiting a location to see an issue or organisation first-hand. This is great for building understanding but requires access and planning.

Steps to use:

1. Arrange a visit – Contact and organise with a relevant place (e.g. charity, civil society body, institution or other state body).
2. Prepare questions or focus points – Having designed specific questions in advance help: ‘What do they do here?’, ‘How do they do it?’, ‘Why?’, ‘What challenged do they face?’, ‘How does what happens here fit into a “bigger picture”?’
3. Reflect and report – Take notes, photos (with permission), and share what you learned.