Oliver Daddow
Department of Politics, History and International Relations
Loughborough University
o.j.daddow@lboro.ac.uk

Britain and ‘Europe’: teaching a tale of two stories

The question of the most appropriate form the relationship Britain should have with the institutions and countries of the European Union (EU) has been one of the most explosive in British politics since the Second World War. Disputes and tensions over British European policy have divided Cabinets, split parties, brought down leaders and left the public in a state of confusion and even hostility to matters European. One’s stance on whether or not Britain is a ‘European’ country – and therefore what part Britain can and should play in the EU – is basically down to a preference for one of two main stories on offer. The first story pits Britain eternally against the Continent, in geographic, political, economic and ideological terms. This story tells of Britain’s psychological remoteness from mainland Europe, evidenced by its preference for nurturing first of all its global role through its Empire/Commonwealth, and latterly the ‘special relationship’ with the United States. Europe in this story features at best as an optional prop to Britain’s great power status, and at worst as a hindrance to the achievement of just that destiny.

The second narrative, popularised by Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and the New Labour government from 1997 (see [2]), has it that Britain has always been a European power, and that it is a denial of the nation’s history and geography to take a ‘Eurosceptical’ stance by falling for the, admittedly popular and persuasive, first story. It is this battle between two rival narratives that underpin a final year option, Euroscepticism in Britain, which I have been delivering in the Department of Politics, History and International Relations at Loughborough University since 2005. In this article I want to reflect on some successful teaching innovations I have made to the design and delivery of the module, brought about by an immersion in quantitative methods.

The relative neglect of the quantitative

From the basic outline of the research problem underpinning the module, it should be clear that qualitative approaches inform the bulk of the political discussion as well as the academic research into this subject. Sure, statistics on trade, jobs, investment and the economics of the eurozone do appear in the public debates and scholarship (e.g.[5]) and these (the positive ones anyway) have been routinely trotted out by the Labour government to make the ‘hard sell’ on Europe to the British people. However, because the Europe question concerns perceptions of history, identity and the ambitions of European ‘Others’ across the English Channel, it is natural, in many ways, that qualitative works of political history and polemic hold sway within the field. Works specifically on Euroscepticism (e.g. [3, 4]) have tended to reinforce the impression that
Methods, majoring on descriptive statistics and chi-square.

First of all, I was trained up in the general area of statistical research methods module, Political Analysis. The aim of my work undertaken during the secondment was twofold. That early manifestations of the Euroscepticism module tended to squeeze a week on economics half way through, only serves in its early years tended to slot in a week on ‘economics’ half way through the module, only goes to show my relative uncertainty about how best to incorporate quantitative approaches into my teaching. Making the jump

Just as New Labour from 1997 suggested it was time for Britain to overcome its fears of ‘Europe’, for me after 2008 it was time to confront the quantitative element of political science more rigorously than hitherto.

The relative marginalisation of statistics within this small subfield of the discipline adds to my impression that, in the UK certainly, we as political scientists, both individually and collectively as a discipline, routinely fail to equip our students with even the basic mathematical tools necessary to helping them understand and explain politics from a quantitative perspective. Although there has certainly been no explicit prejudice against the use of statistical data, a cursory glance at the leading journals and textbooks in the field shows a strong leaning towards the textual over the numerical. The situation in the vibrant and globally influential US discipline appears to be more balanced, if not equally so, between the two approaches. My own approach to research and the kinds of publication I put out have tended to reflect the conventional qualitative over quantitative tendency within the discipline at large.

That early manifestations of the Euroscepticism module tended to squeeze a week on economics half way through, only serves in its early years tended to slot in a week on ‘economics’ half way through the module, only goes to show my relative uncertainty about how best to incorporate quantitative approaches into my teaching. Making the jump

Just as New Labour from 1997 suggested it was time for Britain to overcome its fears of ‘Europe’, for me after 2008 it was time to confront the quantitative element of political science more rigorously than hitherto.

The relative marginalisation of statistics within this small subfield of the discipline adds to my impression that, in the UK certainly, we as political scientists, both individually and collectively as a discipline, routinely fail to equip our students with even the basic mathematical tools necessary to helping them understand and explain politics from a quantitative perspective. Although there has certainly been no explicit prejudice against the use of statistical data, a cursory glance at the leading journals and textbooks in the field shows a strong leaning towards the textual over the numerical. The situation in the vibrant and globally influential US discipline appears to be more balanced, if not equally so, between the two approaches. My own approach to research and the kinds of publication I put out have tended to reflect the conventional qualitative over quantitative tendency within the discipline at large.

That early manifestations of the Euroscepticism module tended to squeeze a week on economics half way through, only serves in its early years tended to slot in a week on ‘economics’ half way through the module, only goes to show my relative uncertainty about how best to incorporate quantitative approaches into my teaching. Making the jump

Just as New Labour from 1997 suggested it was time for Britain to overcome its fears of ‘Europe’, for me after 2008 it was time to confront the quantitative element of political science more rigorously than hitherto.

The relative marginalisation of statistics within this small subfield of the discipline adds to my impression that, in the UK certainly, we as political scientists, both individually and collectively as a discipline, routinely fail to equip our students with even the basic mathematical tools necessary to helping them understand and explain politics from a quantitative perspective. Although there has certainly been no explicit prejudice against the use of statistical data, a cursory glance at the leading journals and textbooks in the field shows a strong leaning towards the textual over the numerical. The situation in the vibrant and globally influential US discipline appears to be more balanced, if not equally so, between the two approaches. My own approach to research and the kinds of publication I put out have tended to reflect the conventional qualitative over quantitative tendency within the discipline at large.

It was, therefore, with a degree of excitement but also trepidation that I embarked on a secondment in 2008-9 to work with David Green (sigma, Loughborough University), and colleagues in the Mathematics Education Centre to help me enhance delivery of my department’s Year 2 research methods module, Political Analysis. The aim of my work undertaken during the secondment was twofold. First of all, I was trained up in the general area of statistical methods, majoring on descriptive statistics and chi-square tests. To this end I worked through an SPSS study book and attended dedicated professional development training sessions in the appropriate methodologies. Secondly, we worked up three types of resource for the module: lectures on statistics and statistical methods, five non-assessed lab exercises on SPSS and the coursework element which centred on quantitative methods. For all of these resources we used open source data, from the British Social Attitudes Survey for example, plus data we generated from the student year group itself. This came from an online ‘student preferences survey’ which they filled in during the first part of the module through Learn, the University’s Virtual Learning Environment. The anonymous responses we obtained about diet, favourite colour, political party of preference, favourite newspaper and so forth enabled us to create data sets that were entirely novel and helped engage the students in the module from an early stage.

Landing the other side

The results of the secondment have been nothing but positive over both the short and longer terms, and in teaching and research terms. First, it improved my ability to design the Political Analysis module and deliver it more effectively to the students. I was able to develop innovative learning and teaching strategies and this helped provide the students with a challenging yet rewarding module.

Second, and despite some initial resistance caricatured in the title of this article, most students responded positively to the quantitative elements of the course. Module feedback showed that they particularly relished the opportunity of manipulating SPSS and interpreting data outputs and could see the benefits that would accrue to them in the long term from doing so.

In an increasingly competitive graduate job market we believe we are giving our students a real edge in terms of enhancing their transferable skills on the module.

Finally, and the point I want to dwell on here, my immersion in statistics helped enhance the delivery of other modules I teach at Loughborough, in particular Euroscepticism in Britain.

The aims of this module are: to help students understand where we can locate Euroscepticism in Britain; to critically appraise the strengths and weaknesses of the various academic models of Euroscepticism; and to help them explain the different types of Euroscepticism evident in Britain today. When I designed the module in 2005, and taught it for the first three years, it was as I have explained above almost exclusively a qualitative module. We started by surveying the empirical and theoretical material and
moved on to consider the context provided by the history of Britain's post-1945 policies towards the European Economic Community (EEC), now the EU. The next phase of the course unpicked different strains of Euroscepticism: political (the sovereignty argument, for example) and economic (mainly but not exclusively against the single currency), together with nationalist and history-based arguments about an essential and timeless sense of ‘difference’ between Britain and ‘the Continent’, inspired by my ongoing research into political and press coverage of European policy (e.g. [1]). Midway through the course we fly in from Brussels a local Conservative Member of the European Parliament for the East Midlands, Roger Helmer, who gives a talk on his Eurosceptical stance and answers questions from the students about his political outlook and ideology. At the end of the module we bring the story up to date by studying the New Labour years and Eurosceptical political cartoons and current anti-EU internet sites.

Integrating quantitative methods

Last year, I redesigned the module to integrate a quantitative element that I hoped would promote student engagement with, and ownership over, the material we covered.

The new element involved designing and conducting a survey of attitudes towards the EU amongst the public in Loughborough town centre. The rationale for including it was that through the module we studied Euroscepticism in all its forms: amongst politicians, in the press and media, and organised interest groups. But Euroscepticism is not, of course, confined to elite decision-makers or establishment commentators; it is a real everyday phenomenon that the students will feel when they talk to their peers, their families and friends, as they read newspapers and watch the news, and even when they travel abroad and handle Euro notes and coins. Euroscepticism, or at least attitudes or opinions that could be labelled Eurosceptical, also reside in language, for instance when ‘Brussels’ is used instead of ‘European Commission’ to describe the source of EU legislation (Radio 5 Live take note).

Through the questions on the survey, and having begun by gathering data on respondents’ age, gender and occupation, we wanted to capture three interrelated sets of data. First, we wanted a measure of how much the public knew about basic facets of the EU and current affairs more widely. We did this by showing our respondents pictures of the White House, Palace of Westminster, the European Parliament and European Commission and asking them if they could name the buildings. We did the same for pictures of British Foreign Secretary David Miliband, Prime Minister Gordon Brown, Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany and Commission President José Manuel Barroso. Second, we wanted to test public attitudes to aspects of the EU’s activities using two techniques: hypothetical ‘yes/no/don’t know’ referendum questions on British membership of the single currency project and the Lisbon Treaty, followed by Likert scale responses to questions about the extent to which membership of the EU benefited Britain’s economy, security and general national interests. Finally, we wanted, at a very basic level, to test what people thought about the EU – their gut feeling as it were. This was partly answered through the referendum and Likert scale answers, but we opened the survey (so as not to bias the answers) by playing a simple word association game: ‘What is the first word or image that pops into your head when I say “EU” to you?’ As you can imagine, some answers are not printable here!

Survey of attitudes to the EU in Loughborough

The EU attitudes survey now constitutes the capstone exercise of the Euroscepticism in Britain module, spanning its last four weeks. In the first week of the package we conceptualise the key issues, working out what questions will best gather the data we need on public knowledge of and attitudes to, the EU, its institutions and policies. In the second week we use this set of questions to run a pilot study when the students go out and practice the survey on other students on the Loughborough campus. The pilot study is an important element of the process for several reasons: it helps us refine the questions we want to ask to give as accurate a date set as possible; it gives the students practice – in a safe, friendly environment – at accosting unsuspecting respondents and persuading them to take part in the survey; and it introduces students to the valuable part a pilot study has to play in the overall research design. Not least it gives us a student-centred data set which can be used to compare with the results obtained on the main study.

In the survey development stage we also introduce students to the ethics side of human participant research and the health and safety aspect. Since they are out and about interacting with the public they need to be aware that there are some places they are not allowed to approach potential respondents (for example in shops) and I have to inform the police and local council in advance that they will be in town polling at a particular date and time. The practical issues are an important, but sometimes overlooked, aspect of survey and human participant research and giving students the experience of actually conducting this research helps build on the methods and design issues we teach them at year two level.

In week three we meet at an agreed venue in Loughborough town centre and the students, working in the same pairs as they did for the pilot study, have ninety minutes to conduct as many surveys as they can. Keeping the pairs consistent across the pilot and main survey helps the students to get to know each other and understand
how, by working co-operatively, they get the best out of their respondents as efficiently and effectively as possible. Last year, we generated nearly 300 completed surveys, which for one and a half hours was a healthy return from fifteen pairs of students. After the main survey is complete, I have the quantitative results scanned electronically at the University and this produces an SPSS data set which is emailed to students for their scrutiny.

The final session involves asking the students what patterns they can identify in the data set, beginning with basic results such as what percentage of the respondents would the students consider Eurosceptical and why. We then invite them to concentrate on three issues. First, are men more likely to be pro- or anti-EU than women? Second, does the age or occupation of a respondent help explain attitudes to the EU? Finally, does more knowledge about the EU and current affairs tend to go hand in hand with more positive views on the EU? Wider issues we consider include: what statistical tests could we run on the data to measure the extent of Euroscepticism evident in the data set? What kinds of Euroscepticism we discussed earlier on the module can the students find in the data? The point of asking them these questions is not necessarily to come up with definitive answers, but to encourage students to reflect on the nature of Euroscepticism in Britain and how it manifests itself in the public attitudes revealed in the survey, as well as on the strengths and weaknesses of public attitude surveys.

Conclusion

My experiences organising Political Analysis, on the secondment, and then incorporating the survey element into my Euroscepticism in Britain module have demonstrated that there are many benefits to be gleaned from taking a mixed methods approach to the study of Political Science. I was concerned that there would be some level of in-built student resistance to the statistical elements of our new take on methods teaching, but happily it was only a tiny minority that remained unconvinced by the end of the module. Colleagues in the department have noted more students willing to use descriptive statistics in their written assignments for us, and in the design of final year dissertations we have begun to see some students using statistics through content analysis and so on.

We do not expect all students to become expert quantitative researchers, but we believe that it is our job to open them up to as many different approaches as possible so they can see what is on offer when they come to studying the complex worlds of domestic and international politics. We hope, not least, that equipping them with new skills in this way they will more able to critically evaluate goings on in world around them – and that is no bad thing when statistics are such a vital component of contemporary debates about Britain’s place in the global arena.

References


The vast majority of students threw themselves into the new material, learnt valuable information and transferable skills from it, and have reported verbatim that it has made them more comfortable dealing with descriptive statistics in readings across their studies, politics and beyond.