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Examples of previous research topics (that have worked)

Question	Data source(s)
Does the death penalty deter murders?	U.S. Justice Department crime statistics; Book of the States
Are more senior members of Congress able to bring more “pork barrel” spending to their districts?	Rice University data set on federal spending disaggregated to CD level; Congressional Directory
What role do congressional committee politics play in the geographic allocation of federal spending on science and technology	Rice University data set on federal spending disaggregated to CD level; Congressional Directory
Do political contributions to congressional candidates from PACs interested in gay rights increase representatives’ support for those rights?	FEC data; Roll call data (ICPSR)
Did the increase in the drinking age in the early 1980s reduce drunk-driving fatalities among teenagers?	Book of the States; Bureau of Justice Statistics data
Does requiring high school seniors to take high-stakes standardized exams hurt or help academic achievement?	Data from Mass. Dept. of Education; Census data
Do congressional districts with more members of environmentalist groups elect more environmentalist members of Congress?	Sierra Club membership data; ICPSR roll call data
What method of privatization has been the most economically effective in Eastern Europe following the fall of communism?	OECD data; World Bank data
Do actions taken by the U.S. to punish terrorism increase or decrease the number of terrorist actions aimed at the US?	Coding of NY Times articles; Rand Corporation terrorism yearbook
Does the presence of large numbers of members of environmental groups in a congressional district cause members of Congress to be more pro-environmental in their voting records?	Membership data from groups; interest group ratings reported in reference works.
Does requiring freshmen to live on campus cause drinking to be lowered among freshmen?	Alcohol Use and Abuse among American College Students, 1993 (ICPSR data set)
What is the role of religiosity in attitudes among Jewish Israelis about “land for peace”?	Israeli Election Study
Did Roman emperors who acquired power through violence tend to meet violent ends themselves?	Historical sources concerning the Roman Empire
Which types of international crises tend to produce the biggest “rally effect”?	Gallup Poll; political scientists’ codings of “rally events”

Characteristics of projects that tend to succeed.

1. Data easily available
2. Lots of quantitative research already done
3. Fields of American politics (public opinion and elections, esp.), public policy.
4. Data-rich fields (in addition to American politics, elections and public opinion generally, political economy).

Characteristics of projects that tend to flounder:

1. Data hard to come by in the field
2. Very little quantitative analysis or careful case studies already done
3. Idiosyncratic phenomena, like terrorism
4. Projects that rely on a survey in an unknown field
5. Projects where you know the answer already and can't be convinced you're wrong.