The next challenge is to operationalize your variables. This means that you need to show how your going to test your argument by offering measures of your variables, so that the reader can see that variation in your independent variables does, in fact, lead to variation in your dependent variable. This is more tricky than it sounds. Sometimes we have certain independent variables in mind that, while theoretically interesting, are empirically hard to work with. You need to spend some time thinking about how to make “testable” your argument. How do I measure “social capital,” for example? How do I know a democracy when I see one? What evidence would persuade me that pressure group politics really mattered in explaining a trade policy outcome, as opposed to the whims of policymakers and technocrats? In brief, you cannot conclude the theory section without showing how the argument can be tested empirically. You won’t always find the best empirical proxies for your variables, but a “good faith” effort is always better than no effort at all.

4. Methodology

Generally, students debate whether to offer case studies of quantitative analysis. The decision should be based on the puzzle at hand. Some topics lend themselves to statistical techniques, given a large number of cases and clear empirical measures of the relevant variables, for example. Even if you decide that you will do a qualitative study, it is a good idea to think about how you would do your same project statistically, since the same concerns (such as degrees of freedom, concern for outliers and biased results) loom large regardless. If you do a quantitative study, be sure to explain the techniques (i.e., the need for a probit model, etc.) and think about regression diagnostics. Most software