

Comparative Analysis Within Political Science

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ALEXANDER STAFFORD, NOV 14 2013

What Are The Advantages of Comparing Institutions and Political Processes In Two Or More Countries Compared To the Study Of the Same Institutions Or Processes In a Single Country?

This essay will serve as a brief introduction to the practical, conceptual and theoretical values of comparative analysis within political science. Following a brief explanation of the methodology, this essay will explain the importance of its role and the benefits it brings to the political field of research. The essay will also focus on the benefits of comparatively analysing the collating institutions and processes of two or more countries as opposed to one.

Comparative analysis (CA) is a methodology within political science that is often used in the study of political systems, institutions or processes. This can be done across a local, regional, national and international scale. Further, CA is grounded upon empirical evidence gathered from the recording and classification of real-life political phenomena. Where-by other political studies develop policy via ideological and/or theoretical discourse, comparative research aims to develop greater political understanding through a scientifically constrained methodology. Often referred to as one of the three largest subfields of political science, It is a field of study that was referred to as "the greatest intellectual achievement" by Edward A. Freeman (Lijphart, ND).

Using the comparative methodology, the scholar may ask questions of various political concerns, such as the connection, if any, between capitalism and democratization or the collation between federal and unitary states and electoral participation. CA can be employed on either a single country (case) or group of countries. For the study of one country to be considered comparative, it is essential that the findings of the research are referenced into a larger framework which engages in a systematic comparison of analogous phenomena. Subsequent to applying a comparative methodology in the collation or collection of data, established hypotheses can then be tested in an analytical study involving multiple cases (Caramani, 2011).

Patterns, similarities and differences are examined to assess the relationships of variants between the two or more separate systems. It is this nature of the analysis that renders it comparative. Henceforth the researcher is subsequently able to isolate the independent variables of each study case. If the independent variables of "X" and "Y" exist, their relationship to dependant variable "Z" can be hypothesised, tested and established (Landman, 2008). This isolation is essential for the most defining and significant strength of CA, that is to establish the hypothetical relationships among variables (Guy, 2011). This empirical analysis can be used to explain a system, present theoretical ideas for modification and even to reasonably predict the future consequence of the case study in question.

While some researchers may favour a large amount of countries for their study (large-N) others will use a smaller amount of units (small-N) (Guy, 1988). The size of the case study is directly collated with the subject and it must lend the study sufficient statistical power. The researcher decides whether it is most appropriate to study one or more units for comparison and whether to use quantitative or qualitative research methods (Guy, 1988). The methodology of utilising multiple countries when analysing is the closet replication of the experimental method used in natural science (Lim, 2010). A clear strength of this method is the inclusion of the ability to implement statistical controls to deduct rival explanations, its ability to make strong inferences that hold for more cases, and its ability to classify

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'deviant' countries that contradict the outcomes expected from the theory being tested (Guy, 2011).

Deviant countries or cases are units which appear to be exceptions to the norm of the theory being analysed. They are most prevalent in studies of processes and institutions involving only one country. This is due to the fact that there is often a severely limited amount of variability being tested (Lim, 2010). In testing for the relationship between income inequality and political violence in sixty countries, Muller and Seligson identified which countries collated with their theory and which did not. Brazil, Panama, and Gabon were found to have a lower level of political violence than was expected for their national level of income inequality. Alternatively, with a low national level of income inequality, the UK was shown to have a higher than expected amount of political violence (Harro and Hauge, 2003). This identification of these 'deviant', cases allowed researchers to look for the explanations. They were able to deduct them from their analysis and increase the accuracy of their predictions for the other cases. This could not have been achieved in a single-country study and would have inevitably left the findings unbalanced and inaccurate.

Selection bias is a reductive practice that is most common with single-country studies. It arises through the deliberate prejudice of countries chosen for examination. The most damaging form of selection bias to the validity of the research is when only case(s) that support the theory being hypothesised are analysed. The serious problem of selection bias occurs much less frequently in studies that contain multiple countries (Lim, 2010). This is because studies that compare institutions and processes in multiple countries often rely on a sufficient number of observations that reduce the problem or at least its effects of selection bias. Using multiple countries reduces the risk of this invalidity causing phenomena.

However, the research of a single country is clearly valuable; it can produce an insightful exploration of many domestic institutions such as social healthcare, and also processes such as immigration. The findings however are mostly applicable to the country of analysis. Whereas the findings of multi-national CA are also domestically valuable, they also tend to be more inherently valuable to the wider international field. This is because the comparisons of multi-national institutions and processes that are functionally collated have an increased global validity and transferability than the findings of comparison of a single nation (Keman, 2011). The comparative results of a single nation must be hypothesised with other understandings and predications relying substantially on theoretical observations, assumptions and past studies. Inevitably, studying more than one country lends the study a greater field of which to analyse. It is by the CA of subjects from multiple countries that thematic maps can be developed, national, regional and global trends can be identified, and transnational organisations can make acutely informed decisions. These practical benefits are not possible when analysing a phenomenon from one country without cross-case comparison. Analysing multiple cross-national units also furthers our understanding of the similarities, differences and relationships between the case study itself, and the geo-political, economic, and socio-cultural factors that would otherwise escape unaccounted.

The popularity of comparative method of analysing two or more countries has steadily increased (Landman, 2008). Indeed it can be regarded as essential to the understanding and development of modern day political, and international relation's theory. With the constant dissolvent of countries around the world such as Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia combined with the potential for the creation of new states such as Palestine; the CA which involves different countries offers a wealth of information and most importantly, prediction for their futures. This theoretical framework for prediction is invaluable to society.

Alternatively analysis applied to a single-nation case is less applicable on a global scale (Lim, 2010). For example; studying the process of democratization in one Latin American country, although it offers important inferences that can be examined in other countries with a similar set of circumstances, is arguably insufficient to develop a theory of democratization itself that would be globally applicable. Quite simply, the singular analysis of an institution or process involving only one country often fails to provide a global set of inferences to accurately theorise a process (Harro and Hauge, 2003).

Comparing and contrasting processes and institutions of two or more countries allows the isolation of specific national variants (Hopkin, 2010). It also encourages the clear revealing of common similarities, trends and causation and the deduction of false causation. This means that established hypothesis are continually ripe for reevaluation and

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modification. It enables the researcher to minimise the reductive phenomenon of having 'too many variables not enough countries', this occurs when the researcher is unable to isolate the dependant variable of the study because there are too many potential variables (Harro and Hauge, 2003). This problem is far more associated with single-country studies because it results from a surplus of potential explanatory factors combined with an insufficient amount of countries or cases in the study (Harro and Hauge, 2003).

Studies involving multiple countries assists in the defining of results as being idiographic in nature or nomothetic (Franzese, 2007). It also assists in making the important distinction between causation, positive correlation, negative correlation and non-correlation. When analysing only one case or country it is harder to correctly make a distinction between these relationships especially one that is not only subject to the one country.

It is by studying institutions and processes of different countries by use of an empirical methodological framework, that the researcher is able to realise inferences without the ambiguity of generalisations. The separation of the cases being compared offers the researcher a richer study ground of variables that assist in acutely testing hypotheses and in the creation of others. It is through CA that correlating, dependent and independent relationships can be identified (Lim, 2010). The inclusion of multiple countries in a study lends the findings wider validity (Keman, 2011). For example, Gurr demonstrated that the amounts of civil unrest in 114 countries are directly related to the existence of economic and political deprivation. This theory holds true for a majority of countries that it is tested with (Keman, 2011).

It should also be noted that all countries, to differing degrees, are functioning in an interdependent globalized environment. Because of immigration, economic and political interdependence, the study of an institutions and/or processes within a single country inevitably gives a reduction in the transferability of the findings. This is because the findings at least are only as applicably transferable as their counterparts are functionally equivalent. It also somewhat fails to account for transnational trends (Franzese, 2007). Alternatively, comparison involving multiple nations, especially using quantitative techniques, can offer valuable empirically-based geopolitical and domestic generalizations. These assist in the evolution of our understanding of political phenomena and produce great recommendations into how to continue particular research using the same form of analysis or a different method all together.

The study of processes and institutions within two or more countries has been criticised for producing less in-depth information compared to studies involving one country (Franzese, 2007). While this appears to be a substantial criticism; there is not always agreement between scholars that this trade-off between quantity and quality is substantial, or indeed extremely relevant. Robert Franzese claims that the relative loss of detail which results from analysing large amounts of cross-national cases, does not justify retreating to qualitative study of a few cases (Franzese, 2007). This is because most generalizations from single-country studies will inevitably be limited, since the country as a unit is bound by unique internal characteristics.

It is clear that both single-nation and multinational studies play an important role in CA. Yet as evidenced above, the strengths of encompassing multiple countries into comparative research far outweigh any reduction in the quality of the findings. Indeed, multinational studies work to reduce selection bias, and encourage global transferability, assists in variable deduction and receive recognition as being empirically scientific.

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