



# Approaches to Comparative Analysis: Directions from Political Studies

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# Outline

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- Introduction - Case-Based Comparative Analysis
- Comparative Method (Political Science)
- Comparative Historical Analysis (Historical Sociology)
- Process Tracing
- Examples - Comparative Studies of CEE
- Challenges & Considerations

# Intro to Case-Based Comparative Analysis

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- To be comparative, the analysis is based on two or more cases allowing for both cross-case and within-case analysis (as opposed to the case study method focused on one single case)
- Cross-case analysis can examine a small or large number of cases, but the number of cases has implications for the techniques available
  - Small- and medium- $N$  studies are qualitative in nature
  - Large- $N$  studies have the possibility to use statistical techniques
- The focus here is on small- $N$  qualitative-comparative analysis requiring in-depth knowledge of the cases
  - The requirement of in-depth knowledge according to the research aims is itself a limitation on the number of cases that are feasible

# Comparative Method (Political Science)

- The comparative method is commonly used in Political Science – *Comparative Politics*
- The comparative method approximates the statistical method
  - The comparative method is used because the experimental and statistical methods often cannot be used for qualitative variables in political science (Hopkin 2002)
  - Small-*N* qualitative-comparative research, “look[ing] at phenomena within their contexts” (Hopkin 2010)
- Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) and Most Different Systems Design (MDSD) (Przeworski and Teune 1970)

# Comparative Method (Political Science)

- There have been attempts to more explicitly specify alternatives for case-based comparative research and their trade-offs
- Three approaches for small-*N* explanatory case study research (Blatter and Blume 2008; Blatter and Haverland 2012), as means of drawing inference
  - ‘co-variational analysis’ (COV) for cross-case comparisons
  - ‘causal-process tracing’ (CPT) and ‘congruence analysis’ (CON) for within-case analysis

COV	Dom	Cross-case	Variable-centered X → Y Inputs/Outcomes Causal effects	Generalize to wider population
CPT	Alt	Within-case	Process-centered Causal mechs/configs	Develop deep/dense insights
CON			Theory-centered Explain mismatch Interpretive	Address broader theoretical discourse

# Comparative Historical Analysis

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- CHA is a qualitative-comparative approach used by Historical Institutionalists interested in institutional change
  - Overlaps with Historical Sociology, Political Science
  - Focused on process tracing (PT)
- CHA works are concerned with causal analysis, processes, and systemic and contextualized comparison (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003)
- “[A]ims to test, challenge and shift prior beliefs about a set of cases” (Goldstone 2003)
- Takes a “historicist view of institutional genesis, evolution and change” (Thelen 2003)
- Compatible with Most-Similar Systems Design (MSSD) from Comparative Politics

# Process Tracing (PT)

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- Process Tracing – Linking variables and outcomes via causal chains, processes and mechanisms; inferring causality in comparative cases
- In policy studies, CPT is consistent with theoretical pluralism and useful when dealing with hidden or fragmented data (Kay and Baker 2015)
- Checkel 2005
  - PT gaining buzz-word status
  - Good – PT places theory and data in close proximity
  - Bad – Inherently positivist-empiricist, but its users (e.g. constructivists, historical institutionalists, etc.) often aren't!
    - Recommended with post-positivist or scientific realist approach

# Process Tracing (PT)

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- Can also specify different *types* of PT
  - Case-centric, theory-testing and theory-building PT (Beach and Pedersen 2012; 2013)
- Cross-case methods (small-*N* comparison/COV) can infer causality and precede more in-depth PT (Beach and Pedersen 2012)
  - Can be wise to start with a COV technique and extend to PT if appropriate
- Drawbacks
  - Requires huge amounts of qualitative data and time
  - It is not clear whether recent attempts to refine the methodologies are reflected in practical research
  - Most studies claiming “PT” are not clear about what they actually did or how they did it



# Ex: Comparative Studies of CEE

- Comparative studies of policy and institutions focused on CEE have been concerned with institutional transformations in the post-socialist period and explaining processes such as:
  - Transition to democracy and market economy and the emergent diversities of capitalism in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia (Stark and Bruszt 1998; 2001)
  - Territorial decentralisation and municipal reform in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland (Illner 1997; 1999)
  - Regionalisation in the Czech Republic and Poland (Yoder 2003)
  - Path dependence of political-institutional, economic and societal aspects of ‘transition’ (Koutský et al. 2013)

# Ex: Comparative Studies of CEE

- Much attention is paid towards specifying particularities between CEE countries
  - Assumption of similarity and belonging in studies of CEE states (Herrschel and Nancheva 2013)
  - Many studies are focused on filling the literature gap of variation amongst CEE countries, often treated together as a black box (Swianiewicz 2014)
- While obviously case-based and comparative in nature, they are generally not explicit about their methodologies
  - Cross-case, within-case and single-case studies
  - Difficult to find evidence of specific techniques or epistemological approaches
  - Historical Institutional/CHA, CPT or simply COV?
    - Many are based on description and make assumptions about processes and effects (as Checkel (2005) pointed out PT scholars are prone to do)

# Challenges & Considerations

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- Studies often employ a mixture of cross-case and within-case analysis (e.g. COV & CPT)
  - Is it intentional? Wilful negligence? Weakness of research? Why bother?
  - Skocpol's (1979) *States and Social Revolutions* specified co-variational (COV) techniques but causal claims were based on thick historical description (CPT) (Blatter and Blume 2008) (and it was Most Different Systems design)
- The choices depends on the research aims
  - Many comparative case studies aim to situate cases, e.g. countries, amongst each other to further theory and understanding of the cases themselves (Evans 1992; Stark and Bruszt 1998), rather than identifying causal mechanisms or generalizing theory
  - “There is no a priori reason to regard case-oriented, qualitative-comparative research as methodologically ‘soft’, and indeed this approach can provide a more rigorous and sophisticated response to some research questions.” (Hopkins 2010, 300)

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