# 2

# The Comparative approach: theory and method

**CONTENTS**



## 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter we shall elaborate on the essentials of the ‘art of comparing’ by discussing relation between theory and method as it is discussed with reference to the Comparative approach. In order to clarify this point of view, we shall first discuss some of the existing ideas about what the comparative approach is in terms of a scientific undertaking. In addition, we shall argue in Section 2.2. that one can distinguish in comparative politics a ‘core subject’ that enables us to study the relationship between ‘politics and society’ in a

fruitful and viable way. In section 2.3 we shall enter into the important topic of the comparative approach, i.e. the comparative method and its implications for a 'proper' research design. The central argument will be that a coherent framework of theoretical references and a corresponding logic of inquiry are required. If it is not possible to do this, the comparative approach will still remain a valuable asset to political and social science, yet any claim of being a 'scientific' approach should then be put to rest (Mayer, 1989; Keman, 1993a; Lane and Ersson, 1994).

A final concern involves scrutinizing existing logics of comparative inquiry to account for the observed variation by means of testing empirical hypotheses, thereby either corroborating or falsifying them (Lijphart, 1975: 159; Przeworski and Teune, 1970; Guy Peters, 1998). Hence we explicitly aim at the relation between proposition and empirical evidence and consider that as the cornerstone of social science. This implies the use of *positive theory development* as a stepping stone to advancing our knowledge of politics and society. The central feature of this approach to social science is embedded throughout this book by the relationship between Research Question, Research Design and -- empirical -- quantitative data-analysis on the basis of statistical methods. All these concerns are in itself worthy of serious discussion and deliberation, and the main issue at hand is that the comparative approach often lacks coherence in terms of a set of theoretical references and related logics of inquiry. Therefore this chapter must be seen as an argument to relate theory and method in order to gain a viable and feasible approach to explain political and social processes. To this end we propose the following guidelines to define the comparative approach as a distinctive way of analyzing and explaining social

and political developments. The guidelines can be considered as ‘flags’ that mark the process of doing research by means of the comparative method:

1. describe the core subject of comparative inquiry. In other words: the question *what* exactly is to be explained and how do we recognize a need for comparison, that is: what are the essential *systemic* features?
2. develop a view on which *theoretical* concepts can ‘travel’ comparatively as well as measure what is intended (internal validity) as well as possess a unifying capacity for *explaining* political and social processes in general (external validity)?
3. discuss the logic of the comparative method as a *means* to a goal, rather than as an end in itself. In other words, which instrument fits the Research Questions to be answered best by means of what type of Research Design?

We therefore now turn to the next point on the agenda: the comparative approach as an important instrument of researching the relationship between politics and society.

## 2.2 Comparative Research and case selection

Comparative political and social research is generally defined in two ways: either on the basis of its supposed core subject, which is almost always defined at the level of political and social *systems* (Lane and Ersson, 1994; Dogan and Pelassy, 1990; Keman, 1997), or by means of descriptive features that claim to enhance knowledge about politics and society as a *process* (e.g.: Roberts, 1978; Macridis and Burg, 1991; Almond *et al.*, 1993). These descriptions are generally considered to differentiate the comparative approach

from other approaches within political and social science. Although it is a useful starting point, it is not sufficient. The comparative approach must be elaborated in terms of its theoretical design and its research strategy on the basis of a goal-oriented point of reference, i.e. what exactly is to be explained.

A way of accomplishing this is to argue for a more refined concept of 'politics and society' and develop concepts that 'travel' -- i.e. are truly comparative -- and can thus be related to the political process in various societies (Collier, 1993; Landman, 2003). In addition, a set of rules must be developed that direct the research strategy, aiming at explanations rather than at a more or less complete description of political phenomena by comparing them across systems, through time, or cross-nationally. At this point most comparativists stop elaborating their approach and start investigating, often however, without realizing that theory and method are mutually interdependent (Keman, 1993c; Stepan, 2001). For the goal of comparative analysis is to explain those 'puzzles', which cannot be studied without comparing *and* which are derived from logical reasoning. Hence, no comparative research without an extensive theoretical argument underlying it, or without a methodologically adequate research design to undertake it.A first and vital step in the process is to ponder over the relationship between the cases under review and the variables employed in the analysis (Landman, 2003; Peters, 1998; Keman, 1993c). There is a trade off between the two: in general the more cases one compares, the less variables are often available and vice versa (Przeworski, 1987; Ragin, 1987). In Chapter 3 we shall elaborate this problem in full, for now it suffices to put forward that the conversion of Research Question (RQ) into a viable Research Design (RD) is confronting the researcher with this inevitable problem. To complicate things

even more one has also to consider whether or not 'time' is a relevant factor to be taken into account (Bartolini, 1993). Below in figure 2.1 this problem of choice has been depicted.

**Figure 2.1 ABOUT HERE. (NOT IN THE FILE; SEE BOOK PAGE 28)**

Figure 2.1 shows that there are five options available:

(1) The *Single* Case Study (either a country, an event or systemic feature)

(2) The Single Case Study *over time* (i.e. a historical study or time series analysis)

(3) *Two or more* cases at a *few time* intervals (i.e. closed universe of discourse)

(4) *All* cases that are relevant regarding the Research Question under review

(5) *All* relevant cases across time *and* space (pooled time series analysis)

Obviously a single case study (see: Yin, 1996; Guy Peters, 1998) cannot be considered as genuinely comparative. Implicitly it is, but in terms of external validity it is not. Nevertheless, it is often used for reasons of validation *post hoc* to inspect whether or not the general results of a comparative analysis hold up in a more detailed analysis; see for instance: Castles, 1993; Vergunst, 2004) or to study a *deviant* case for theory generation (i.e. a case that is seemingly an 'exception to the rule'; see: Lijphart, 1968). A single case study has the advantage that it allows for the inclusion of many variables. This method is often referred to as "thick description" (Landman, 2003: Chapter 2).

A single case study over time is often used as a theory confirming or infirming analyses based on a country's history with a specific focus derived from the Research

Question in use (Lijphart, 1971: 692). Examples of such studies can – for instance – be found in the analysis of consolidation of democracy (Stepan, 2001). This type of case analyses can be performed qualitatively or quantitatively. In the latter case it is often applying econometric models over a set of many time points (Beck and Katz, 1995).

The third option in Figure 2.1 concerns the 'few' cases alternative, and is more often than not taking into account time (be it before/after an event – like war or economic crisis – or be it certain periods that are seen as crucial for the cases involved; Berg-Schlosser and Mitchell, 2002). A few(er) Cases Research Design is seen as a 'focused comparison' which is directly derived from the Research Question under review (Ragin, 1994). Here the specific features of core subject under study explicitly direct the inclusion of relevant cases and is therefore more or less a 'closed shop'. A good example of this is the qualitative study of revolutions by Theda Skocpol (1979), on the one hand, and the quantitative analysis on the same topic by Gurr (1970), on the other hand.

Option number four is the most prevalent one in comparative research: it concerns those cases that have more in common that they differ from each other *depending* on the Research Question (Collier, 1993). The advantage is that the universe of discourse is limited on the basis of the 'most similar systems design' and therefore that *both* the internal and external validity is considered to be enhanced. Examples of this approach are the numerous analyses of industrial democracies (Bryce, 1929; Almond and Verba, 1963; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Powell, 1982; Hibbs, 1987; Keman, 1997; Lane and Ersson, 1999; Gallagher et al., 2001).

The final option (# 5) is strongly debated among comparativists. On the one hand, the number of cases is indeed maximized, but, on the other hand, there is the pitfall that

time is considered to be constant across all cases (or, at least, that change is consistent within the cases; see: Hicks, 1994; and: Chapter 6 in this book, where the statistical problems related to pooled time series are discussed). Yet, the obvious advantage is that the universe of discourse can be extended and thus the scope of comparison widened across time and space (Stimson, 1985). If one would go through the literature or the major political science journal (like the American Political Science Review, Comparative Studies, or the European Journal for Political Research, etcetera), one can find numerous examples of how a Research Question is indeed translated into a Research Design in which each of the possibilities has been chosen. For instance, the study of Dutch Consociationalism is a one case/time series Research Design (# 2 in Figure 2.1) whereas Lijphart's study of Consensus Democracies (Lijphart, 1999) is a cross-sectional analysis of *all* relevant cases (# 4). Many studies on Welfare States more often than not use a Research Design in which *all* relevant cases are included and are studied over time albeit for a few period-points only (# 3; see e.g.: Castles, 1993; Esping-Andersen, 1999). The analysis of the working of coalition governments (see: Laver and Schofield, 1990; Budge and Keman, 1990) is often done in combination of as many relevant cases as possible and for as many points in time as feasible. This is what is often called a pooled time series Resarch Design (# 5). In fact, the last example also demonstrates that we are not only interested in countries as cases, but -- depending on the Research Question -- on elements central to the political system such as: governments, parties, interest groups, voters, institutions and so on. In these instances the number of cases will often be much larger, if and when all relevant cases are included. Yet, and this is an important point, the options for choice as depicted here are thus not free.

However, in most discussions of the comparative approach, it appears however, that both theoretical and methodological aspects of case selection are divorced, or -- at least -- treated separately. For example, Ragin (1987) and Przeworski (1987) emphasize predominantly the methodological aspects of the art of comparison as a 'logic of inquiry', which is often underdeveloped or incompletely elaborated. At the same time these authors argue their case by means of examples that are seemingly picked at random. Theoretical progress and explanatory results appear then to emanate from their 'logic' (see: Przeworski, 1987: 45ff; Ragin, 1987: 125ff). Yet, the comparative analysis of the political process must be instead founded *a priori* in theory and then related to the best fitting 'logic of inquiry' or in out terms: a proper Research Design.

The principal message is that much of the research that is labelled as comparative, either lacks theoretical foundation of what mechanisms in various systems have why such mechanisms in common or not, or is based on a research design that is not comparative, but is rather a collection of bits of information about a number of systems. The main lesson that can be drawn from the examples listed here as an elaboration of Figure 2.1 is that the Research Design *per se* directs the Research Design in terms of the central units of variation (like governments, elections, welfare state et cetera) which imply the theoretical relations under review and direct as well the units of observation (like years if change is focused upon or all parliamentary governments across the whole universe of discourse). These choices or decisions -- made by the researcher -- also dictates then the units of measurement (or: values) that make up the Total Number of Cases. Given this line of reasoning, which is essential to our approach to comparative research, it is essential therefore, to develop a theoretical perspective in order to relate systematically

the Research Question to possible Research Designs and not simply to gather information about a lot of cases, which are more often than not included for pragmatic reasons.

## 2.3 The Use of Comparative analysis in political science: relating politics, polity and policy to society

Usually the comparative approach to politics and society is defined both by its substance (the study of a plurality of societies or systems) and by its method (e.g. cross- and international, comparable cases, longitudinal etc., see: Schmitter, 1993: 177; see also Figure 2.1). Such a description, however, undermines the necessary link between theory and method as well as the distinctiveness of the comparative approach in terms of what, when and to compare. Theory here equals the propositions concerning the explanation of a relationship between politics in social reality and the societal developments that are (seen to be) affected by it. Method is then the most appropriate way to investigate the proposed relationships empirically. As we have stated before, comparing as such is one of the common tenets underlying much if not all research in the social sciences. Yet, one needs to realize all the time that this refers to the 'logic' of systematically finding answers to questions about the complexities of reality. This logic has already been used for a long time and has been described by John Stuart Mill (1872) as the *methods of Agreement and Difference* (see also: Janoski and Hicks, 1994: Ch.1; Landman, 2003: Ch. 2). Comparison is then an instrument to verify or falsify relationships between two phenomenons. Yet, here in this book we consider the logic as an integral part of the comparative approach by stressing the crucial importance of the link between the

Research Question, on the one hand, and the Research Design, on the other. For this we need to reduce the complexity of reality and thus to control for variation – this is what the comparative method allows for.

As Sartori (1991: 244--5) stresses, we need to compare in order to control the observed units of variation or the variables that make up the theoretical relationship. In fact, what the researcher is attempting, is to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions under which the relationship occurs in reality. In fact this would entail that it may be assumed by the researcher that all other things (or: conditions) are equal except for the relationship under empirical review. This is what we call the *Ceteris Paribus* clause. The more 'truly' the comparison, i.e. the more explicit the relationship between the Research Question and Research Design is of a comparative nature, the more positive the analytical results will be. If we look, for instance, at the relationship between 'class society' and the emergence of 'welfare states' the relationship is positive if we examine the developments in the UK and Sweden and Australia (Castles, 1978, 1985). Yet, if we focus instead on the Netherlands, Germany and Italy (Van Kersbergen, 1995) where the role of religion used to be the central focus of political behaviour, the answer could be negative to this Research Question. Hence, only when we take into account as many relevant and concurrent cases it is possible to reach a viable and plausible conclusion concerning socioeconomic divisions in society and related consequences in terms of welfare regulation. Similarly, the question whether or not economic developments are also dependent on types of democratic governance and interest intermediation cannot be fully answered by studying one country, or -- like Olson (1982) did -- by comparing only the states within the USA. The basic message is thus the degree of control of the

environment or contextual features necessary to reach sound conclusions is in need of selecting the proper number of cases, be it cross-sectionally or cross-time (depending, of course, on the Research Question; see Figure 2.1). From this point of view, it appears reasonable to conclude -- as Dalton (1991) does -- that it is almost impossible to conceive of serious explanatory work in political and social science that is not at least implicitly comparative.

Janoski and Hicks (1994: Ch. 1), for instance, point correctly to the distinction between *internal* and *external* analysis in the social sciences. Both types are considered as important for comparative research. Internal analysis refers to the knowledge necessary to understand the cases under review *per se* whereas external analysis is the analysis of the agreement or differences *between* cases. As we shall later on, both types of analysis are useful for: 1. selecting the proper research design; 2. evaluating the reliability and validity of the data gathered. Hence, from the perspective that the comparative approach is a crucial one in political and social science, depending on the definition of the core subject and research question asked (are the referring to the i.e. cells 1 and 3 in Figure 2.2) one must also take into account that knowledge of the cases as such, which make up the universe of discourse, is a vital prerequisite for accomplishing good comparative types of analysis. Hence, internal types of comparisons can be useful to execute external analysis of the same phenomenon.

The comparative approach to political science is thus not by itself exclusive, but if we follow the idea that concepts derived from theories about the real world need to be investigated by means of controlling variation as observed in the real world, we cannot abstain from this approach (Lijphart, 1971; Smelser, 1976; Mayer, 1989; Sartori, 1991).

Actually, we could go even further by saying, that the comparative approach is the fundamental point of departure for most theories that figure in political and social science. In addition, the comparative method then is not only preferred, but required in those situations in which there is no possible recourse to experimental techniques or when the number of observations do not allow for the use of statistical techniques that are based on sampling. However, as we already saw in Figure 2.1, these limitations are rather the exception than the rule (see also: Mayer, 1989; Keman, 1993d; Collier, 1993).

An important and crucial step in the use and application of the comparative approach is the issue of *concept formation*, which can travel across time, situations, or societies (Bartolini, 1993; Sartori, 1994). In other words, how to define crucial concepts and subsequently develop a systematic classification of variables that represent the theoretical relationship proposed and which are derived from the core subject of the discipline, that is: the 'political' in a society.

The 'political' in a society can be described on the basis of three dimensions: *politics, polity and policy* (Schmidt, 1996; Keman, 1997). Politics is then what we would like to call the political process. On this level actors (mostly aggregates of individuals organized in parties, social movements and interest groups) interact with each other if and when they have conflicting interests or views regarding societal issues that cannot be solved by them (i.e. deficiency of self-regulation). The process of solving those problems, which make actors clash, is more often than not visible through the political and social *institutions* that have emerged in order to facilitate conflict resolution (Scharpf, 1998).

Institutions -- or the 'rules of political governance' -- help to develop coalescence and to achieve a consensus among conflicting actors through compromising alternative

preferences. These institutions manifest themselves in the *rules of the game* in a society. This is what is meant with the 'polity'. To put it more formally, rules are humanly devised constraints that shape political interaction. Institutions are then considered to be both formal, like for instance in a constitution, which can be enforced, and informal, i.e. they evolve over time and are respected as a code of conduct by most actors involved. Hence, the rules -- be it formal or informal -- define the relationship between the 'political and society' (Braun, 1995; Czada *et al.*, 1998). In short, a theory of the political process must assume that there exists a mutual and interdependent relation between politics and society, but that its organization is to a large extent independent from society. The issue at hand is then to investigate to what extent and in what way this process can be observed and affects social and economic developments of societies by means of comparison (Almond et al., 1993; Hix, 1999; Hague & Harrop., 2004). It should be kept in mind, that the triad of 'politics-polity-policy' in itself is *not* a theory of the political process. It is instead a *heuristic* device to delineate the 'political' from the 'non-political' (and thus to distinguish politics from society). This description of the 'political', however, makes it possible to elaborate on the core subject of the comparative approach. That is to say that all those processes that can be defined by means of these three dimensions are in need of a comparative analysis in order to explain the process.

**BOX 3 – *Conceptualising the "political" in society***

Political systems can be described by means of: Politics – Polity – Policy *(3*P)*

*Politics* concerns the interactions between (collective) actors within a society on issues where actors (e.g. parties & organized interests) are strongly contested.

*Polity* is the available framework of the formal and informal "rules of the game"- also called institutions that direct the behaviour of the political actors.

*Policy* denotes the political decisions made for a society (often called 'outputs'), which are subsequently implemented in society (also 'outcomes').

Theories and hypotheses in comparative political science usually refer to units of variation, i.e. political variables, policy variables and polity-variables at the macroscopic level. The theories and hypotheses often apply to many units of observation (e.g. nations or parties, governments, etc.) and many time periods (e.g. decades or years).

The term unit of variation can have two meanings therefore: on the one hand it signifies an elaboration of the theoretical argument and the related Research Question into meaningful concepts, on the other hand it concerns the translation of the theory into a Research Design where variables are developed that can be observed empirically and are the units of analysis.

A number of comparative researchers have drawn attention to this confusing way of using the terms 'unit of variation' and 'unit of observation', which easily leads to equating description with explanation. Yet, it is quite important to know exactly what is under discussion, if we wish to validate theoretical statements by means of empirical knowledge. Przeworski and Teune propose a distinction between 'levels of observation' and 'levels of analysis' (1970: 50), whereas Ragin introduces the terms 'observational

unit' and 'explanatory unit' (Ragin, 1987: 8--9). Both these distinctions between respectively empirical knowledge and theoretical statements appear useful, but may still be confusing to the practitioner. We prefer to follow the formulations as used in Chapter 1.

In summary: a comparative analysis of the 'political' in society begins with the formulation of the unit of variation by referring to relations at a macro-scopical level (i.e. systemic level). By elaborating these units, one must always keep in mind that the units of observation (i.e. the (sub)systems or cases under review) that are employed are not identical, but are considered to be similar. Finally, the unit of measurement is not by definition equal to the analytical properties as defined in social theory and related research questions.

**BOX 4 – Comparing as a means to control for contextual variation**

Doing research in the social sciences, i.e. about people, societies, states et cetera, *always* implies a reduction of complexity of real life. The comparative method is useful to achieve this goal because it allows for controlling contextual variation. The issue is therefore how to select the *proper combination* of relevant cases and variables to validate theory without disregarding relevant contextual features.

To give an example: the study of the development of the welfare state is not, by definition, a topic of comparative political research. In our view, it becomes a comparative topic only if an attempt is made to explain this development by means of macro-political properties such as conflicting interests between socio-economic classes. These conflicts are, depending on the existing institutions of the liberal democratic state, fought out in parliament and other decision-making bodies and subsequently may result

in a patterned variation of public policy-formation at the system-level of the state. Hence the core subject is not the welfare state, but instead the extent to which politics, polity and policy can be identified as properties of the political process that shapes the welfare state in a country. This being the case, the extent to which elements of this process are relevant, is explaining the political development of the welfare state (Castles and Pierson, 2000; Scharpf and Schmidt, 2000). Below in Table 2.1 some examples are listed of how units of variation, observation and measurement are linked together in actual research in comparative politics.

**Table 2.1 about here (IN THE FILE TABLESPARTONE.DOC, NOT THE VERSION IN THE BOOK)**

To conclude our discussion of the study of the relationship between politics and society: the *theory-guided* question within any type of comparative analysis is to what extent the 'political', in terms of explanatory units of *variation* (= variables) can indeed account for, and is shaped by the political actions in one social system compared to another. Conversely, the theory guided question, or Research Question needs to be refined as to define the units of *measurement* (= indicators) and thus the units of *observation* (= cases) in social reality. It is this process and the attempts to explain it by systematic comparison that distinguishes the comparative approach from other approaches in political and social science. This conclusion brings us to the next issue we seek to answer: what steps must be taken to properly relate the Research Question to an adequate Research Design, i.e. a design that is conducive to plausible conclusions. This is the subject of the next chapter.

## 2.4 END MATTER

*Topics highlighted*

- Theory comes before method, Research Questions before Research Designs
- Selecting relevant cases across time and space
- Dimensions of comparison: time, space and types of analysis
- The study of the 'political' in relation to 'society' enables the comparativist to relate units of variation to units of measurement and units of observation in a meaningful way
- The main advantage of the Comparative Approach in Political and Social Science is to verify and to 'test' theories by controlling contextual variation.

**Questions and Exercises**

- Can you explain why different Research Questions re. Welfare Statism could well imply different Research Designs? See for this: *European Journal of Political Research,* 31/1 & 2: pp. 99--114 & 159--168.
- If you look up the book by Todd Landman, 2003 and read Chapter 2, in particular the section on Single-country studies, can you explain what its use is: *developing* theory or v*erifying* theory?
- In this chapter we discuss: space, micro and macro-levels and inter and intra-system comparisons (see Figure 2.1). Could you think of a topic of investigation that is solely comparatively researched on:

- Time without space?
- Micro-observations without macro-properties?
- Intra-system features without inter-system references?

**Exercises**

- If you read Lijphart's article on 'Dimensions of Democracy' and Duverger's article 'A new Political System' could you then reformulate their Research Question in terms of the *triad*: politics - polity - policy? (you can find Abstracts of these articles in *European Journal of Political Research*, 31 (1/2): 125--146 and 193--204).
- An important feature of the 'art of comparing' is controlling for the contextual variation (or: exogenous variables). More often than not this is endeavored by selecting the number of (proper) cases, which are supposed to be similar, but for the variation to be explained.
- If you take the article of Lijphart again (see above) can you tell from his list of cases *why* he thinks that these countries are indeed more similar than others and thus do enhance the matter of internal and external validity?

**Further Reading**:

*Key Texts*


- Charles Ragin (1987): *The Comparative Method: Moving beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

This is one of the most authoritative texts on the problem of how to compare in the social sciences. In particular the strategy for selecting cases and its consequences is elaborated.

- Jan-Erik Lane and Svante Ersson (1994). *Comparative Politics. An Introduction and a New Approach*. Oxford: Polity Press.

  An accessible overview of different approaches in comparative politics with a special attention for the relationship between politics, society, and the state on the one hand, and types of theory with respect to middle range theory on the other hand.

*Advanced Texts*

- Charles Mayer (1989). *Redefining Comparative Politics. Promise versus Performance.*. London and New York: Sage Publishers.

  Although published some time ago, it still is a powerful treatise of the development of the comparative methodology. The focus is on the development of a rigorous empirical-analytical approach. Useful for students who wish to be informed on the pitfalls and hazards of doing comparative research.

- David Marsh and Garry Stoker Eds. (2002) *Theory and Methods in Political Science*. London: MacMillan.

  A fine overview of the main contemporary subfields in political science. Particularly useful for orientation on the relation between subfields and method.

- Hans Keman (1993) *Comparative Politics: New Directions in Theory and Method*. Amsterdam: VU Press.

  A useful collection of essays by reputed comparativists. The focus is not only on the ‘state of the art’, but also on how to relate theory to method in a conscious and solid way.