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Comparing political systems: Towards positive theory development

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Abstract:

Much comparative research is biased as well as limited by its way of case selection, which may well impair the internal and external validity of the results. Furthermore, too often comparisons are made without explicitly departing from theory-guided questions in relation to the research design developed. Finally, concurrent logics of inquiry due to case selection and research design are often insufficiently reflected upon. All this implies that comparative political analysis remains shallow in developing new theoretical insights. In this article these issues are raised and discussed. By means of three research traditions in comparative politics we demonstrate how positive theory development can be achieved by means of applying the comparative approach rigorously and consciously. Essential is that theory comes before method to advance proper comparative analyses of politics and society.

Key Words: Comparative Analysis; Theory Development; Research Design; Methodology.

1. Introduction

In 1921 Lord Bryce published a study of the constitutional design of democracy. His point of departure was that ample modern democracies were available to undertake a systematic comparative inquiry. The aim of such a study was to “describe the working of actual democratic governments [...] classifying and comparing the phenomena which the examination of these governments reveals.” (Bryce 1921: 9). Most important, in his view was that the comparative method could help to avoid biased views by assuming one particular country as typical for the direction and working of democracies in general. Hence, taking politics as a ‘science’ by applying the comparative approach Bryce sought to make analyses by recording the efforts made and results achieved by and within constitutional democracies. To this end the method of enquiry ought to be empirical: “It is facts that are needed: Facts, Facts, Facts. When facts are supplied, each of us can try to reason from them.” (Bryce 1921: 13).

This narrative demonstrates that the comparative approach of politics has a long tradition in political science. Of course, the tradition of comparative politics dates back even further (think of Aristotle, Herodotus, de Toqueville, et cetera). Yet, what was new to this approach was the idea that comparative enquiries should be based on systematically ordered empirical evidence. It should not be used as illustrations of isolated situations or singular systems. The ‘facts’ form the platform for inference as regards to regularities across systems. This procedure would induce classifications and typologies, on the one hand, and would lead to analytical conclusions with respect to the relationship between the organization of a democratic system and its actual performance, on the other hand (see Finer 1999).

It is interesting to note (in passing) that James Bryce was familiar with the ideas and practices of political science in the US and of the emerging approach that is now known as ‘behavioralism’ (see Macridis 1955; Almond 1968). The behavioral approach emphasized strongly a scientific attitude, causal arguments and factual description. However, it was mainly directed to the study of American politics and the analysis of democratic politics by means of micro-level data (like, for example, survey analysis, cultural features and psychological factors; see: Katznelson and Milner 2002: 4-5).

This ‘school of thought’ has been quite influential. It begot an almost ‘paradigmatic’ status in the USA and was a dominant force in the institutionalization and professionalisation of political science (APSA). Yet, this development was not as influential in Europe (before and after the Second World War; see Almond 1996) and differed from its American

counterpart in one important aspect: the institutional analysis of politics always remained a crucial feature of the study of politics and of ‘Comparative Politics’ in particular (Daalder 1993). In particular after the Second World War the comparative analysis of political systems became a cornerstone within political science. The study of democratic governance, its organization, its working and its performance in reality has always been at the core of this sub-discipline. This is, of course, exemplified in widely used connotation of cross-national analysis and international comparisons in many introductions to course books on political science (see e.g.: Berg-Schlosser and Müller-Rommel 1987; Dogan and Pelassy 1990; Peters 1998; Hague and Harrop 2004)¹. It is only since the late 1980s and during the 1990s that one notices the deliberate use of the term comparative politics with regard to political systems and related features that are also intra-systematic (e.g. parties and governments per se or directed towards elements of political systems). Hence, the so-called ‘national’ (or country-level) bias has been dominant for a long time (see: Keman 1993b; Landman 2003). This bias is a logical consequence of the fact that most political systems existing during the 19th and 20th century were independent sovereign states (more often than not with a constitution and centralized state powers). Hence, ‘nation-states’ were considered ideally suited as cases for cross-national analysis.

Finally, the nationalist bias also has been conducive to ‘parochialism’, i.e. focusing almost exclusively on the larger and richer democracies, and over-emphasizing constitutional features (i.e. the ‘polity’; see for instance: Powell 1982; Macridis and Burg 1991; Almond and Verba 1993). All this has led to the idea that comparative research tends to produce one-sided knowledge that is difficult to generalize. Thus, the lesson to be learned is that comparative political research ought to focus more on the essential components of a given political system, which in turn should direct the proper use of the comparative method (see Keman 1993b; Peters 1998). In my view this will help to avoid ecological fallacies and biased analyses. Last but not least, if and when theory and method are consciously and rigorously drawn together, it will advance theory development within political science. Combining plausible propositions with relevant evidence will be conducive to “positive” (vis-à-vis normative) theory development (see Pennings et al. 2006: 32; Easton 1990).

In this article the focus will be explicitly on the comparative approach of political systems, which are the features that are conceptualized on the macro-scopical level and can be methodologically analyzed and observed on the system’s level only (Holt and Turner 1970; Mair 1996). This is what I call the ‘systemic’ type of analysis and the features studied are then

defined as part of that particular system under review. In the remainder of this paper I shall first discuss the pro's and con's of the comparative method with respect to the study of political systems. The next section focuses on developing an optimal research strategy for comparing systemic features. In the penultimate section three different approaches will be described to demonstrate the 'state of art'. Finally, I shall (attempt) to draw some conclusions as to the achievements in terms of (positive) theory development, on the one hand, and point out some of the remaining pitfalls and caveats with respect to comparing across political systems, on the other hand.

2. Why comparing political systems?

Within the discipline of Political Science the comparison of systems has always been a central feature. Not only because the Greeks in ancient times and European scholars already compared political systems in the 18th and 19th century, but also because the national state was always considered as the (almost) 'natural' albeit biased core within the discipline. Nevertheless, only in the 20th century when political science developed into an established academic discipline by means of professionalisation and institutionalization did the comparative approach become an accepted branch (see: Lijphart 1971; Lasswell 1968; Daalder 1993; Lichbach and Zuckerman, 1997: 3-16). However, at the same time it appeared difficult to define comparative politics and delineate it from other sub-disciplines within political science. At best one might suggest that 'the goal of comparative politics is to encompass the major similarities and differences between countries' (cf. Hague and Harrop 2004: 62). Others add to this that such a systematic comparison is intended to enhance theory-building and testing (cf. Mair 1996: 310), which is more often than not preceded by developing classifications and typologies that are derived from 'thick descriptions' of single cases (i.e. countries). Thus, these views imply:

- Comparative politics focuses on cases: often countries or nation-states in order to understand more about them about them as political systems (Almond 1968; Lijphart 1975; Lane and Ersson 1994).
- Comparing systematically serves several goals like developing typologies (inducing 'concepts that can travel'; see: Sartori 1970) and classifications (which are cross-national divisions between cases; see for example: Finer 1999).

- The comparative method allows for hypothesis testing, if not prediction (see: Mayer 1989; Landman 2003: 10-14; Hague and Harrop 2004: 61).

This rather behavioralist view on comparative politics overemphasizing its methodology is not only widespread but has also been contested by others (see for an overview: Ragin 1987; Peters 1998). This debate will not be repeated here and nor shall it be resolved here. Instead, I shall concentrate on the hazards, pitfalls and problems of carrying out a systematic comparative analysis of political systems with the aim to enhance its analytical strength.

Hazards: most researchers assume that systems (e.g. countries) can be compared - if and when certain conditions have been met. Yet, it is a risky step in any comparative research design. How can we know that systems per se can indeed be compared? On the one hand, one needs to know whether differences are meaningful. On the other hand, one must be sure that what is considered to be similar is indeed by and large congruent.

The same problem is, of course, related to the question of what is compared. What are the essential components of comparison? Is it government, societies, parties, policies, elections, et cetera? More often than not, comparativists develop categories that enable comparisons by means of functional equivalents (e.g. Dogan and Pelassy 1990; Collier and Mahon 1993). However, it remains an assumption that such concepts remain valid in comparative analysis. In addition, such a practice may be prone to over-determination and can lead to biased results and wrong conclusions (see: Lijphart 1975; Fauré 1994; Przeworski 1987; Rueschemeyer et al. 1992; Sartori 1994). Two problems can be noted: conceptual stretching and assuming equivalence. These problems arise in particular if and when we attempt to compare many systems on the basis of controlling for contextual variation. Some fear that at the end of the day the comparison has only demonstrated probable causes, while the actual 'proof in the pudding' has not been delivered.

Pitfalls: a continuing dispute among comparativists is about whether one aims at a comprehensive description of the cases involved (whether quantitative or qualitative) or at inferences of a theoretical nature on the basis of a description that can be generalized. This problem is not only related to the so-called 'small N' versus 'large N' debate (and how to overcome this; see: Holt and Turner 1970; Ragin 1987; Landman 2003). Important is also what type of variables (and related measures) are introduced in the research design (King et al. 1994; Pennings et al. 2006: Ch. 3). The less abstract the level of measurement the more valid they may be. However, such a practice implies that only a limited number of cases can be compared with a view at generalizing the findings. Conversely, the more abstract the

variables that are operationalized, the less reliable they are. Hence a major pitfall of comparing systems is to stress peculiarities and idiosyncrasies of systems' components. Conversely, if and when the 'ladder of abstraction' (Cf. Sartori) is used too freely the similarities will tend to outnumber the observed differences. Thus, the comparativist ought to be aware of which cases or systems are compared in view of a balance in terms of meaningful information and proper explanation (see: Collier 1993; Landman 2003). In sum: the major problem of applying the comparative method at the macro-scopical level is making the right choice. The choice of what variables, which cases and what approach is not only important to avoiding pitfalls but is also conducive to finding meaningful answers.

Problems: Francis Castles (1987) stated that too few data fitted too many theories. A major problem of comparative politics is that its advantage of being considered as a quasi-experimental method is often jeopardized by the lack of comparable data (due to 'thick' description or non-matching levels of measurement), or invalid data (due to 'high' levels of abstractions), and simply due to missing data and cases (limiting the 'universe of discourse'). All these insufficiencies have often led to generalizations that are simply derived from incomplete evidence. For instance, often one sees problems with temporal data that are consistent across systems. Another problem in this respect is the lack of information regarding decision-making processes. One way to solve this problem is obviously to improve the quality and availability of data across as many systems as possible.² However, this road is long and winding because these data are often collected with a view at answering a specific research question guided by theory. An alternative way is to advance a theory guided research question first, then to develop a proper research design in order to create a valid and reliable data collection for a number of truly representative cases that allows for applying systematic and solid methods of data-analysis. What is proposed here implies that one is prepared to take 'theory' as a point of departure and not the method or data available. What this implies will be discussed next.

3. Comparative Research and its Relation to Theory

Comparative political 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 systems (Wallerstein 1974; Powell 1982; Dogan and Pelassy 1990) or by means of descriptive features

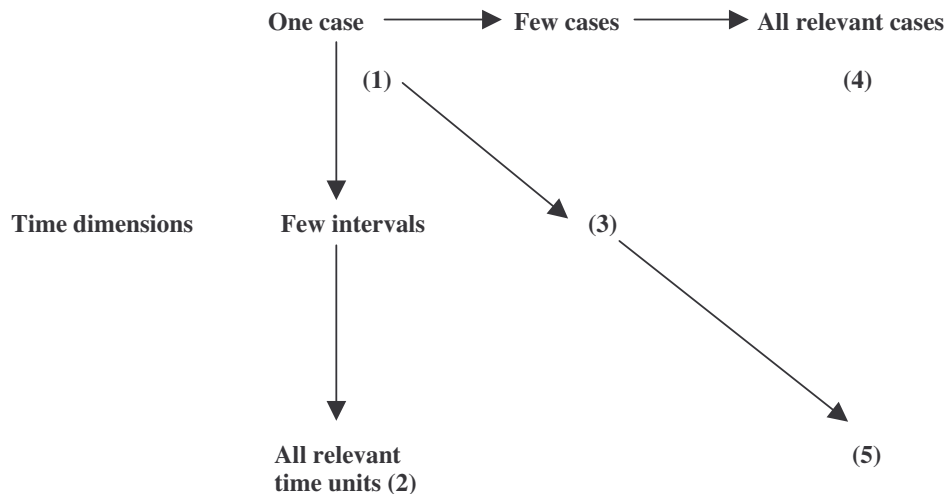
that claim to enhance knowledge about politics and society as a process (e.g.: Apter and Andrain 1972; Macridis and Burg 1991; Almond et al. 1993; Keman 2002). This combination of systemic analysis of political processes is generally considered to differentiate the comparative approach from other approaches within political and social science. Although it is a useful starting point, it is not sufficient to fully comprehend the advantages of the comparative approach with regard to positive theory development.

Thus, the comparative approach ought to 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 achieving this is to argue for a more refined concept of ‘politics and society’ and develop concepts that can ‘travel’ – i.e. are truly comparative across systems – and can thus be related to the political process in various societies. In addition, a set of rules must be developed that direct the research strategy, aiming at explanations rather than at a complete description of political phenomena by comparing them across systems and through time. At this point most comparativists stop elaborating their approach and start investigating, often however, without realizing that theory and method are mutually interdependent (but see: Przeworski 1987; Mair 1996; Landman 2003).

The goal of comparative analysis is to explain those ‘puzzles’, which cannot be studied without comparing and understand which potential answers ought to be derived from logical reasoning. Hence, no comparative research is useful without an extensive theoretical argument underlying it, or without a methodologically adequate research design to undertake it. For example, suppose we wish to know more about the relationship between economic development and the rise of the welfare state in democracies, in this instance, the type of research design is helpful in explaining the relationship. In addition, if the research question explores the process of industrialization in a society promoting welfare policy-making by the democratic state, then one can grasp this more fully by studying one (or a few) systems through time. In such a research design the units of variation (i.e. level of industrialization and the contents of welfare related policy-formation) are taken into account from one period to another, e.g. from year to year are the units of observation (i.e. measuring the change over time). This may well enhance the internal validation of the explanation (it is ‘true’ for what has been studied) and is what Lijphart (1971) labels as the ‘Comparative Method’. Yet this is a somewhat misleading label. What is meant is that one employs a universe of discourse of which the cases are comparable with respect to their political and social context because they appear to be more similar than different (in this example: countries with a democratic polity).

Apart from the epistemological problems of this approach (see: Mayer 1972; Przeworski 1987; Fauré 1994; Ragin, 2000) and the statistical problems related to having too few cases and too many variables, this means that such an approach is based on ‘thick description’. Such an approach only yields randomly distributed variation across nations leading up to ‘trivial’ knowledge. In this case the research design tends then to be one, which is somewhere between the positions (1) and (4) in Figure 1 below. Conversely, if one wishes to know – for instance – whether or not the degree of industrialization brings about the development of welfare statism (see e.g. Wilensky 1975), one has to compare more cases simultaneously. This is position (3) in Figure 1. However, if the research question is to what extent the welfare state is the result of economic growth, one must take into account both time and space in order to reach viable conclusions, i.e. position (5) in Figure 1. Hence, it is the (theoretical) argument (in the form of research question) that directs the type and necessity of comparison – the research design – as is illustrated by means of Figure 1.

Figure 1: Relating Research Questions to a Research Design



With respect to the relation RO -> RD =

- (1) case study (at one time point);
- (2) time series (one case over time);
- (3) closed universe (relevant cases in relevant periods);
- (4) cross-section (all cases at one time point);
- (5) pooled analysis (maximizing cases across time and space).

Adapted from: Pennings et al., 2006: 21.

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: the more cases one compares, the less variables are often available and vice versa (Przeworski 1987; Ragin 1987). In Section 4 I shall elaborate this problem in full, but for now it suffices to put forward that the conversion of the research question into a viable research design poses inevitable problems for the researcher. 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).

In Figure 1 this problem of choice has been depicted. Five options are distinguished: First, a single case study per se (see: Yin 1996) cannot be considered as a comparative research design. Implicitly it may be, but in terms of external validity it is not. However, it is often used for reason of validation post hoc (to inspect whether or not the general results hold up in a more detailed analysis) or to study a deviant case (i.e. a case that is seemingly an ‘exception to the rule’). An advantage of a single case study is that it allows for the inclusion of a larger variety of variables than otherwise would be feasible and can be used as a pilot for generating hypotheses (see Section 6.3 below). Hence, I consider a single case study as a device within a larger research design, but not as a means for positive theory development as such. Alternatively a single case study over time is often used as a theory confirming or infirming analysis based on a country’s history with a specific focus derived from the research question in use (Landman 2003). The third option in Figure 1 concerns the ‘few’ cases alternative, and allows for taking into account time (be it before/after a discrete event – like war or economic crisis – or be it certain periods that are seen as crucial for the cases involved; Bartolini 1993). A few(er) cases research design is seen as a ‘focused comparison’ that is directly derived from the research question under review (Ragin 1991). Option number 4 is frequently used: 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 more or less a ‘closed shop’ and therefore the validity of the analytical results within the universe of discourse will be enhanced. It is typically conducive to so-called “middle range” theorizing (Lane and Ersson 1994). The final option (5) is strongly disputed among comparativists. On the one hand, the number of cases is indeed maximized, but, on the other hand, there is the pitfall that the impact of time is considered to be constant across all cases (or, at least, that change is consistent within the cases under review; see: Hicks 1994; Kittel 1999). Hence, the issue is whether or not change can be assumed to be consistent for

the cases under review (like for instance the impact of widening and deepening of the European Union).

If one were to go through the literature or the major political science journals, one finds 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 (Daalder 1974) is a one-case/time series research design (# 2 in Figure 1) whereas Lijphart's study of Democracies (Lijphart 1984; 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 for instance: Castles 1982; Esping-Andersen 1990; Lane and Ersson 1999). The analysis of coalition governments (see De Swaan 1973; Laver and Schofield 1990; Budge and Keman 1990; Müller and Strøm 1999) 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 also called a pooled time series Research Design (#5). In fact, the last example also demonstrates that we are indeed not interested in countries as cases, but – depending on the research question – on features of a 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 the main point is that the options for choice as depicted here are not free. On the contrary, if industrialization is seen as a process it must be investigated over time in order to answer the question if this process results in societal change produced by Welfare Statism. A good example of employing this type of comparison can be found in Flora's analysis of West European Welfare States (Flora 1974). Various European countries were analyzed from the point that they slowly developed into more or less constitutional liberal democracies until the present. In effect, not the actual number of countries was important but the number of years (i.e. #2 in Figure 1). By comparing the rates of change with the rate of democratization it became possible to demonstrate when and under which conditions the welfare state developed. Studies of Rueschemeyer et al. (1992) and Lane and Ersson (1997) show the respective utilization of a research design as depicted above under (#4) and (#5). Rueschemeyer et al. (1992) focus on comparing democracies in view of their class composition. Lane and Ersson (1997), on the other hand, were analyzing whether or not economic growth, when a certain level had been reached, led to the establishment of a Welfare State.

In most discussions, it appears however, that both theoretical and methodological aspects 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. Worse even, it seems that some of the examples are selected to demonstrate the tenability of their view. Theoretical progress and explanatory results appear then to emanate from their ‘logic of inquiry’ (see: Przeworski 1987: 45ff.; Ragin 1987: 125ff.). Yet, the comparative analysis of the political process within systems must be instead founded a priori in theory and then related to the best fitting ‘logic of inquiry’, or in our terms: a proper research design. This point is much overlooked and impairs positive theory development.

An example of such a separation of theory and method can be found in many studies of electoral behavior. This vital element of the political process in democracies can be explained fairly well on the basis of deductive reasoning (Crewe and Denver 1985). To validate its micro-level founded hypotheses regarding individual behavior a comparative research design is not necessary. However, electoral behavior or party behavior that is explained by means of the working of electoral systems, or the features of a party system, are in need of a comparative analysis by means of examining the variation in the political properties on both the micro- and macro-level (see, for example, Sani and Sartori, 1983; Lane and Ersson 1999). If not, the analysis is not only based on assuming the *ceteris paribus* clause, but is also prone to ecological fallacy.

Another example concerns the study of ‘electoral volatility’ in Western Europe. It appeared that the division of party systems and the structure of voting patterns are less stabilized than originally assumed. In practice many of these comparative studies were, in fact, based on country-based analytical descriptions with little comparative information. What was lacking was a truly comparative set of theoretical references concerning – in this case – the explicandum i.e. ‘political stability’ that at the same time is consciously linked to a comparable set of operational terms (but see: Bartolini and Mair 1990: 35-46). In other words: if the explicandum is not equal to a system per se, but can be considered as a part of a system, such as governments or electoral results obviously must reflect on the question of whether or not the research question is formulated to explain government or electoral volatility in a number of given systems, or alternatively, to explain the phenomenon of government functioning or electoral change. In the former instance specific elements of a political system

are compared between systemic units of analysis (often countries), and in the latter case intra-systemic phenomena are compared for all relevant cases.

Other examples could be mentioned to support this importance of the relation between theory and method in comparative politics. Yet, the principal message is that much of the research that is labeled as comparative, either lacks a theoretical foundation of what mechanisms various systems have in common (and why), or is based on a research design that is not truly comparative, and are rather collections of information about separate systems (see for example: Dahl 1966; Pridham 1986; Müller and Strøm 1999).

The main lesson to be drawn from the examples listed here as an elaboration of Figure 1 is that the research question per se ought to direct the research design in terms of the essential units of variation (like governments, elections, welfare statism et cetera) which imply the theoretical relationships under review and also direct the units of observation (like years if change is focused upon or all parliamentary governments across the whole universe of discourse). Given this line of reasoning, which is essential to my approach to comparative research in relation to positive theory development, it is crucial to develop first a theoretical perspective in order to relate systematically the research question to possible research designs: Theory comes before method and research questions before research design. If this line of inquiry is not adhered to then comparative political analysis will and cannot be conducive to positive theory development.

4. Comparative analysis: controlling for the context

The comparative approach to politics and society is usually defined both by its substance (the study of a number of societies or systems, i.e. the cases under review) and by its method (e.g. cross-sectional, comparable cases, longitudinal etc., see Figure 1). However, in this way the necessary link between theory and method as well as the distinctiveness of the comparative approach in terms of what and when to compare is neglected. Hence, if the comparative approach is meant to enhance positive theory development in political science, the combination of theory and method should be elaborated. In my view theory equals the propositions concerning the explanation of relationships that characterize the working of political systems and the societal developments that are (supposed to be) affected by it. Method is then the most appropriate way to investigate the proposed relationships empirically. As stated before, comparing in this way 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 (1843/1976) as the methods of Agreement and Difference (see also: Pennings et al. 2006: Ch. 3). Comparison is then an instrument to verify or falsify relationships between two phenomena. Hence, I consider this logic as an integral part of the comparative approach by stressing the link between the research question, on the one hand, and the research design, on the other. If and when one strives for analytical-empirically founded knowledge – as is our point of departure – and it concerns the analysis of various political systems it must be reflected whether or not this concerns an inter-system (between systems as a whole) or an intra-system comparison (of features within multiple systems). For example, if one studies party-behavior within a national system, then one is still comparing parties, unless one is only interested in pure description. The same line of reasoning applies to specific groups or organizations in a society. Hence, if the aim is to explain the variation between systems of specific features of different systems then the issue of controlling for the context becomes eminent.

As Sartori (1994: 244f.) stresses, we need to compare in order to control the variables that make up the theoretical relationship. In fact, what the researcher is attempting to do is to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions under which the relationship occurs in reality. This would entail the assumption that all other things (or: conditions) are equal except for the relationship under empirical review (the Ceteris Paribus clause). 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’, democratization and the emergence of ‘welfare states’ the relationship is apparent if we examine the developments in the UK and Sweden, New Zealand and Australia (Castles 1978, 1985). Yet, the answer could well have been different to this research question if we would have also focused on the Netherlands, Germany and Italy (Van Kersbergen 1995) where the role of religion-based organizations – the church in particular – and not class-based organizations used to be one of the central foci of political behavior and action. Hence, only when we take into account as many relevant and concurrent cases as possible is it possible to reach a viable and plausible conclusion concerning socio-economic 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. Thus the basic

message is that the degree of control of contextual features is essential to reach sound analytical conclusions. 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. Actually, we could go even further by putting forward that the comparative approach is the fundamental point of departure for most theories that figure in political and social science. Such a statement implies that the comparative method 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 (see also Lijphart 1975; Mayer 1989; Collier 1993; Beck, 2001; Pennings et al. 2006).

Summing up: analyzing political systems by means of the comparative approach implies first of all the elaboration of a research question. This may concern either an implicit comparison – as defined by the universe of discourse – or an explicit comparison based on a comparative research design, which defines the selection of cases that must be taken into account. Since this paper focuses on comparing systems we shall only discuss ‘truly comparative’ research designs. This choice implies that one should always ask how the central concepts that figure in the theory-guided research question are meaningfully (i.e. in a valid and reliable way) translated into variables: units of observation that vary across cases (i.e. systems). In addition this also implies that the researcher ought to decide which cases are to be included and why. Unbiased case selection is therefore one of the most daunting tasks in doing ‘truly’ comparative research.

5. **Selecting cases in relation to the comparative logic of inquiry**

The choice of cases is not only important as to regards valid and reliable measurement and the inclusion of those systems that can be compared meaningfully with respect to the research question, but is also crucial with respect to the issue whether or not the case selection allows for a proper interpretation of the research questions asked.

Firstly, the researcher must decide which systems are truly different with respect to the relationship under review, but are not different as regards to their basic systemic features (see Easton 1990: Ch. 10). If this procedure is adequately carried out it may be expected that the results of the subsequent analysis are valid internally (valid for all comparable cases included in the actual analysis). In other words: the research answer allows for firm conclusions that

help to develop and substantiate so-called ‘middle range’ theories (Lane and Ersson 1994; Chilcote 1994).

Secondly, the researcher ought to decide whether or not specific systemic features are central to the argument made (e.g. electoral systems, party behavior or welfare states) or systems as a *whole* are subject of investigation (this can be countries, or clusters of countries [e.g. continents], or states within a federal system). This design belongs to the ‘traditional’ type of comparative politics (Almond 1968; Daalder 1993).

Thirdly, the selection of cases needs to be adequate in terms of the logic of comparison and is a tricky decision between two alternatives: Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD), this is the Method of Difference, and Most Different Systems Design (MDSD), that is the Method of Agreement (see also Przeworski and Teune 1970; Landman 2003; Pennings et al. 2006).

John Stuart Mill in his “System of Logic” has developed the methods of Difference and Agreement (1843/1976). The basic idea is that comparing cases can be used to detect commonalities between cases. The Method of Difference focuses in particular on the variation of certain features amongst others that do not differ (strongly) across comparable cases. Hence, co-variation is here considered crucial under the assumption of holding the context constant: locating independent variables that differ among similar systems, but which account for observed political outcomes (the dependent variable). Conversely, the Method of Agreement is comparing cases (or systems) in order to detect those relationships between $X \rightarrow Y$ that are similar notwithstanding the remaining differences on other features of the cases compared. Hence, all other things are considered to be different but for certain relationships that are seen to be causal (or effect-productive; Janoski and Hicks 1994: 14).

As Ragin asserts the problem of interpreting the analytical results remains. If the shared commonalities between variables are emphasized then it concerns an implicit urge for parsimonious results that excludes non-conforming cases (in statistical terms: the “unexplained variance” of a model). Conversely if the possible combinations of effect-producing conditions are taken into account then parsimony is not the aim of the analysis but the comprehensiveness of the explanation. In our view both approaches are viable and plausible, but one must be alert to the fact that the choice of method and the selection of cases have serious ramifications for the ‘logic of inquiry’ underlying the research design that is developed. Too often this is not the case, however.

This ‘logic of inquiry’ or in our parlance – the relationship between research question and research design – runs as follows: in a Most Similar Systems Design, where we compare as many cases as feasible, assuming that these cases have more contextual features in common

than not, we interpret the research outcomes by concentrating on the variation across the cases. This type of explanation is developed on the basis of the ‘method of difference’. Hence, in a Most Similar Systems Design the focus is on the correspondence between the dependent and independent variables on the basis of their cross-variation. Conversely the Most Different Systems Approach is based on the Method of (indirect) Agreement or degree of commonality between independent variables within each case. In other words the variation within cases guides the eventual interpretation of the analysis. An example of this ‘logic of inquiry’ can be found in the study of the relationship between Capitalism and Democracy (Rueschemeyer et al. 1992) and in Barrington Moore’s treatise on Democracies and Dictatorship (Barrington Moore 1966). In both studies the research design was starting from the idea that the comparison is meant to confront positive (i.e.: yes, there is a relationship between capitalism and democracy) and negative outcomes (no, there is not). The Method of Agreement is also called the ‘parallel demonstration of theory’ (cf. Skocpol and Somers 1980). The Method of Agreement tends to be conducive to internally valid conclusions. An alternative option to improve the external validity that is widely discussed and disputed is the application of Boolean Analysis (Ragin 1987, 2000). This type of analysis allows for the handling of qualitative information, or many variables for a relative high number of cases. The logic underlying this approach is that multiple causation is studied across cases by means of configurations of conditions that impact on the dependent variable. Yet, instead of focusing on bi-variate relations or a parallel demonstration by case analysis “Truth Tables” are developed representing causal patterns across the universe of discourse. This logic of inquiry rests on eliminating possible combinations of conditional effects between cases. This approach is called Qualitative Case Analysis (QCA) (see for example: De Meur and Berg-Schlosser 1994; Ragin 1991). In summary:

- In comparative analysis we are confronted with the dilemma to choose for a research design in which we trade off internal against external validity due to the problem of many cases, few variables (MSSD) and vice versa (MDSD);
- By choosing a MSSD-approach we assume the context to be (more or less) identical across all the cases under review, whereas a MDSD-approach enables us, by controlling for the contextual variation, to compare systematically selected cases;
- A MSSD-approach follows a logic of inquiry that is based on the co-variation between X and Y-variables, i.e. eliminating cross-system differences, whereas the MDSD-approach induces a logic of inquiry where the parallel demonstration of cases under investigation is based on eliminating cases.

Up to this point this paper has focused on the problems, difficulties and limits of comparing political systems systematically aiming at positive theory development. This is useful in our view since many studies that claim to be comparative and are considered to develop new insights more often than not do not live up to the canons of comparative political science. Yet, at the same time progress has been made over time and there are exciting examples of ‘positive theory development’: the deliberate attempt to constructing theories, firmly based on empirical evidence by means of a proper comparative analysis of political phenomena on the so-called ‘system’ level. Below, in the penultimate section three of these approaches will be elaborated.

6. The Practice of Comparing Political Systems

Going beyond sheer description as Lord Bryce did as well as trying to explain rather than to map out systems as, for example Blondel (1981) or Finer (1999) did by means of complex classifications and typologies, signifies the ability to advance testable propositions. The three approaches that will be elaborated below have this in common, but certainly not in the same way. They differ in their approach to developing theory, in selecting cases, the type of data used, and the logic of comparison applied. Yet, by consciously combining theory and the comparative method, all are able to enhance positive theory development.

6.1 Contesting existing views: Does Politics Matter?

The first example concerns the debate in the straightforward question: Does Politics Matter? (the following is based on: Castles 1982; Keman 1997; 2002a; Schmidt 1987; 1996). The origins of this debate go back to the 1960s and 1970s (see Castles and McKinley 1979). During this era some political economists published articles on the emergence and cross-national variation of the welfare state in industrialized democracies (see: Wilensky 1975; Flora 1974). The shared view was at the time that basically the development and degree of ‘Welfare Statism’ had little to do with ‘politics’ (parties, governments, ideologies) and much more with structural tendencies within the advanced capitalist countries (i.e. the member-states of the OECD). What mattered most as regards to explaining ‘welfare statism’ were the “logic of industrialism”, the rates of economic growth and the demographic composition of post-war societies (see for an overview of these factors: Castles 1998; Keman 1998). These three factors could be viewed as the conditions for public policy formation with respect to education, health care, social security and income redistribution. Political factors like party

differences (e.g. Left vs. Right) and the relative strength of such parties in government and the strength of trade unions (see Korpi 1983) were considered as only indirectly relevant (or at best coincidental). Hence politics did not matter.

A group of comparativists, however, were not satisfied with this conclusion. The first reason being that the non-political variables was insufficiently capable of explaining the cross-national differences in ‘welfare statism’. Hence the unexplained variance was too large to afford such conclusions as universally correct (or: externally valid). Secondly, it appeared that if one looked more closely at the development over time, the levels of expenditures on welfare state related policy-making tended to become more divergent. Thirdly, examining the various components of ‘welfare statism’ (i.e. the different policies pursued) it could be demonstrated that the design of the welfare state showed a large cross-system variation (see for example Esping-Andersen 1990; Castles 1993; Kuhnle 2000). In short: the more welfare states developed, the stronger the differences grew regardless of whether the shared contextual features of the countries were included in the analysis.

These conclusions led to the idea that the socio-economic and demographic factors may well have explained the emergence of welfare states, but certainly not their subsequent development. Hence the unexplained cross-system variation needed to be investigated. The guiding research question became therefore: Does Politics Matter as regards to the design and development of welfare states? The research design that was developed was in essence: the universe of discourse, or the cases included, concerned those OECD-member states that could be considered as fully fledged representative democracies and having a similar level of economic development (option #4 in Figure 1). The central relationship under review was: whether or not the impact of parties and organized interests through elected government on the shape and degree of welfare statism was relevant rather than simply cross-national variation per se.

This research question allowed for a research design with a fixed number of cases (OECD-democracies) and a Most Similar Systems comparison (hence controlling for other influences). The actual ‘test’ aimed at a true comparison of two explanations: Economics versus Politics on the basis of the ‘Method of Difference’ (see Section 5). In fact, the first stage of the debate on ‘Does Politics Matter?’ aimed at a replication of existing studies of ‘welfare statism’, namely using the same type of cases and socio-economic variables, but adding political variables to the equation. Applying the Ceteris Paribus clause and both cross-sectional and cross-time comparisons it was possible to demonstrate beyond doubt that politics did matter. Notwithstanding the role of socio-economic factors, it became clear that

parties in government made a difference and the longer the same parties remained in office the stronger the growth of welfare statism was (Klingemann et al. 1994; Lane and Ersson 1997; Keman 2002a).

The research answer was therefore that ‘politics matters’ as regards to public policy formation in representative democracy. This answer formed the basis for further theory building in two ways: On the one hand, the relationship between type of parties and the form of government is relevant for the type and level of welfare statism (Castles et al. 1987; Swank 2001). On the other hand, the debate opened up new avenues for specifying under what conditions, in particular institutional variation, the actual performance of welfare state could be explained in terms of growth and retrenchment. Both directions have led to a host of studies since the 1980s to further positive theory development (see, for instance, Pennings 1995; Scharpf and Schmidt 2000; Pierson 2001; Armingeon and Bonoli 2006).

In summary: by applying systematic comparative research to a contested issue, a well-established approach in political science has been developed. This approach focused explicitly on one central relationship across most similar systems and aimed at explaining this. Thus it is not the cross-national variation that is crucial but the inter-systemic comparison. By doing so, the study of the welfare state moved beyond sheer description and post hoc interpretations.

6.2 How cooperation between parties develops: Coalition Theory

Some political scientists argue that the essence of politics is to form coalitions (Laver 1983). Coalition theory has, understandably, gained a lot of attention. If one would indeed understand the mechanism of coalition formation then one could also explain the power distribution within political systems (Riker 1962). The application of a comparative systems’ approach to the development of coalition theory is our second example.

In its origins mathematicians have developed coalition theory, which has been applied by political scientists by means of virtual designs, game theory or single case based descriptions (De Swaan 1973). Slowly, but gradually coalition theory has been elaborated upon along two dimensions: one, through the use of spatial analysis of political actors within party systems (Laver and Schofield 1990), and two, by the introduction of policy distances and institutional constraints (Budge and Keman 1990; Laver and Budge 1992). Both approaches have been seminal to the positive theory development on coalition formation and both approaches achieved this through the deliberate use of the comparative method. Yet, both approaches used this methodology differently.

Already in the 1970s it became clear that the hypothetic-deductive logic that dominated the study of coalition formation did not stand up to empirical reality. More often than not the predictions emanating from deductive reasoning proved to be inadequate or imprecise. Arend Lijphart (1984: 52) reports that there was an inverse relationship between the degrees of parsimony of these theories³ and their empirical results. In short: although its logic seemed compelling, its ability to predict correctly turned out to be weak.

The research question that emerged has been: how to improve the explanatory quality of coalition theory in terms of positive theory development? The answer to this question has been the elaboration of a two-dimensional model: Policy-seeking and Office-seeking behavior of the actors (i.e. parties) involved would direct their strategy. Laver and Schofield used this model to construct equilibriums among parties that shape the best possible space for co-operation. Budge and Keman used the same dimensions, but took into account a number of negotiation rules (i.e. institutions) between parties that defined the room for maneuver to form an optimal coalition (Strøm, 1990).

The next step was, of course, to develop a research strategy that enabled the researchers to test their models. Laver and Schofield choose a comparative design in which party systems were the cases to be compared, whereas Budge and Keman included all party governments in established democracies as comparable cases. Hence, these research strategies were not based on nations, or on political systems *per se*. Given the research question, the unit of co-variation was equal to the central element to be analyzed: party government and party system. In addition, the research design of Laver and Schofield employed a Most Different Systems Design (i.e. the Method of Agreement) because their hypothesis was that identical space for co-operation was the result of establishing a similar equilibrium between different parties wherever this occurred. Conversely, Budge and Keman employed a Most Similar Systems Design by classifying the cases according to the extant rules (institutions) and ideological differences across all systems under review. Hence, different logics of comparison have been used to answer the same research question (see Section 5).

The results of both comparative analyses corroborated empirically the two-dimensional model of policy-seeking and office-seeking behavior of parties. Laver and Schofield (1990) were able to show that in multi-party systems the mathematical logic of the original coalition theory did not always work. Furthermore they demonstrated that coalitions could better be explained by taking into account the intra-systemic variations across party systems and their change over time. It was a dynamic explanation (see also Laver and Budge 1992).

Budge and Keman (1990) made it possible to develop a configurative set of institutional conditions that correlated with the type of coalition government that was formed. In addition, they were also able to demonstrate empirically which type of coalition was more enduring than others and how their policy-making capacities varied (see also Warwick 1994). In other words: not only could the formation of party government be better explained, but also the performance of government could be studied.

In summary: comparing systems, i.e. the ‘life and times’ of party government, helped to enhance existing theory in two ways: one, empirical analysis showed the weakness of existing approaches and helped to develop fresh insights; two, by focusing explicitly and systematically on the central subject of research, party government, and elaborating an empirically informed model positive theory development could be achieved.

6.3 From Consociationalism to Consensus Democracy: From case analysis to universe

The final example is the positive theory development in the field of democratic theory. It concerns the work of Arend Lijphart (1977; 1984; 1999). This is an interesting example because he developed his theoretical advances by means of using different research designs in relation to the same research question. Arend Lijphart is well known through his work on the Dutch political system that he described by means of the ‘politics of accommodation’ (Lijphart 1968).

These ideas did not develop by coincidence during the 1960s. Basically they can be seen as a reaction to US-based theories on how democracies function optimally (or: remain stable). The so-called ‘pluralist’ school had developed an empirical theory, which demonstrated that stable democracy mainly occurred in homogeneous societies where there was open and fair competition between organized interests. If these conditions were not (more or less) met then conflict would erode efficient and democratic governance (Almond and Verba 1963; Dahl 1966).

By employing a single case analysis of the Dutch political system Lijphart showed that this is not true for all democratic systems. Put bluntly, the Dutch case proved that, under the adverse conditions of fragmentation and ‘cartelised’ party systems, stable government did exist. In other words, Lijphart used a single case study to show that the external validity (i.e. universality) of the pluralist school was weak, if not disproved. Hence, in this case the research design: comparable case analysis (see also Lijphart 1975) was used to question fundamentally a rival research question: how stable are democracies in divided societies?

The next step in Lijphart's attempt to positive theory development as regards to the optimal working of representative democracy was to elaborate his Dutch findings comparatively. In his "Democracy in Plural Societies" (1977) he compared as many democratic systems as possible that could be considered as fragmented (i.e. instable) societies and could be considered as multi-party systems. In a way, Lijphart 'exported' his consociational model in order to show that there existed an alternative explanation of the occurrence of 'stable' democracies. Hence, his research design became a cross-system one: all relevant cases were included with the aim to answer the following research question: under what conditions can plural (if not fragmented) societies achieve stable democracy? The answer to this question was based on a Most Different Systems Design (Method of Agreement): although the contextual variation among his cases was high, the analysis was directed to exploring the similarity of the conditions that were favorable to consensus and made conflict-resolution possible. Alternatively one could suggest that the same result would have been achieved by using the QCA-approach (see Demeur and Berg-Schlosser 1994; Ragin 2000).

This inductively developed alternative theory was further elaborated in his books "Democracies: Patterns of Majoritarian and Consensus Government in 21 Countries" (1984) and "Patterns of Democracy" (1999). In these comparative studies the research design changed again. The 1984 study was considering 21 cases that involved most established representative democracies, regardless of being fragmented or not and with co-operative party systems or not. This change to a Most Similar Systems Design was caused due to a changing research question: do consensus-oriented democratic systems perform better than conflict-oriented democracies?

Note that a changing research question thus directs the research design! Instead of demonstrating that non-pluralist democracies could produce stable government, the aim became to show that there are two types of democracy: a majoritarian one and a consensus democratic one. In order to achieve positive theory development it was necessary to control for variation (the Ceteris Paribus clause) and to focus mainly on the institutional variation across systems: from a sociology driven theory Lijphart moved towards an institutional approach of how democracy works under varying conditions.

In summary: Lijphart's lifelong involvement with positive theory developments shows how vital the choice of a research design is. First of all, it depends, of course, on the research question asked. This was an empirical question. Secondly, by moving from a critical case study to a comparable case analysis, he could demonstrate that his original case study (of the

Netherlands) was not a deviant one (or: an exception to the rule). Thirdly, this analysis formed the foundation to develop an alternative model of representative democracy. Finally, in his last study he has elaborated this alternative model – Consensus Democracy – as a rival theory of democracy. Hence, positive theory development may well involve different modes of comparison across systems although the topic of research remains the same.

7. Conclusions: Comparing Political Systems and Positive Theory Development

The comparative approach in political science has for a long time suffered from several methodological weaknesses and a biased focus. To remedy these shortcomings comparativists have developed new directions for doing comparative political research. One of these directions is presented in this paper (see Sections 3 and 4). The obvious caveat is, of course, that it is not the only way to go. Yet, I believe that this approach is a viable and feasible trajectory for the comparative analysis of political systems that induces positive theory development.

The essential message of this paper is to consciously and permanently relate substance (the study of political phenomena at the system level) with method (the deliberate reflection on the use of empirical evidence). This message has been elaborated throughout this paper by pointing to prevalent pitfalls and hazards as well as taking into account caveats. If the student of comparative politics constantly reflects on matters of case selection, concept development and the underlying logic of comparison then he or she will travel more safely. The central instrument to do so – so I argue – is to develop arguments by means of the ‘triad’ Research Question – Research Design – Research Answer (see: Pennings et al. 2006: Part I).

An important caveat remains, however, not to fall victim to the bias of equating cases with nation-states and consider these as systems by definition. A second caveat is that the choice of cases implies logic of comparison that should allow for a proper control of contextual variation – features that are case-specific but not relevant – and the possible conclusions that can be drawn from the available evidence. Finally, the type of research strategy also determines in what way system analysis is carried out: aiming at comparing systems’ elements or the comparison between systems: coalition theory aims at analyzing a crucial intra-systemic element of representative democracy, whereas Lijphart attempts to analyze the working of democratic systems. The question whether or not politics matters is a demonstration of inter-system type of analysis.

To highlight our message: we have discussed three approaches that have emerged in comparative political science. These served as examples of how the comparative approach can be utilized to advance theory development within political science. Although the art of comparing political processes may seem complex and difficult it can be applied successfully. Yet it is first of all, a matter of ‘look before you leap’ by formulating the correct questions guided by theory and choosing the proper research design including careful case selection and concepts that can travel. However, this is (or: ought to be) a matter of fact for any type of analysis within political science that is theory guided and aiming at empirically grounded explanations in order to advance positive theory.

Footnotes

1. Critical overviews of Comparative Politics as a sub-discipline are: Mayer 1989, Keman 1993, Mair 1996, Landman 2003, and Ragin 2000. The major contested issues are – apart from the nationalist bias – the theoretical weight and the methodological rigor that is established within comparative political science.
2. An important requirement is the development of data-banks; see, for example, the Comparative Political Data Set as developed by Klaus Armingeon et al.; or the data-set published by Arend Lijphart, 1999, or the one put together by Budge et al. 2001, and also Lane et al. 1997 and Woldendorp et al. 2000 as well as those published by international agencies like ILO, the EU, the UN, the OECD, the IPU et cetera.
3. For example the Minimal Winning and Minimal Size principle as well adjusted versions like Minimal Range and Minimal Connected Winning coalitions; see for this: De Swaan 1973; Lijphart 1984: Ch. 4; Budge and Keman 1990.

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