

“How to” of comparative politics research: designing a research project

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Outline

- Comparative politics as a subfield of political science
- Historical evolution of comparative politics methods and approaches
- Research methods of comparative politics (CP):
 - Bad, better, and best CP research questions
 - “How to” of CP research: variables, hypotheses, hypotheses testing
- Your own research design “in under 10 minutes”

Comparative politics within the discipline of political science

- Studies domestic politics of foreign states
- Is concerned with **big questions** such as:
 - Causes of democracy and dictatorship
 - Ethnic violence and peace
 - Causes of revolutions
 - Roots of economic development

Historical evolution of comparative politics



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graph TD; A[Historical evolution of comparative politics] --> B[Normative approach]; A --> C[Positive (empirical) approach];
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Normative approach

- Older approach (Plato and Aristotle in ancient Greece)
- Emphasis on how politics *should* be conducted; concerned with *prescribing* what political reality should be
- Makes value judgments; asks what's best/worst

Positive (empirical) approach

- More recent (Niccolò Machiavelli – 1469-1527)
- Emphasis on the study of *how* politics is conducted; concerned with *describing* and *explaining* political reality
- Does not make value judgments; asks *what* is happening, *how*, and *why*

Historical evolution of comparative politics in the 20th century

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graph TD; A[Historical evolution of comparative politics in the 20th century] --> B[Normative]; A --> C[Positive (empirical)]; C --> D["Focus on description:  
How politics works in different countries?  
Early 20th century"]; C --> E["Focus on explanations:  
Why the political world is the way it is?  
After WWII"];
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Normative

Positive (empirical)

Focus on **description**:

How politics works in different countries?

Early 20th century

Focus on **explanations**:

Why the political world is the way it is?

After WWII

Types of comparative politics research questions

“Bad”	“OK”	“The best”
Normative	Descriptive	Causal
<i>What’s best? What should be done?</i>	What and How questions	Why questions
Asks for a recommendation <i>How can President increase his support?</i>	Ask for description only, not for a causal argument; Useful when there is little knowledge on the subject; May be necessary before “the best” <i>why</i> questions can be formed	Ask for a causal argument about some existing relationship; Require a “because” answer <i>“False” why</i> questions (call for a laundry-list of reasons)
About the future <i>What will happen?</i>		
Answer is obvious <i>How will X gain by winning?</i>		

Question:

Is popular non-democratic government better than unpopular democratic government?

Verdict?

Bad!

Why?

Normative (asks for a **value judgment** about what's better/worse)

Question:

Will Russia launch land invasion of Ukraine after the Azov sea incident?

Verdict?

Bad!

Why?

Asks to **predict the future** which cannot be observed yet

Question:

Is increased social spending helping to improve the economy in country X?

Verdict?

OK

Why?

Descriptive

Question:

Why is the opposition to President Putin in Russia so weak?

Verdict?

Best

Why?

Asks for a cause of the opposition's weakness

Question:

How do authoritarian leaders manage to consolidate power?

Verdict?

OK (but could become Best)

Why?

- “OK” because is asking for a description of the process by which leaders consolidated power;
- Potentially “Best” – if a causal chain of events will be investigated

Variables, hypotheses, hypotheses testing

- **Variable**

- Something that varies or changes (takes different value)
 - E.g. national wealth, revolutions, democracy, conflict

- **Dependent variable (DV)**

- What we want to explain (the object of our study)
- The outcome that's influenced by other variables

- **Independent (causal, explanatory) variable (IV)**

- Something that influences (causes) your DV

Research process (steps in research design)

1. Formulate “the best” (causal) **research question**
2. Specify your **DV**, given your question.
 - Decide how you will *operationalize* and *measure* your DV
3. Propose a testable **hypothesis** (or several) about what affects your DV
 - **H** needs to be: (a) falsifiable; (b) have clear causal logic; (c) informed by existing theories
4. Identify your **IV(s)**, given your hypothesis(es)
 - Specify how you will *operationalize* and *measure* your IV(s)
5. Decide how you will **test your hypothesis**
 - Comparison? What case(s)? What method(s) – qualitative/quantitative, large-n or small-n?
6. **Assess the hypothesis** against the evidence
 - Is H consistent, inconsistent, partially consistent with the evidence?
7. Draw your **conclusions**
 - Accept, reject, or modify hypothesis you tested (and theories based on them); possibly propose a new theory

#2. Operationalizing and measuring DV

Q: Why did President Poroshenko decide to introduce martial law in Ukraine?

DV: Decision of Poroshenko to introduce martial law.

Q: Why is Russia less democratic now than in the early 1990s?

DV: Degree of democracy in Russia.

But how exactly is degree of democracy to be measured?

Should we be looking at political liberties? Media freedom?

Elections? Something else?

If DV is not clearly *operationalized*, we cannot answer the question

#3. Hypotheses

- **Hypothesis (H)**

- An assumption or supposition about *possible causes* of your DV
- A possible answer to your research question

- **Sources of hypotheses:**

- Existing theories
- Evidence from other cases
- General knowledge/common sense

Criteria for hypotheses

- Hypothesis is NOT a prediction.
 - E.g. “If party X wins, the economy will improve” is NOT a hypothesis” because
 - Can’t be tested against existing evidence
 - No causal relationship is postulated
- H needs to be falsifiable
 - What evidence, if we observe it, will show that our H is wrong?
- H need to have a causal logic that can be “arrow-diagramed”
 - H: revolutions occur in poor countries
 - Arrow-diagram: Poverty → high popular discontent → larger size rebellion → revolution*
 - Arrow-diagram: Poverty → state unable to pay security apparatus → soldiers not very loyal to regime → unlikely to suppress rebellion → revolution*

#4. Independent variables (IV)

- IVs affect (cause) your DV
- Just like DV comes from your research question, **IVs come from your hypotheses**

Example:

- **Q: Why do revolutions occur?**
 - **DV: presence/absence of a revolution**
- **H: because poverty leads to revolutions**
 - **IV: poverty (measured how?)**
 - GDP? Unemployment? Natural resource endowment? Sth else?
Several measures?
 - **Existing theories about links bn poverty and revolutions?**
 - Situating your research within the existing literature allows you to contribute to existing state of knowledge with your own work

Relating competing “traditions” in comparative politics to hypotheses

- Competing theoretical approaches differ in **what causal variables they see as most important**
 - So would explain the same DV with different IVs
- Common classification of theoretical approaches:
 - **Rational choice**: believe that people act rationally pursuing their material interests → study **structure of material interests** motivating individual and collective action
 - **Cultural**: there are no objective interests, your identity determines your interests → study **dominant identity** in a given society
 - **Structural**: believe that both interests and identity are mediated by institutions (formal organizations of government, parties, etc) → study **institutions** (rules of the game of politics)

#5. Testing hypotheses

- Often we test through a **comparison** of two or more cases. Why?
 - Without comparing (to **control for** certain variable) often can't know what factors caused our DV
- How to choose cases to compare?
 - **Method of difference** (choose similar cases that experienced different outcomes → look for differences between them)
 - E.g. Nicaragua vs. Honduras to explain revolutions
 - **Method of agreement** (choose different cases that experienced similar outcome → look for similarities among them)
 - E.g. post-communist states vs. the Arab world to explain collapse of authoritarian regimes following popular uprisings

Testing hypotheses (cont): are qualitative or quantitative methods better?

Qualitative (<i>small n</i>)	Quantitative (<i>large n</i>)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fewer cases	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• More cases
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Attention to history, local context, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use of statistics
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Depth over breadth	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Breadth over depth
<u>Limitations:</u>	<u>Limitations:</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hard to generalize to other cases	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Data availability/reliability
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Some concepts (culture, identity) are hard to quantify
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Some important events are few in numbers (revolutions, major wars)

Depending on the question, one or another method may be preferable

#6. Assessing hypotheses against the evidence

- *Is the evidence consistent, inconsistent, partly consistent with the hypothesis?*
- **Causation**: an *explanation of why* X and Y are related
- **Correlation**: two variables co-vary(change together), but we don't know *why* (so can't conclude X causes Y)
 - *Spurious correlation* (appears to be causal relationship bn IV and DV, but in fact none exist)
 - pure coincidence (e.g. storks and babies)
 - IV and DV are linked indirectly by some other variable
 - e.g. poverty leads to revolutions only when it first affects state ability to fund repressive apparatus
- **Your conclusion**: accept, reject, or modify hypotheses you tested. Show how your research contributes to the scholarship!

Research design in under 10 min...

1. Formulate “the best” (causal) **research question**
2. Specify your **DV**, given your question.
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3. Propose a testable **hypothesis** (or several) about what affects your DV
 - H needs to be (a) falsifiable; (b) have clear causal logic; (c) be informed by existing theories
4. Identify your **IV(s)**, given your hypothesis(es)
 - Specify how you will *operationalize (measure)* your IV(s)
5. Decide how you will **test your hypothesis**
 - Comparison? What cases? What methods (qualitative vs quantitative, large vs small n)?
6. **Assess the hypothesis** against the evidence
 - Is H consistent, inconsistent, partially consistent with the evidence?
7. Draw your **conclusions**
 - Accept, reject, or modify your hypothesis.
 - Situate your findings within the existing literature.