

Comparing government and politics

PREVIEW

So far we have looked at the conceptual and theoretical aspects of comparative politics. But these only begin to have meaning when we put comparison into practice, for which reason we now turn to the practicalities of comparison: the kinds of questions that need to be asked, the methods that can be used, the options for designing a comparative research project, and the pitfalls to be avoided. This chapter is intended in part to be a survey of methods and in part to be a practical *How To* guide to the comparative process, giving more insight into the dynamics of that process. The goal is not to cover the details of specific techniques such as interviewing or statistical analysis so much as to provide strategies that will help students working on comparative projects of their own.

The chapter begins with a discussion about the number and the use of cases chosen in comparison; these range from one to many, the research methods used being different for single-case studies, those involving a small number of cases (small-N studies), and those involving a large number of cases (large-N studies). The chapter then reviews the features of qualitative and quantitative research methods, and considers some of the challenges faced by comparison, including the troubling problem of too few cases and too many variables. It ends with an assessment of the historical method, which can be useful in offsetting some of the limitations inherent in the case study method.

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KEY ARGUMENTS

- There is a wide range of options when it comes to conducting comparative political research. It is important to be aware of the potential of comparison (Chapter 1) as well as the alternatives and limitations (this chapter).
- Researchers have choices to make that include the unit of analysis, the level of analysis, and the variables to be studied.
- The three main research methods are the case study, the qualitative approach to a small selection of cases, and the quantitative approach to large numbers of cases.
- Comparative research will have different approaches and results according to whether it is empirical or normative in approach, or quantitative or qualitative.
- When comparative projects seek to examine the relationship between two or more factors, it is worth considering the relative strengths of the most similar and most different system designs.
- History is arguably under-used in comparative political research. Current cases can be compared with past examples, and developments over time can be compared across countries.

Comparing government and politics: an overview

The direction and outcome of scientific study both depend on how we undertake our research, and thus **methodology** is critical. We saw in Chapter 5 that there are different theoretical approaches to comparison, and now we will see that there are also many research methods, and differing opinions about the best way of realizing the potential of comparison (Munck and Snyder, 2007). The options begin with the **unit of analysis**, whether states, institutions, processes, movements, themes, policies, or individuals. A related decision concerns the **level of analysis**, which can be anything from the relations among and between states down through groups or social classes to politics at the level of the individual.

Methodology: The systematic analysis of the methods used in a given field of enquiry. Also used to describe the body of methods used in a discipline, or the means used to reach a particular set of conclusions.

Unit of analysis: The object of study in comparative politics.

Level of analysis: The level of study in comparative politics, ranging from the political system level to the individual level.

Researchers are then faced with a number of additional choices: the case or cases they wish to study, the particular combination of such cases, the particular **variable** that interests them, and the question of whether to use quantitative or qualitative research methods. Even if they opt for the most popular approach – the case study method – they are faced with several subsidiary questions regarding the number of cases they use, and whether the cases they use are representative of a type, or not.

Variable: A changeable feature, factor, quantity, or element.

Lijphart (1971) made a distinction between three different approaches to political research: the experimental method uses experimental and control groups to isolate the effects of different stimuli, the statistical method uses empirically observed data to tease out relationships among variables, and the **comparative**

method is exactly the same as the statistical method except that it focuses on drawing conclusions from the study of a small number of cases.

Comparative method: Comparing a small number of cases in order to better understand their qualities, and to develop and investigate hypotheses, theories, and concepts.

Comparison is one of the oldest tools of political science, found in the work of Aristotle. Some have even argued that the scientific study of politics is unavoidably comparative (Almond, 1966; Lasswell 1968), and that ‘comparison is the methodological core of the scientific study of politics’ (Powell *et al.*, 2014). The ‘method’ is usually taken to mean the study of a few carefully selected cases using a middle level of analysis (rather than the more intensive analysis possible with a few cases, or the more abstract analysis necessary with many cases) (Landman, 2008: 29), but it can take different forms according to the number of cases being studied.

Comparative research methods

The methods available for the comparative study of politics and government are many and varied. The choice among them, argues Landman (2008: 24) depends on a combination of the research question being asked, the time and resources available, the method with which the researcher is most comfortable, and the epistemological preferences of the researcher; that is, how they believe that understanding is best acquired. At the heart of most comparison is the case study method, which comes with many subsidiary choices: how many cases are appropriate, what selection of cases are appropriate, and are they best approached using qualitative, quantitative, or historical methods? There are also many pitfalls involved in assessing cases, all of which must be factored in to planning and design.

The key question in choosing cases is that of how many there should be, in which regard there are three main options:

- The case study method typically involves a single case, and thus might not seem to be comparative at first glance, but a case is necessarily comparative because it needs to be an example of something larger, against which it can then be juxtaposed. Single cases are not

as widely used as they once were, but they have the advantage of depth, and other researchers can use two or more single-country studies to explore broader similarities and differences, and single cases can usefully be compared with an ideal type or a typology.

- The qualitative method is what we usually associate with the comparative method, and involves comparing anything from two to a dozen or more cases (otherwise known as small-N, for the number of cases). It has the advantage of going beyond a single case while also remaining manageable, but many questions arise in regard to the number and the choice of cases.
- The quantitative method tends to be more abstract, involves more cases (that is, large-N studies), and is also better suited to statistical analysis. It will take more time and resources, is more likely to suffer from the variable quality and availability of data from multiple cases, the results will offer more breadth than depth, and it might ultimately have to be checked against single case or small-N studies.

In the pages that follow we will look at each of these in turn, reviewing their features and dynamics, and their advantages and disadvantages. But it must be said in anticipation that they are not divorced from one another, and there is much overlap. In reviewing quantitative and qualitative approaches, for example, King *et al.* (1994: 3–4) note that the two traditions ‘appear quite different; indeed they sometimes seem to be at war’, but conclude that the differences are mainly of style and technique. The first uses numbers and statistical methods, and ‘abstracts from particular instances to seek general description or to test causal hypotheses ... [or] measurements and analyses that are easily replicable by other researchers’. The second covers a wide range of approaches, none of which relies primarily on numerical measures.

Case study method

The **case study method** is one of the most widely used strategies in research, being at the heart of political science and widely used also in subjects as diverse as anthropology, business, economics, education, psychology, and sociology. It usually involves an in-depth study of a single example, which might be an event, a policy, or a political institution or process, and an effort is made to use the case to illustrate a wider point applying to other cases. Such studies combine a qualitative investigation of a specific topic, using all the techniques appropriate for

that subject, with a link to wider themes in the study of politics. The greatest advantage is that it offers a real-world understanding of a phenomenon, a clearly defined example that helps to illustrate a wider principle.

Case study method: A research method involving the detailed study of a particular object (a person, institution, country, phenomenon, etc.) as well the context within which it exists.

Yin (2013: 16–17) points out that case studies must be understood in terms of both their scope and their features. In terms of scope, they look in depth at a phenomenon within its actual context; case studies are different from experiments, for example, because the latter separate the phenomena to be studied from their context. In terms of features, case studies help address the phenomenon of too many variables and not enough cases (discussed later in this chapter), and are broad-ranging in that they rely on multiple sources of evidence.

One key to a successful case study is to be clear what the case represents, and how a case differs from a study. By its nature, a case is an instance of a more general category, such that to examine a case is to undertake an investigation with significance beyond its own boundaries. An account of the Japanese general election of 2012 which does not venture beyond the topic itself is a study, not a case study. But an analysis which takes this election as an example of the return to power of a previously dominant party (the Liberal Democrats) is a case study. A case study adds value by offering a detailed illustration of a theme of wider interest.

By their nature, case studies are multi-method, using a wide range of techniques, including the following:

- Reading the academic literature.
- Examining primary and secondary sources.
- Conducting interviews with participants and other observers in the unit.
- Experiencing and visiting the unit.

As King *et al.* (1994: 38) put it, scholars of cases engage in ‘soaking and poking, marinating themselves in minutiae’. They aim to provide a description which is both rounded and detailed, a goal which Geertz (1973) called ‘thick description’. This multiple-methods approach contrasts with a more specific and explicit approach using a single lens, such as a statistical analysis, or an experiment. Unlike statistical analysis, which seeks to identify relationships between variables

	Number of cases	Focus	Strategy
Case study	One	Case	Intensive study of a single instance with wider significance.
Qualitative	A few (small-N)	Case	Holistic comparison of two or more cases within their natural settings.
Quantitative	Many (large-N)	Variable	Statistical assessments of the relationships between variables involving large numbers of cases.
Historical	One or a few (small-N)	Process	Traces the process leading to a known outcome.

FIGURE 6.1: Political science research methods

Note: N means the number of cases.

measured across a series of observations, case analysis aims to identify how a range of factors interact in the context of the example being studied.

Figure 6.2 outlines five types of case study, of which the representative case is the most common. It is the work-horse of case studies, as useful as it is undramatic. Often researchers will use their own country as a representative example. For instance, researchers may be interested in the formation of coalition governments in general, but

choose to study in detail how governments form in their homeland. The home country is the research site but the hope is that the results will contribute to broader understanding. A collection of representative case studies can go on to provide the raw material for comparative generalization by other scholars taking a wider approach.

By contrast, a prototypical case is chosen not because it is representative but because it is expected to become so. 'In other words, their present is our future'

	Definition	Example
Representative	Typical of the category	Coalition government in Finland.
Prototypical	Expected to become typical	Sophisticated use of the internet in US election campaigns.
Exemplary	Created the category	British Parliament.
Deviant	Exception to the rule	India as a stable democracy in a poor country.
Critical	If it works here, it will work anywhere	Promoting democracy in Afghanistan.

FIGURE 6.2: Five types of case study

Further reading: Yin (2013)

FOCUS 6.1 Hypotheses and variables

At the heart of research in almost every field of study is the formulation and testing of a **hypothesis**. This is a proposed explanation for a phenomenon that can be supported (confirmed) or refuted (falsified) through observation or experimentation. Hypotheses should not be confused with theories, which are explanatory frameworks from which hypotheses might flow, and which can in turn be tested in order to support or refute theories (see Chapter 5). Examples of hypotheses include the following:

- Plurality electoral systems always produce a two-party system (otherwise known as Duverger's law – see Chapter 15).
- The wealthier a country, the more likely it is to sustain a stable democracy.
- The violent end to a dictatorial regime is more likely to bring chaos than democracy.
- Colonialism is the root cause of the problems of the world's poorest states.

We have also seen how variables play a key role in research, particularly in comparison. The object is usually to explore the extent to which variables or factors co-vary with one another, such that knowing a country's score on one variable (for instance, literacy) allows us to predict its score on another (for instance, electoral turnout). In such analyses, one variable is **dependent**, in the sense that it is the one we want to better understand, while the others are **independent**, in the sense that we believe that they may explain or impact the dependent variable. For example:

- Higher participation in politics may be driven by factors such as greater wealth and higher education.
- The incidence of military coups may be tied to poverty, social division, and the past incidence of coups.
- An assertive foreign policy may be driven by a high sense of mission, the power of the defence industry, fear of the foreign, or (as in the case of Putin's Russia) a desire to reassert lost influence.

Hypothesis: Proposed explanation for a phenomenon that can be confirmed or falsified through observation or experimentation.

Dependent variable: The factor or element we wish to explain.

Independent variable: The factor or element believed to influence the dependent variable. There are often many such variables.

(Rose, 1991: 459). The point here is that studying a pioneer can help us understand a phenomenon which is growing in significance elsewhere. One famous early example of a prototypical case study was *Democracy in America*, written by the French politician Alexis de Tocqueville as a product of his travels in the United States in 1831 to 1832. He had been sent by the French government to study the American prison system, but the book he wrote became a broader analysis of democracy and

representative government, using the US as a case. De Tocqueville regarded the United States as a harbinger of democracy and therefore a guide to Europe's own future (1835, ch. 1). More recent examples of prototypical cases would be Tunisia as the first instance of the Arab Spring, or Egypt and Ukraine as cases of the political impact of social media in mobilizing mass demonstrations.

Where the study of prototypical cases aims to reveal how similar cases may evolve in the future, exemplary cases are the archetypes that are considered to have generated the category of which they are taken as representative. For instance, the parliamentary system was born in Britain, and thus a study of the features of the British Parliament will give us insights into the manner in which legislatures and executives work in all those countries using this system. In similar fashion, the US presidency does far more than illustrate the presidential system of government: it is the model which influenced later political systems, notably in Latin America. While an exemplar is often defined as a case to be emulated, in research design the term refers more neutrally to an

influential example which illustrates the essential features of a phenomenon. An exemplary case is often, but need not be, prototypical.

The purpose of a deviant case study is to seek out the exceptional and the untypical, rather than the norm: the few countries which remain communist, or which are still governed by the military, or which seem to be immune from democratizing trends. Deviant cases are often used to tidy up our understanding of exceptions and anomalies. Why does India contradict the thesis that democracy presupposes prosperity? Why did tiny Switzerland adopt a federal architecture when many federations are found in large countries? Why has voter turnout stayed high in Denmark even as it has fallen elsewhere (Elkit *et al.*, 2005)? Deviant cases always attract interest and, by providing a contrast with the norm, enhance our understanding of representative examples. But since the exceptional tends to the exotic, the danger is over-study. Comparative politics should be more than a collection of curios.

Finally, a critical case (also known as a ‘crucial case’) enables a proposition to be tested in the circumstances least favourable to its validity. The logic is simple: if it is true here, then it is true everywhere. For instance, if we were to find that most Germans opposed further European integration, we could anticipate that the same would hold true in other EU countries such as Britain which have historically been more suspicious of the European project. In this way, critical case studies can be highly efficient, providing exceptional returns on the research investment; by studying just one country, we can generalize to others. However, the pay-off comes with risk: a critical case design builds a potential for generalization into a single investigation but involves a bet that the relevant proposition will, in fact, be confirmed in the conditions least favourable to its validity.

In the absence of overarching theory, case studies are the building blocks from which we construct our understanding of the political world. In a similar way to judges in common law systems, political scientists (and politicians more so) usually proceed by comparing cases, rather than by making deductions from first principles. In consequence, much comparative political analysis takes the form not of relating cases to abstract theory but, rather, of drawing analogies between the cases themselves. For instance, how did the process of state-building differ between the states of early modern Europe and the post-colonial states of the twentieth century? What are the similarities and differences

between the Russian, Chinese, and Iranian revolutions? Why does the plurality electoral system produce a two-party system in the United States but a multi-party system in India? As we will see in the next section, a comparison of cases can create space for a broader understanding.

Qualitative method

Implementing a comparative design involves making either qualitative or quantitative comparisons, or a blend of the two. The **qualitative method** is most often used in research that falls between single-case and large-N studies, and concentrates on the intensive examination of two cases (a paired or binary comparison), three cases (a triangular comparison), or more. Cases are usually selected to introduce variation into the dependent variable, thus overcoming an inherent limit of the single case study.

Qualitative method: A research method that typically uses a small number of cases to understand a phenomenon holistically and within its natural setting, with an emphasis on values, opinions, behaviour, and context.

The qualitative approach has the following features:

- A limited number of cases are studied in depth.
- It is descriptive rather than predictive.
- An effort is made to understand the interaction of multiple variables.
- Meaning is allowed to emerge from the objects of study.
- Observation is the main means of data collection.
- Phenomena are studied within their natural setting.

To illustrate the technique, consider the controversial conclusions of Jeremy Rifkin in his 2004 study *The European Dream* which compared and contrasted the priorities and values of Americans and Europeans. He began with the notion of the ‘American dream’, an idea usually credited to the historian James Truslow Adams in his book *The Epic of America* (1931). Although never clearly defined, it is usually taken to mean that Americans living the dream are being allowed to pursue their goals in life through hard work and free choice, regardless of race, gender, age, religion, or class.

Rifkin was critical of the notion, arguing that it was centred more on personal material advancement than on concern with broader human welfare. He contrasted

it with a 'European dream' that emphasized 'quality of life over the accumulation of wealth', as well as:

community relationships over individual autonomy, cultural diversity over assimilation ... sustainable development over unlimited material growth, deep play over unrelenting toil, universal human rights and the rights of nature over property rights, and global cooperation over the unilateral exercise of power. (p. 3)

He concluded that the European Union had been developing a new social and political model better suited to the needs of the globalizing world of the new century, and that the 'European dream' was – as a result – eclipsing the American dream. Ironically, Rifkin was writing just before the onset of the global financial crisis in 2007 and the eurozone crisis in 2009, which would strike severe blows to dreams on both sides of the Atlantic.

The selection of cases is important, and there are two core strategies involved (Przeworski and Teune, 1970). The most common – known as the **most similar system** (MSS) design – involves selecting those cases which are as similar as possible except in regard to the object of study (the dependent variable). The underlying logic is that 'the more similar the units being compared, the more possible it should be to isolate the factors responsible for differences between them' (Lipset, 1990: xiii). If the states being studied are similar in, say, their history, culture, and government institutions, it should be possible to rule out such common factors as explanations for the particular difference being studied.

An example of the MSS method at work might be a study of attitudes towards membership of the European Union among its six founding states, or a selection of Western European members, or a selection of Eastern Europeans members. Attitudes towards integration differ among countries within each group, even though the countries might appear to have much else in common, so the goal would be to tease out the differences that accounted for the variation in levels of support for the EU within an otherwise similar group.

Most similar system: A research design based on using cases that are as similar as possible, in effect controlling for the similarities and isolating the causes of differences.

Most different system: A research design based on using cases that are as different as possible, in effect controlling for the differences and isolating the causes of similarities.

However, even with an MSS design, many factors will remain as possible explanations for an observed difference and, usually, there will be no decisive way of testing among them. The problem of too many variables and too few countries (see later in chapter) cannot be sidestepped; in practice, much of the value of a qualitative comparison (using an MSS design) lies in the journey, rather than the destination.

The **most different system** (MDS) design follows the opposite track. Here, we seek to test a relationship between two factors by discovering whether it can be observed in a range of countries with contrasting histories, cultures, and so on. If so, our confidence that the relationship is real, and not due to the dependence of both factors on an unmeasured third variable, will increase (Peters, 1998). A well-known example of this approach is the historical analysis by Theda Skocpol (1979) of revolutions in France, Russia, and China. These three cases had quite different political economic and social systems, so she set out to ask what they had in common that would produce a similar political outcome. She concluded that regimes which were internationally weak and domestically ineffective became vulnerable to insurrection when well-organized agitators succeeded in exploiting peasant frustration with an old order to which the landed aristocracy offered only limited support.

Another example is provided by Rothstein (2002), who examined the evolution of social and political trust in two contrasting democracies, Sweden and the United States, assuming that any trends shared between these two countries should also be observable in other democracies. In a similar way, if we were to find that the plurality method of election is associated with a two-party system in each of the diverse group of countries employing that electoral system, our confidence in the robustness of the relationship between plurality elections and a two-party system would increase.

Quantitative method

Where the qualitative method takes an intensive approach to understanding political phenomena, using small-N cases in their natural setting, the **quantitative method** takes a narrower approach based on a large number of cases, more variables, and statistical analysis. It typically tries to quantify data and to generalize the results to a larger population, and generates information through experiments and survey research. It is also heavily statistical,

TABLE 6.1: Comparing qualitative and quantitative approaches

	Qualitative	Quantitative
Goal	To understand underlying reasons and motivations in the setting of a phenomenon	To quantify data and generalize results from a sample to the population of interest
Method	Exploratory or 'bottom-up'; hypotheses and theory generated from data	Confirmatory or 'top-down'; hypotheses and theory tested with data
View of human thought and behaviour	Contextual, personal and unpredictable	Regular and predictable
Context	Natural setting	Controlled conditions
Sample size	Small	Large
Core principles	Interpretive, exploratory	Scientific, conclusive
Types of information	Open-ended, narrative, non-numerical, words, images, themes	Statistical, numerical
Information collection	Interviews, focus groups, case studies, observation	Experiments, audits, survey research, rating scales
Results	Particularistic, respondent-framed	Generalizable, researcher-framed
Advantages	Best where ideas cannot be reduced to numbers	Allows for large-scale studies
Disadvantages	Can be difficult to analyse, generating conflicting conclusions	Ideas and political phenomena cannot always be expressed in numbers

Note: These should be regarded as tendencies rather than absolutes. There is much overlap between the two methods.

Source: Adapted from Johnson and Christensen (2014, ch. 2)

demanding a familiarity with approaches and methods that are technical and involve their own specialized language. (It should be emphasized, though, that quantitative sources can also be used within small-N studies.)

Quantitative method: A research method involving variables rather than cases, and attempting to explain political phenomena using statistics.

The most basic form of quantitative research is counting populations, which provides an underrated beginning. As John (2010) says, asking the plain question 'How many of them are there?' is worthwhile. For instance: how many federations are there, how many states are democratic, and how many authoritarian regimes from 1980 are democratic today? Just as straightforward case studies can contribute more to comparative politics than elaborate attempts at theory testing, so descriptive counts can sometimes provide more useful results than sophisticated statistical analyses. Once we go beyond the basics, though, we enter the more analytical world of dependent and independent variables.

To illustrate the statistical approach, consider the example in Figure 6.3, which is a scatterplot showing the relationship between the number of members in a national legislature (the dependent variable) and a country's population (the independent variable). The simple question being asked is whether population impacts the size of the legislature, and the graph reveals a modest positive **correlation**: the larger the population, the larger the assembly. If there was a negative correlation, the **regression line** would slope down rather than up: in that unlikely case, a larger population would be associated with a smaller legislature.

Correlation: A relationship between two or more variables or attributes.

Regression line: The line of best fit in a scatterplot, summarizing the relationship between two variables.

The content of the graph is summarized more precisely by calculating a regression line: the line giving the best fit to the data, and which is determined

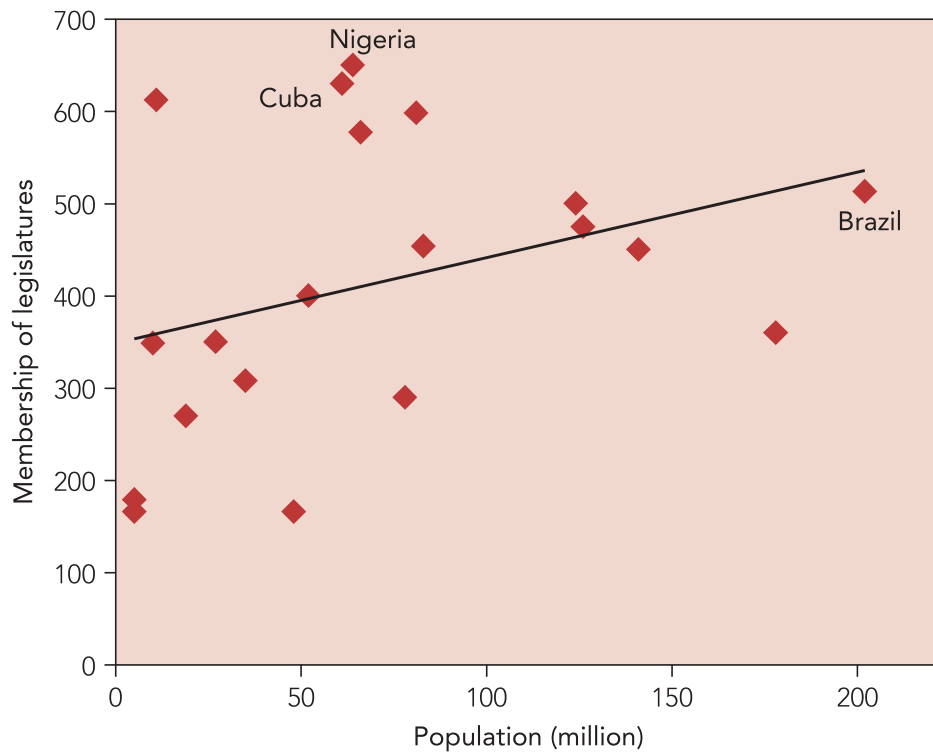


FIGURE 6.3: Population and the size of legislature

Note: Membership of legislatures refers to lower chamber only.

Sources: Membership of legislatures from Inter-Parliamentary Union (2015); population size from World Bank (2015)

by a formula linking the two variables. In this case, the equation reveals that, on average, the size of a legislature increases by one for each increment of a million in a country's population. Given such an equation, which also gives a base estimate for assembly size given a notional population of zero, we can use the population of any particular country to predict its assembly size.

One important virtue of a regression line is that it allows us to identify **outliers** or off-the-line cases. The larger the difference between the predicted and the actual assembly size, the greater the need for additional explanation, thus providing a link to deviant case analysis. In our example, the membership of Brazil's legislature is just slightly below that expected from the country's population but both the Cuban and the Nigerian legislatures are larger than predicted. Cuba's National Assembly of People's Power has 612 members in a country with just over 11 million people, or one representative for 18,000 people, giving Cuba a higher level of representation than almost any other country in the world. How is this explained? It could be that

communist states created large legislatures as a way of reducing any threat they might pose to the party's power. This, at least, is a plausible hypothesis for further investigation, giving us a case selection strategy in which the case is nested within a statistical framework (Lieberman, 2005).

Outliers: The observations furthest away from the value predicted by the regression line.

The value of quantitative comparisons is that they can provide precise summaries of large amounts of data using standard techniques whose application can be checked by other researchers. But, as always, interpretation is the difficult part, requiring attention to two main dangers. First, a strong correlation between two variables may arise simply because both depend on a third, unmeasured factor. In such cases, there is no relationship of cause and effect. For example, a correlation between proportional representation (PR) and multi-party systems might arise because both factors emerge

in divided societies, not because PR itself increases the number of parties. This problem of a spurious correlation can be addressed by including all relevant variables in an analysis, but we may not know how many are relevant, and may not have data on all those we think might be relevant.

The second problem in interpreting statistical results is that, even if a relationship is genuine, the direction of causation remains to be established. Suppose we find that liberal democracies have higher rates of economic growth than authoritarian regimes; does the correlation arise because democracy encourages economic growth, or because economic growth encourages democracy? A case can be made either way, or both. A statistical correlation by itself will not provide the answer, and a correlation in itself does not show the direction of causation.

Worthwhile quantitative comparisons can be made even when the variables take the form of categories (such as yes/no) rather than numerical scores. For example, are federations less likely than unitary states to develop welfare states? Is proportional representation linked to coalition government? Are people from poor countries more likely to turn to terrorism than people from rich countries? A country is either a federation or not, a government is either a coalition or not, and so on. In these circumstances, a straightforward cross-tabulation is the qualitative equivalent of the scatterplot in Figure 6.3. Correlation-like statistics can nonetheless be calculated for such tables (Pennings *et al.*, 2006).

The challenges of comparison

As we saw in Chapter 1, comparison pays dividends: it broadens our understanding of the political world, leads to improved classifications, and gives potential for

explanation and even prediction. And as we have just seen, there are different approaches to using cases and variables in comparative study. Despite the variety of advantages and options, the very breadth of comparison brings its own difficulties, of which four in particular stand out (see Table 6.2).

Too few cases, too many variables

This is a problem for those who think of comparative politics as a version of the experimenter's laboratory, in which researchers patiently seek to isolate the impact of a single variable. As outlined by Lijphart (1971), it arises when a researcher wants to control for many variables at the same time and quickly runs out of cases. In other words, the number of variables exceeds the number of cases. Even with nearly 200 sovereign states, we do not have enough cases to allow political comparisons to be as precise as laboratory experiments. To make the same point from another angle, we will never be able to test all possible explanations of a political difference between states.

For example, why was New Zealand particularly sympathetic to introducing the private sector into the running of its public services during the 1990s? Perhaps it was a reflection of the pro-market thinking of the country's political and business elite (Boston *et al.*, 1995), or perhaps it was because the public sector in New Zealand, unlike many democracies in continental Europe, was not protected by the constitution and civil law codes (Hood, 1996). So we have two potential explanations, one based on ideology and the other on law, and both are broadly consistent with the facts, but we have no way of isolating which factor is decisive. Ideally, we would want to see if the public sector had been reformed in a state identical to New Zealand except that only one of these two factors applied. But there is no such state; we have run out of cases.

TABLE 6.2: Some challenges of comparison

Too few cases, too many variables	The problem of having more explanatory factors for a given outcome than there are cases available to study.
Selection bias	The cases selected for study are often an unrepresentative sample, limiting the significance of the findings. The selection may be influenced in particular by survivorship, value, or confirmation bias.
Understanding meaning	The 'same' phenomenon can mean different things in different countries, creating difficulties in comparing like with like.
Globalization	States cannot be regarded as entirely independent of each other, thus reducing the effective number of cases available for testing theories.

There are several potential solutions to the problem. We could increase the number of cases in a study by turning to history and comparing cases over an extended period of time. We could also use most similar system designs to achieve a more focused study of a few cases, or a most different system design to reduce the number of variables. Finally, we could resort to asking hypothetical ‘What if ...?’ questions by using **counterfactuals**. What would the outcome have been in New Zealand had its reforming elite confronted an unsympathetic legal framework? Would public sector reform still have proceeded? What would our world be like if Britain had won the US War of Independence, if Hitler had died in a car crash in 1932, or if the attacks of 9/11 had never happened? Tetlock and Belkin (1996) have developed useful guidelines for judging the plausibility of counterfactuals, but the outcome of such thought experiments can – by definition – never be tested against reality.

Counterfactual: A thought experiment speculating on possible outcomes if a particular factor had been absent from a process, or an absent factor had been present.

Selection bias

A second handicap to comparison is raised by **selection bias**, which is at issue whenever the units of analysis (such as states, cities, interest groups, or electoral systems) are chosen intentionally rather than randomly. In these circumstances, the danger is that these units are unrepresentative of the wider population and, in consequence, results cannot be generalized to the broader category from which the cases are drawn. For example, studies of English-speaking democracies are unrepresentative of all democracies, and studies of political parties in sub-Saharan Africa are untypical of those in Europe or Latin America. Given the rarity of random sampling in qualitative comparisons, the point is not so much to eliminate such bias as to be aware of its presence.

Selection bias: Arises when selected cases and variables are unrepresentative of the wider class from which they are drawn.

This danger often emerges as an unintended result of haphazard selection. For example, we might choose to study those countries which speak our language,

or which we feel are safe to visit. As a result, large and powerful states might be studied more intensively than small and less powerful ones, even though large states are untypical. By contrast, countries in which it is difficult to conduct research receive insufficient attention. For example, Goode (2010) suggests that authoritarian regimes such as Russia are under-studied because of the political sensitivity of conducting research in such domains. The result of such selection biases is that published work is unrepresentative of all states. So while most university libraries will contain many books on American, British, or German politics, they will contain fewer studies of Haiti, Somalia, or Chad.

One virtue of large-N statistical designs is that they reduce the risk of selection bias. Indeed, when a study covers every existing state, selection bias should disappear altogether. But the problem may just resurface in another form, through an unrepresentative selection of variables, rather than countries. For example, much statistical research in comparative politics relies on data collected by governments, think-tanks, and international bodies whose priorities are often economic rather than political (this book, for example, draws on data gathered by the World Bank). So the availability of data means that financial and economic variables receive more attention and politics runs the risk of being treated as a branch of economics.

A particularly troubling form of selection bias comes from examining only positive cases, thus eliminating all variation in the phenomenon we seek to explain. King *et al.* (1994: 129) explain the problem as follows:

The literature is full of work that makes the mistake of failing to let the dependent variable vary; for example, research that tries to explain the outbreak of wars with studies only of wars, the onset of revolutions with studies only of revolutions, or patterns of voter turnout with interviews only of non-voters.

When only positive cases are studied, several potential conclusions about the causes and consequences of the phenomenon are ruled out. Contrast is needed to give variation, so that we can then consider what factors distinguish times of war from times of peace, periods of revolution from periods of stability, and abstainers from voters.

Even without variation in the dependent variable, we can still identify common characteristics of

the cases. For example, we may find that revolutions are always preceded by war, or that all non-voters are cynical about politics. However, we have no contrast to explore and explain. We do not know how often war occurs without triggering a revolution, or whether the political cynicism we find among abstainers is equally prevalent among those who turn out on election day (Geddes, 2003). Put differently, war may be a necessary condition of revolution (no revolution in the absence of war) without being a sufficient condition (whenever there is a war, revolution follows).

Three particular forms of selection bias raise their own unique problems. First, **survivorship bias** arises when non-survivors of a temporal process are excluded, leading to biased results. Studying the few surviving communist states or military governments as representative of the entire class of such regimes (past and present) is an error because the few that have survived may differ systematically from those that have disappeared. Similarly, if we want to study federations, we should appreciate that some have failed and should ask not only whether current federations are successful, but also what proportion of all federations, past and present, have survived and prospered. And just because every example from history of a confederation has failed or morphed into a federation, does that mean that future examples are also doomed to fail? In designing our research, we should look through both ends of the telescope – at starters as well as finishers, at casualties as well as survivors.

Survivorship bias: A form of selection bias that crops up when we study only surviving examples of political types, overlooking past examples.

Second, **value bias** arises when researchers allow themselves to be guided by values or ideology. As we read reports, journal articles, and books (even this one), we have to allow that the authors will have political preferences, and in the case of sponsored research we have to consider who paid for the research, whether conditions were imposed on the researchers by the sponsors, or whether there is an underlying political agenda at work. Value bias is a particular problem in comparative studies, because other than the country or countries in which researchers have spent most or all of their lives, they will initially know little directly about the objects of their study, and they face the

danger of seeing others through the lenses of their own experiences, values, and learning. Without even trying, they will be biased by politics, culture, race, gender, religion, age, economic situation, and a host of other factors.

Value bias: Allowing assessments, the choice of facts, and conclusions to be impacted by the values of the researcher.

Confirmation bias: The tendency to seek out or interpret information that confirms pre-existing beliefs and attitudes, and to ignore information that does not.

Finally, **confirmation bias** arises when researchers have a view in mind before they undertake their research, and pay attention only to the facts and analyses that support that view, ignoring or downplaying any contrary evidence. Those who sponsor research are likely to seek out and support researchers who seek out data that support their interests. Whether it is conscious or unconscious, confirmation bias has the same effect of producing skewed results and conclusions. In regard to climate change, for example, both advocates and deniers sometimes seize on any study which supports their beliefs, while ignoring or rejecting findings which run against their entrenched positions. In principle, we can counter confirmation bias by asking how new findings should lead us to amend our current understanding of the world but this level of objectivity is not easy to sustain.

Understanding meaning

Because the meaning of a political action depends on the conventions of the state concerned, comparing like with like is not always as straightforward as it seems. Take the question of styles of political representation, which vary across states. Where Nigerian politicians might seek to impress by acts of flamboyant extravagance, Swedish politicians are more likely to set out to affirm their very ordinariness. The same goal of impressing constituents is achieved by culturally specific means, such that what works in Lagos would be disastrous in Stockholm, and what succeeds in Stockholm would be met with apathy in Abuja.

Similarly, when members of a legislature vote against their party's line, the consequences can range by state from complete indifference to expulsion from the

party. What appears to be the same act carries varying significance, and thus meaning depends on context.

So, before we begin any cross-national comparison we should ensure that we understand the relevant cultural codes of the states we are studying. Failure here results in cultural imperialism, in which the meaning of an action in our home state is incorrectly projected onto other societies.

Globalization

The final handicap to comparison comes from globalization (Teune, 2010). Although 193 ‘independent’ states belonged to the United Nations in 2015, in reality these states were interdependent, or even dependent. Countries learn from, copy, compete trade with, influence and even invade each other in a constant process of interaction. The result can be homogenization, where politics and government in different countries become increasingly similar (though specialization, where each country focuses on its distinctive strengths in the global order, is another possible outcome). The KOF Globalization Index maintained by the Swiss Economic Institute offers some insight into this problem by ranking the countries of the world in terms of the extent to which they are globally connected in economic, political and social terms (see Table 6.3). Among other things, this table reveals that it is the smaller democracies with

advanced economies such as Belgium and the Netherlands that have achieved the highest levels of global connectivity. Larger countries such as India and even the United States remain somewhat less well integrated. And indeed, both India and the United States have been able to carve out distinctive political paths in a manner that would be impractical for small countries. But overall, considerable levels of interdependence are the norm, limiting the extent to which we can treat states as separate cases.

Opinion is divided on the implications of globalization. In his book *Jihad vs. McWorld*, Benjamin Barber (1995) suggests that the forces of globalization/globalism and tradition/tribalism are at odds with one another. Where Jihad (literally, the obligation of Muslims to propagate the faith) delivers such qualities as a vibrant local identity, a sense of community, and solidarity among kinsmen, neighbours, and countrymen, McWorld delivers peace, prosperity, and relative unity, albeit at the cost of independence, community, and identity. He concludes that globalization will eventually win out. But the struggle has already been won, according to the sociologist George Ritzer (2011), who writes of the McDonaldisation of society. This suggests that culture has come to be dominated by the goals of efficiency, predictability and standardization; related arguments could be made about politics and political expectations.

TABLE 6.3: The KOF Globalization Index

	Ranking	Score		Ranking	Score
Ireland	1	92	South Africa	58	65
Belgium	2	92	Japan	59	65
Netherlands	3	91	Mexico	70	61
Sweden	7	87	China	72	60
Canada	12	86	Brazil	76	60
UK	17	84	Egypt	85	57
France	21	83	Nigeria	90	56
Germany	26	79	India	112	50
United States	32	75	Afghanistan	184	30
Russia	56	65	Somalia	191	24

Note: Numbers indicate scores out of 100, with 100 representing the most globalized and 0 indicating the least globalized. Numbers are rounded out to nearest whole figure.

Source: Swiss Economic Institute (2015) at www.kof.ethz.ch

The major transitions of world history – industrialization, colonialism, decolonization, democratization – unfolded on a world stage. States themselves did not develop independently, but the idea of statehood instead diffused outwards from its proving ground in Europe. In that sense we inhabit one global system, rather than a world of independent states. Green (2002: 5) puts the point well when he says the world is arranged ‘as if national polities are in fact cells of a larger entity with a life all its own’. The implication is that we should study this larger organism, rather than comparing its component parts as if they were unconnected.

Specific institutional forms also reflect diffusion. The presidential systems of Latin America were imported from the United States; prime ministers and parliaments grew out of the specific circumstances of British political history; and the ombudsman (see Chapter 10) was a device copied from Sweden. The development of international organizations, from the United Nations to the European Union, also creates a newer layer of governance to which all member states must react.

These links do not invalidate comparative analysis; indeed, they allow studies comparing the impact of an international factor on different states, thus bridging the study of international and comparative politics. But interdependence creates technical difficulties for statistical analysis. Treating states as independent entities artificially inflates the effective sample size in statistical research, resulting in exaggerated confidence in the significance of the results obtained (Tilly, 1997). To put the point more intuitively, treating states as separate can lead to false inferences if in reality they are all subject to a common external influence, such as globalization.

Historical method

Most studies in politics – and in comparative politics, especially – focus on the present and leave history to the historians. But this division of labour is both arbitrary and artificial, because today’s present is tomorrow’s past. Political science can, and perhaps should, make more use of the past as a treasure trove of additional cases, whether of rare events such as genocide and revolution or of particular episodes that exemplify, challenge, or refine existing theories. The **historical method** can enlarge our database, enabling us in particular to employ

the most different system design to examine the robustness of findings across distinct time periods.

Historical method: A research method based on studying cases from the past, often with a focus on their development through time.

The question that arises for political scientists is how to make the transition from taking snapshots of the present – the traditional focus of most political research – to developing moving pictures of change over time. Part of the answer lies in using an **analytic narrative** that seeks to combine history and political science. It examines how a particular sequence of moves, made by calculating actors aware of the options available to them, produces a particular result (Bates *et al.*, 1998). In contrast to a case study, an analytic narrative is concerned with sequence, the goal being to identify the key factors driving towards the outcome.

Analytic narrative: An attempt to integrate historical and political science research methods in seeking to explain a specific outcome.

The European Union offers a good example. We can study its institutions, the dynamics of its decision-making processes, and the policies it pursues, but we will never fully understand it without appreciating why it was created in the first place (the desire to achieve peace among European states was first and foremost) or how it has evolved, or how the particular steps in its evolution resulted in both its current structure and its current membership. It has been built piece by piece, and the order in which the pieces were added, for example how membership expanded, and the particular order in which new members joined the EU will reveal much about the changing perspective and priorities of European integration.

Iran offers another example. At first glance, it can appear over-concerned with criticizing the West – particularly the United States – and the instinctive reaction of Western political leaders is to reward Iran’s petulance with criticism, mistrust, and an unwillingness to engage. And yet although Iran was never a colony, its perspective is still coloured by the long history of Western interference in its politics and economics. It remains critical of foreign involvement in the problems of Iran’s neighbours, such as Yemen. It is only through an analytic

narrative of this kind that the present can be understood in terms of the past.

Process tracing reconnects political science with history by identifying and describing the historical sequence linking a cause to an effect. For example, what were the steps leading from Hitler's anti-Semitism to the Holocaust? Through what mechanisms does defeat in war lead to a change of regime? Often, however, the outcome is far from predetermined. It is here that the concepts of critical junctures, sequences, and slow-moving causes provide tools for thinking about how the political past influences the political present.

Process tracing: The study of the sequence of events linking a cause to an effect.

Although analytic narratives provide a way of examining politics over time, broader approaches are still needed. Pierson (2004) brings together some concepts for thinking about politics in the context of time, helping tease out our often submerged thoughts about political change. First among these concepts is **path dependence**, which describes a political process whose outcome depends on earlier decisions; that is, the destination depends on the route. The idea was borrowed from physics by economists seeking to explain how changes in technology impacted the evolution of business practices, and it has since spread throughout the social sciences. It might be used, for example, to argue that the return of authoritarianism in Putin's Russia can be traced back to decisions made or steps taken during the reform era following the collapse of the USSR in 1991.

Path dependence: The idea that the outcome of a process depends on earlier decisions that lead down a particular path.

Path dependence implies an emphasis on history generally and branching points specifically. By contrast, path independence means that the same destination will be reached, regardless of the route; all roads lead to Rome. Path independence implies an emphasis on underlying structures and resources rather than historical sequences. For example, the result of a football game is path dependent if the first score is vital, and path independent if the better team is sure to win in the end, no matter who scores first. To take a more political illustration, the outcome of a war is path dependent if a particular battle proves decisive, and path independent if

the stronger side is sure to win eventually, whatever the result of a specific confrontation.

Path dependence can be initiated by **critical junctures**, key moments that clear a new path that continues to be followed long after the juncture itself has passed. During the critical phase (often, a moment of crisis), all options really are on the table and history is written. Revolutions are one example; constitutional conventions another. Once the new order has consolidated, however, politics settles down and the choices realistically available to decision-makers shrink. The revolutionary generation gives way to pragmatic operators of the new regime. As ideas are displaced by institutions, so the constitution as choice is supplanted by the constitution as constraint.

Critical juncture: A turning point which establishes interests, structures, or institutions persisting through time.

By dividing history into critical and normal eras, we arrive at a plausible perspective on the old debate about whether people make their own history. The answer is perhaps that they do, but only occasionally. In other words, critical junctures are rare choice points in which human agency really can be decisive for the long term.

Ideas, in particular, rise to prominence during critical junctures. In normal times, much political discussion is what Schmidt (2002: 252) calls 'cheap talk', expressing negotiating positions which defend established interests. But, sometimes, the existing stock of ideas becomes incapable of responding to a shift in circumstances, creating pressures for established procedures to be revised or completely rethought. A country may experience economic decline; a party may lose voter support; a trade union may experience a collapse in membership. Suddenly, ideas that had previously received scant consideration find themselves at the centre of the table. When disintegration threatens, new thoughts are urgently needed.

Sequencing, the order in which events unfold, can help to account for path dependence. For example, communist regimes which introduced economic reform before political liberalization (such as China) were more likely to survive than those beginning the reform process with political change (such as the USSR). In European countries where trade unions developed before socialism became a full-blooded ideology (such as Britain), the labour movement took on a moderate reformist character. But where Marxist thought was already

FOCUS 6.2**Path dependence, critical junctures, and the Greek financial crisis**

The financial crisis that emerged in Greece over the past decade is an example both of path dependence at work, and of critical junctures at which decisions were taken leading to new paths.

The immediate beginnings of the crisis date to 2002, when Greece became one of 12 European Union states to adopt the new EU single currency, the euro. Even then, there were doubts about its readiness to take this step, because it had not met all the criteria needed to join the euro, including limits on its budget deficit. It was allowed to join regardless. One of the effects of membership of the euro was that poorer states such as Greece, Portugal, and Spain had access to lower interest rates on their loans; as a result, Greece went on a spending spree fuelled by cheaper borrowing, built a budget deficit that, at nearly 13 per cent, was far above the three per cent limit set for eurozone membership, manipulated its official statistics to exaggerate its levels of economic growth, and accumulated a national debt that was ultimately bigger than its national economy.

Greece might have struggled on indefinitely in this weakened condition but for the onset in 2007 of a financial crisis in the United States that quickly spread to Europe. European states felt the effects of the crisis, but those in a weaker condition suffered the most. In 2009, the Greek government finally admitted the size of its budget deficit, sparking a broader crisis within the eurozone. Greece was offered a financial bailout, but only on condition that it cut public spending and increased its tax revenues. The terms of the deal sparked riots in the streets of Athens and encouraged little improvement in investor confidence.

The European Union revised its policies on the management of the euro, making sure that a closer watch would be kept in future on the size of national budget deficits, but the crisis in Greece rumbled on. Questions were asked not only about how long it could remain within the eurozone, but also about the future of the euro and of Greece's membership of the European Union itself.

The entire history is path dependent in that each effort to resolve the issue failed, leading only to further plans for reform. And what about the critical juncture: the decisive moment when Greece finally addressed its core economic problems and the eurozone carved out a more secure future for itself, with or without Greece? That moment has yet to arrive and may or may not ever do so. Talking up their story, journalists identify too many historical turning points; political scientists are right to be more cautious.

established, as in France, communist unions developed a more radical political agenda. So, whether trade unions emerged before or after the onset of Marxism helps to explain whether particular European countries developed a reformist or radical labour movement. The outcome was not predetermined but, rather, depended on the sequence of events.

Sequencing: The idea that the order of events, not merely their occurrence, affects the outcome.

In a similar way, the order in which government departments are created influences their contemporary status. Those created earliest (such as the finance and justice ministries) typically constitute the core of

government, with later departments (such as environment and transport) occupying a more peripheral position. Thus, the functioning of the central government is likely to be incompletely understood if this historical sequence is ignored and all departments are treated as equal in status.

One form of 'sequence' is a conjuncture in which separate events occur at the same time, enlarging their political impact. The collision of the First World War with the emergence of working-class socialism, or of the Vietnam War with the student movement, generated political effects which were greater than would have been the case had these events unfolded separately. These confluences are typically made by history, and are another contributor to path dependence.

Slow-moving causes, finally, are processes that unfold over a long period. Examples include modernization and technological advance, the spread of education, and the growth of the mass media. Such processes often need to reach a threshold or a tipping point beyond which a variable begins to exert a visible, dramatic effect. For example, there has been a resurgence of right-wing anti-immigrant political parties in Europe that dates back at least to the early 1990s, reflecting long-term concerns about immigration, law and order, unemployment and, more recently, the ‘Islamization’ of

Europe. At least in some countries, for example Austria and France, a threshold seems to have been passed, with the far right in Austria even enjoying a spell in government. When thresholds are involved, long-term but otherwise slow-moving causes need to be understood historically. Contemporary explosions have long fuses and political scientists need to search into the past to uncover them.

Slow-moving cause: An influence which changes slowly but, over a long period, dramatically.