

If similarity is the challenge – congruence analysis should be part of the answer

Markus Haverland

Erasmus University Rotterdam, School of Social Sciences

Department of Public Administration, Woudestein, M8-32

The Netherlands

Email: haverland@fsw.eur.nl

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Abstract

This contribution to the debate on the challenges to comparative politics largely focuses on the issue of differences versus similarities, the issue that has been raised by both authors: Caramani and Van Kersbergen. I share their concern that too much research focuses on differences between countries and I also join them in locating the sources of this bias in methodological considerations. I do not agree however with some of Caramani's points, in particular his fundamental claim that explanation necessarily demands variations across cases; a claim that seems also to be made at least implicitly by Van Kersbergen. I argue that the validity of an explanation rather depends on the degree to which empirical evidence is congruent with observable implications of this explanation and is not congruent with implications of rival explanations. It is irrelevant whether these theoretical expectations concern differences or similarities between countries. I therefore advocate a theory-driven rather than a case-driven analysis of national political systems in order to meet the challenge to explain similarities between them.

Key words: case study; comparative method; comparative politics; research design

INTRODUCTION

The articles by Caramani and Van Kersbergen have raised topical issues that should disturb everyone investigating national political systems. Caramani claims that comparative politics is biased towards focusing on differences between countries rather than on similarities and that this is an unfortunate development. Van Kersbergen shares this view. In addition van Kersbergen claims that in our times scholars in comparative politics neglect the societal sources of politics and power, ‘politics as dependent variable’, focusing too much on explaining policy outputs and outcomes, ‘politics as independent variable’. He also claims that scholars too easily give up central concepts in comparative politics, such as ‘the state’. The latter two points of Van Kersbergen are thought provoking and certainly worth discussing. However in this contribution, I will focus on the theme that is probably most important for *this* EPS discussion, if only because it is addressed by both authors: explaining differences and variations versus explaining similarities.

A BIAS TOWARDS STUDYING DIFFERENCES AND VARIATION?

Van Kersbergen and Caramani detect a bias towards a focus on differences rather than similarities. Caramani writes: ‘While many definitions of comparative politics as a discipline stress the symmetry between differences *and* (emphasis Caramani) similarities, the tendency in comparative empirical research has been to privilege the former while neglecting the latter’ (Caramani ms p. 3). He argues that such an asymmetry is inadequate to understand current developments in world politics, pointing to interdependence and diffusion effects stirred by integration and globalization.

In the same vein, Van Kersbergen speaks of a ‘preoccupation with variation’ (Van Kersbergen ms p. 8). He illustrates this claim by a survey of articles of an 2005 issue of the European Journal of Political Research, and a 2005 issue of West European Politics, in which with one exception all puzzles are framed in terms of differences and variation. Like Caramani, he is very critical of this development. He notes that what is often puzzling in current politics is that of political phenomena happening ‘at the same time’ and ‘everywhere’ (Van Kersbergen ms p. 11). He refers to the phenomena of political

disaffection which hits all well- established democracies. He concludes this section of his paper with ‘If the pressure to deal with problems of variation only is such that such puzzles of similarities can no longer be raised legitimately then this is a tragedy for comparative politics’ (Van Kersbergen ms. p. 11).

Although I have not systematically researched this question, I tend to agree with both authors that there is a bias in comparative politics towards explaining differences between countries. It is my impression that puzzles are framed in terms of differences and variations rather than similarities.¹ I also share their view that this is unfortunate. Many important developments in politics take the form of (growing) similarities and the example of political disaffection given by van Kersbergen is a telling one. I also agree with Caramani that globalization and political integration may nurture diffusion and interdependency effects and that therefore issues of similarities and convergence should merit more scholarly attention (see also Haverland, 2007).

METHOD TRUMPS SUBSTANCE?

Both authors argue that this bias towards differences and variation is due to methodological considerations. It is a side effect of political science ‘maturing’ into a ‘scientific’ discipline (Van Kersbergen ms. p.9). Caramani elaborates on this by writing that comparative politics bases its explanatory potential on variation: variation ‘is at the basis of all social science methods – experimental, quasi-experimental or non-experimental – whether using qualitative or quantitative data’ (Caramani ms. p. 5-6). Again, I do agree with both authors that this bias is largely method-driven. Mainstream comparative politics engages the comparison between cases and both regression-based statistical techniques and the comparative case study method – ‘the statistical method writ small’ (Hall, 2003) – require variation across cases for explanation. To provide more evidence for this: Frendreis article on the most similar system design (mssd) and the most different system design (mdsd) has the title: ‘Explanation of Variation and Detection of Covariation. The Purpose and Logic of Comparative Analysis’ (1983); and Peter’s widely used textbook *Comparative Politics. Theory and Method* repeats several times the what he calls ‘fundamental litany for social research’ (Peters, 1998: 30). ‘Maximize experimental variance, minimize error variance, and control extraneous variance’, with

maximizing experimental variance meaning maximizing variation in the dependent variable' (ibid.).

HOW TO STUDY SIMILARITIES SCIENTIFICALLY?

Caramani elaborates on a number of ways to study similarities scientifically. Cross-temporal comparison is one of them. Also Van Kersbergen alludes to this option. The idea is that we can research how countries have ended up with a similar phenomenon by tapping into longitudinal differences on the path toward this outcome (Caramani ms. p. 15-16; Van Kersbergen ms p. 11). I do agree that this is a promising venue from the perspective that scientific explanations demands variation across cases. It resembles to some extent the experimental logic of research as it allows for (several) pre- and post test 'measurements' and it controls for all potentially confounding variables that do not change over time, although it does not include a control group (see Cook and Campbell, 1979; Gerring, 2007: 160-164; Lieberman, 2001). I am more skeptical about the other alternative Caramani develops, the *mdsd*. In my reading of this design, the value of the key independent variable does not vary across cases (see for instance Freindreis, 1983: 261; Landman, 2000: 30; Skocpol and Somers, 1980: 184). I cannot see how this can be squared with Caramani's view that scientific explanation demands variation.²

COMPARATIVE POLITICS AS A METHOD VERSUS NATIONAL POLITICAL SYSTEMS AS SUBSTANTIVE FOCUS

While thus far I am largely in line with what both authors say, I now arrive at a point of fundamental disagreement. I do not agree that variation between (observed) cases is the only route to scientific explanation. I do believe that there is an alternative which presupposes, however, that we make a difference between comparative politics (comparing countries) as a method and comparative politics a discipline (or sub-discipline) with a substantive focus on national political systems. This difference is not made by the two authors, although at one point Caramani writes about the need to understand current developments in *world politics* (my italics), which could be read as the collection of national political systems as a substantive focus.³

VARIATION BETWEEN CASES IS NOT NECESSARY FOR SCIENTIFIC EXPLANATION

Making a difference between method and substance helps to identify an alternative to the view that scientific explanations require variation across cases. As said, Caramani relates his argument to the experimental ideal that comparative politics seek to approximate by quasi-experiments, statistical control or methods like the most similar systems design. However, it is telling that one of the most influential methodologists working on experimental and quasi-experimental designs, Donald Campbell, states that ‘the core of the scientific method is not experimentation per se but rather the strategy connoted by the phrase ‘plausible rival hypotheses’’ (Campbell, 2003: ix). He explains that this strategy implies that one starts with hypotheses and seeks to establish to what extent the observable implications of these hypotheses fit empirical observations. In the same vein, the comparativist Rogowski has criticized King, Keohane and Verba’s *Designing Social Inquiry* (1994), which represents the mainstream statistical principles of research. Rogowski argues that scientific explanation does not only involve the empirical test of hypotheses, but first of all the development of a theoretical model and secondly, ‘teasing out the deductive implications of that model, focusing particularly on the implications that seem a priori least plausible’ (Rogowski, 2004: 73).

STUDYING SIMILARITIES BY CONGRUENCE ANALYSIS

[Key Quote 1 about here]

According to this theory-oriented approach, countries (cases, data) are not compared with each other but compared with (rival) theoretical expectations. Therefore variation across cases is not necessary for scientific explanation. Crucial is the degree of fit (match, congruity) between theoretical expectations and empirical observations. An explanation is valid if the implications of a proposed theory fit the data and the implications of rival theories do not fit the data. It does not matter *a priori* whether these implications and observations concern – from a cross-national perspective – similarities or differences.

This approach has been labeled congruence analysis (Blatter and Blume 2008a and 2008b; George and Bennett 2005, see also Haverland, 2006, 2007).⁴ It is quite a common

approach in International Relations, where the problem of 'n=1' is notorious and where scientific progress develops to some extent along 'great theoretical debates', e.g. Neoliberalism versus Neorealism or Constructivism versus Rationalism.

An example of congruence analysis that concerns the working of national political systems is Allison's *Essence of Decision* (1971), probably the most influential study in government decision making. It is a single case study: the Cuban Missile Crisis, hence there is by definition no variation across cases. Allison develops three theoretical models, deduces propositions about observable implications, and investigates to what extent the observable implications match the empirical reality.⁵

It is important to note that this approach is not only feasible for case study research. It can be used for many countries where each country constitutes a case and for each case a single observation is made. If the assumption of unit homogeneity is satisfied, that is that all observations concern the same unit of analysis, the degree of fit between prediction and observations can be statistically analysed. An example that is close to the substantive interest of comparative politics concerns the research project *The European Union Decides* (Thomson *et al.*, 2006) in which predictions from seven decision-making models were tested against 162 controversial items of 66 Commission proposals for EU legislation (see also Achen, 2006; Blatter and Blume, 2008b: 328-330).

With regard to case study research it should be mentioned that one should generally strive for more than one observation per case (one case – multiple observations). In other words cross-case analysis should be accompanied with within-case analysis where multiple implications from theories – for different units of analysis – are compared with the empirical evidence (see Gerring, 2007). Typically a theory is not so strong that it allows for a singular unique, precise and certain prediction. Therefore it is better to arrive at a pattern of predictions. Such prediction can concern for instance the sort of actors acting, their motivation, or the time, timing and sequence of events.

In short: whether looking at a large number of cases or a small number of cases, this approach implies that if scholars are interested in the puzzle of why a phenomena happens everywhere at the same time, they should start with developing a theoretical model and then derive observable implications of that model. If the model implies the occurrence of the same phenomena in a variety of countries, whereas (all) other theories

would expect variation, than the similarities across countries are a virtue rather than a vice for scientific explanation.

CONCLUSION: EXPANDING THE TOOLKIT FOR STUDYING SIMILARITIES

My advocacy for congruence analysis should not imply that I am dismissive of approaches that are informed by explanation based on variation. In particular if the phenomenon is characterized by *growing* similarities across countries and our theoretical understanding of the phenomenon is not yet very advanced, a cross-temporal design is promising. However, if cross-temporal comparisons are not feasible, scholars should turn to congruence analysis as an alternative route to cope with the challenge of scientifically explaining developments in world politics that manifest themselves in similarities across countries.

Notes

¹ In fact, almost all of my own research is informed by puzzles of variation.

² Perhaps Przeworski and Teune's two level version of the mdsd get around this (1970). But in comparative politics, in particular in small 'n', the mdsd is used on one level of analysis only.

³ Empirically, the focus on national political systems distinguish this empirical sub-discipline of political science from its counterpart, *international relations*.

⁴ Yin calls this 'mattern matching' (Yin, 2003)

⁵ To be sure, Allison splits the Cuban Missile Crisis into three decisions. The point here, however, is that these three decisions are not taken as three cases that are compared with each other following for instance a most similar system design. Rather, for each of the three decisions observable implications of the three models are compared with empirical reality.

Rogowski runs through a number of very influential studies in comparative politics that show no variation in the dependent variable, including the single case study on the Netherlands by Lijphart (1968) and Katzenstein's study of small states all having the same outcome, economic success (1985).

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About the author:

Markus Haverland is Associate Professor in Political Science at Erasmus University Rotterdam. He has published about EU policy-making, Europeanization, comparative public policy, and research design issues in journals such as *European Political Science*, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *Journal of European Social Policy*, *Journal of European Public Policy*, *Journal of Public Policy*, *Public Administration* and *West European Politics*. With Joachim Blatter, he is currently writing a text book on case study approaches to be published in 2010/11.

Key Quotes:

‘variation across cases is not necessary for scientific explanation.’