



Postscript: How and what to compare?

Many things are clear without comparisons. For example, to accept that India is a democracy or that democratisation follows several stages needs no comparison of countries. In fact, you can spend a lot of interesting and fruitful time analysing the democratic characteristics and explanations of its success in India alone, so why make everything even more complicated by comparing it with other countries? What can be gained from comparisons?

In the first place, it widens and deepens our knowledge of the political world. A comparison of India and Canada would show not only that both countries are democratic but also that they are large federal systems with mixed ethnic and linguistic populations and that both were parts of the British Empire. Does one of these characteristics account, perhaps, for their democracy? To answer this question we need to compare the two with other countries. We might select Ghana, Nigeria and Pakistan, for example, and they would show that past membership of the British Empire is not a sufficient explanation of democratic development. We might select Denmark and Japan for our comparison and they would show that there is no necessary connection between federalism and democracy. And since Russia and China are both large and with mixed populations they would rule out the connection between large, heterogeneous populations and democracy. From these simple examples it is clear that we can learn a lot from comparisons, not only

about a wider range of countries but also about the similarities and differences between countries, and what might play a role in causing democracy. These similarities and differences, in turn, can be used to develop and to test explanations which go beyond specific cases.

When we compare we start to develop ideas about possible explanations and we can then collect the appropriate evidence to test these explanations. So far so good, but we now face the question of what we should compare. Should we compare India with nearby Pakistan, which is similar in some ways, or perhaps with Russia or Denmark, which are very different? In order to explain and generalise our comparisons must be carefully considered. Broadly speaking, comparison can be distinguished in two ways:

- First, we can distinguish comparisons on the bases of the number of countries considered. Do we spread our net widely over a large number of countries in a search for common patterns among them (for instance, to find out whether economically developed countries are also democracies) or do we focus on one or a few countries and try to understand in depth how they work (for instance, whether Hinduism facilitates democracy in India). Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages and so we might also try to devise a strategy using both of them, to get the best of both worlds.
- Second, we can distinguish comparisons not according to the number of cases they are based on but by the strategy they use in their approach to comparison. We could compare similar countries, say India and Pakistan because both are similar in some important respects, or we could compare India and Denmark, precisely because they are very different in some ways, though both are democratic.

In this Postscript we discuss these four kinds of comparison as a way of outlining the most important problems of designing research in comparative politics.

- Comparing many or a few countries
- Selecting comparable countries
- How many countries is enough?
- Comparing apples and oranges.

■ Comparing many or a few countries?

Comparison does not necessary involve cross-national comparison. We can compare different conditions within a country, say the voting patterns of different social groups, or different conditions over time in that country, say political opinions before and after democratisation in East and West Germany. A well-known example of comparative research in a single country is Robert Putnam's (1941-) widely quoted study of the development of democracy and civil society in Italy in his book *Making Democracy Work* (1994),

which examines the differences between the twenty administrative regions of the country.

These examples underline the fact that the logic behind systematic comparisons of states is identical with the logic of comparing other entities, such as different points in time, or different social groups, regions or elections. However, as the term has developed in political science, 'comparative politics' usually refers to a comparison of countries. In this sense comparative politics involves two basic approaches:

- Comparing many cases
- Comparing a few cases.

Comparing many cases

Large-n comparison Comparison of many countries, usually based on statistical analyses of strictly comparable evidence about them.

Considering many cases ('**large-n comparisons**') has a lot of advantages at first sight, especially if we want to develop or test broad generalisations across a wide variety of different conditions. It

also allows us to identify unexpected or deviant cases that are exceptions to the general rule. These can also throw light on the question we want to answer. While it may be true that many of the ex-colonies of the British Empire are now democratic, it is not always so, and a study of Pakistan might help us understand why. Nor do we need to cover the entire globe in our comparative study. Research on the twenty-three countries of the OECD might be enough, provided we recognised that these are the wealthier countries of the world and our results might not apply to less affluent countries.

There is no exact minimum for a large-n study but most research of this type is based on comparisons of more than twenty or thirty countries. Although this is still a relatively small number, dealing with even as few as this has implications for research:

1. Analysing twenty or thirty cases means that information about them must be both quantified and standardised. By quantified we mean numerical measures of such things as population density, per capita income or percentage turnout in elections. By standardised we mean that these measures are collected on the same basis in every country and are therefore directly comparable. If we wanted a measure of education, for example, it would make no sense to use the percentage of primary school pupils in one country and the percentage of university students in another. Sometimes the measures take the form of a single indicator of a more complex concept. Per capita income is frequently used as an indicator of the multi-variate notion of economic development. In other cases we might use an index in which many figures are combined to form a single and more reliable measure of a complex idea. The Human Development Index devised by the United Nations Development Program combines eight measures to produce a composite index of human development.

2. Large-n comparisons are often called statistical comparisons because information is analysed with statistical techniques. Patterns and tendencies in quantified information (data) can be very efficiently explored with these techniques using computers. Statistical techniques range from a simple calculation of average voting turnouts to sophisticated causal modelling of the combined effects of individual and institutional determinants of turnout or any other measure of political attitudes and behaviour. These techniques have been developed rapidly in the last decades and a number of computer packages are available for statistical analysis. SPSS and Stata are currently the most commonly used.
3. Large-n comparisons are best carried out on large, standardised data-sets. Organisations like the OECD and the World Bank offer a wide range of these covering many countries. Other specialised data archives provide integrated data-sets covering many countries. These include the World Values Studies, Eurobarometer and the European Social Survey. Some data-sets are known as cross-sectional because they provide the same measures in different countries at a given point in time, for example the percentage of the adult populations of a selection of countries expressing satisfaction with their government in a given year. Others are known as time-series because they cover the same events in a country or countries at different time points, for example a series of election statistics.

Quantitative, statistical analyses of standardised data allow us to search for patterns and tendencies in efficient ways. The main goal is to study relationships between various factors or variables. For that reason, large-n comparisons are also called ‘**variable-oriented approaches**’.

Variable-oriented approach Comparison focused on specific themes, patterns and tendencies in a set of countries.

The apparent advantages of large-n comparisons can turn into serious problems. Not everything that is important or theoretically interesting can be easily quantified, as the complications to measure ‘democracy’ already make clear. Sticking to standardised quantitative data runs the risk that the data available dictates our research questions. Nor is every important measure adequately standardised, for many are subject to technical problems in the way they are collected or presented, and each country tends to have their own way of doing things, which can mean that their statistics are not exactly comparable with other countries. Furthermore, many statistical techniques are based on correlations, which are no more than measures of association between variables. Correlations tell us if two measures vary together and how closely they do so, but they do not tell us whether one variable is causally related to another. Even if economic development and democracy were always to occur together it would not necessarily mean that economic development causes democracy. The impact might be in the other direction if it is democracy that promotes economic growth. Or perhaps economic development and democracy are consequences of a third factor that is common

to both of them, such as Protestantism. Finally, the application of statistical techniques requires a degree of statistical and mathematical understanding that can only be acquired with the appropriate training, and students who do not like such courses are at a disadvantage in comparative politics.

Comparing a few cases

Small-n comparison Comparison of a few countries, usually based on systematic, in-depth analysis and detailed knowledge of them.

Analysing a few cases ('**small-n comparisons**') seems to be an attractive alternative to the limitations of large-n approaches. Instead of looking for patterns and tendencies among a large number

of countries it studies only a few, but in a more detailed manner that allows us to understand the complexity of relations. In this way the historical and cultural particularities of each country can be taken into account. If we want to know, for instance, how exactly colonial legacies influence democratic consolidation, a thorough and in-depth examination of the history, institutions and culture of the Indian sub-continent might give us an answer.

How small should a small-n comparison be? No clear line can be drawn between large-n and small-n studies. Typically, small-n studies deal with five or six countries, but they can cover a larger or smaller number of cases. Whatever their number, small-n studies have a common set of characteristics:

1. Since small-n studies focus on exact processes and relationships in a few countries they can include qualitative evidence and methods. There is no need, for instance, for a single index of democratic development in Poland and Russia if we have a detailed understanding of their transition processes. In these comparisons we can discuss the unique role of Solidarność in Poland and the tsarist legacy in Russia.
2. Broadly speaking, the small-n approach can be characterised as heuristic; that is, methods used to explore complex processes and relationships based on trial and error and an intuitive understanding of politics and society. For instance, by exploring and understanding the different nature of the Protestant religion in Denmark and the Hindu, Jain, Sikh and Buddhist religions in India, we might come to an understanding of their relationship with democracy. We cannot gain such a subjective understanding of religion by examining statistical data, though such information might help our understanding.
3. Small-n studies can handle a mass of country-specific information of a qualitative nature without any need to standardise. Any attempt to understand democratic transformation in Poland would certainly pay attention to the rise of Solidarność, but there is no possibility of standardising that information.

Case-oriented approach Comparison focused on specific countries and the themes, patterns and tendencies within these countries.

The main goal of the small-n approach is to understand actual processes in a few countries, and for that reason it is also known as a '**case-oriented approach**'.

The limitations and disadvantages of small-n comparisons are evident. It is interesting to know precisely how Poland became a democracy and why Pakistan failed, but knowing every detail about these countries does not help us to reach general conclusions about democracy across the globe. Furthermore, while small-n comparisons can be carried out without the statistical abilities required for large-n comparisons, they require in-depth knowledge and familiarity with the countries considered. Studying Poland or Pakistan will be fruitful only if the researcher is very well informed about these countries and is fluent in their languages. No one can have this depth of knowledge about more than a handful of countries.

The most serious problem of small-n comparisons is that generalisations cannot be tested rigorously. In an attempt to overcome this limitation Charles C. Ragin proposed a new approach called **qualitative comparative analysis (QCA)**.

Qualitative comparative analysis

(QCA) The systematic comparison of a few cases using specific techniques to develop and test generalisations.

QCA focuses on the presence or absence of factors or variables in the cases available. Based on logical rather than statistical associations, Ragin developed a clear and strict strategy to sort out the causal relationships between various factors. QCA methods have improved considerably in the last few years and are now widely used in comparative politics.

■ Selecting comparable countries

What one compares in comparative political science is crucial. Comparing India and Canada will suggest one conclusion about democracy in large, mixed, federal systems, whereas contrasting India and Russia will suggest a different conclusion. But why should we choose to compare India with only one other country when we can perfectly well compare four or five cases? This sounds sensible but it immediately presents problems:

1. *Efficiency* It can be difficult to compare even a small number of countries when it might take many years to master the politics and government of just two of them.
2. *Relevance* There is a far greater range of comparisons available to us than those already mentioned. We might, for instance, compare India with Brazil, which is also a large mixed society, with a developing economy but different colonial backgrounds. This comparison might tell us something about the importance of the British legacy for democracy.
3. *Generalisation* Four or five countries is a rather small number on which to base generalisations and since there are more than fifty members of the British Commonwealth, we have many more possibilities of testing the ex-British colony hypothesis.

These considerations result in conflicting conclusions. Whereas the first point argues for restricting comparisons to as few countries as possible, the last suggests a systematic comparison of fifty cases. However, if it is true that

Briefing 1

John Stuart Mill on comparisons

1. The simplest and most obvious modes of singling out from among the circumstances which precede or follow a phenomenon, those with which it is really connected by an invariable law, are two in number. One is, by comparing together different instances in which the phenomenon occurs. The other is by comparing instances in which the phenomenon does occur, with instances in other respects similar in which it does not. These two methods may be respectively denominated, the Method of Agreement, and the Method of Difference.

Source: Mill, John Stuart, A System of Logic, Volume I, London: Harrison, p. 450.

the selection of cases for comparison is likely to determine or influence the conclusions we draw then the crucial logic of comparison involves not the number of cases, but the purpose of the comparison. What we compare should be determined by what we want to know in the first place. The selection of countries is not a constraint of our comparative strategy but a consequence of the research question we ask. Although efficiency and generalisations are important, it is relevance that finally determines which countries should be included in our comparison, and what is relevant depends on what theory we want to test or what generalisation we are interested in developing.

As convincing as these arguments might sound, designing an appropriate comparative strategy is not just a matter of formulating goals and labelling countries as relevant or irrelevant. The British philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806–73) distinguished between two basic types of comparisons (see briefing 1). Both types aim at testing causal explanations, but differ in the strategies they follow:

- *Method of Agreement* If a phenomenon occurs in two or more situations then the explanation for the phenomenon must lie in the common

Method of Agreement Comparison of cases which share the presence of effects or outcomes as well as presumed causes.

features of those situations. In the **Method of Agreement**, therefore, the presence or absence of a common crucial factor or factors (the ‘agreement’ between the countries) must account for

the phenomenon we wish to explain. For instance, India and Canada share the impact of some British traditions, which might account for democracy in both countries.

- *Method of Difference* If two or more situations are similar, but the phenomenon exists in only one of them, its cause

Method of Difference Comparison of cases which share effects or outcomes but differ in the presence of presumed causes.

must be related to the different features of its situation. If we use the **Method of Difference**, the presence or the absence of a crucial factor

(the ‘difference’ between the countries) is presumed to account for the particular phenomenon or outcome in one of them. For instance, India and China are both very large countries; therefore the fact that India is a

democracy cannot be attributed to its size because China is large but undemocratic.

Mill stressed that both approaches are useful, but that the Method of Difference provides stronger evidence of causal explanations. In comparative research this method is widely used for regional or area studies. If we group countries under labels such as 'Latin American countries', 'central Europe' or 'the Middle East', we clearly suggest that the countries in these regions have a lot in common. If, for instance, some Latin American countries are democracies and others are authoritarian, the cause of democracy must be sought among factors that have nothing to do with the common Spanish and Portuguese background of Latin American countries. In a similar way, we can compare 'OECD countries' and exclude economic development as a crucial factor for the explanation of something that occurs in some, but not all, of these countries.

The ideas of Mill are fruitful for developing comparisons in systematic ways. For comparative politics a very influential elaboration of the two strategies has been presented by Adam Przeworski (1940–) and Henry Teune (1936–). Whereas Mill applied his methods mainly to the natural sciences, Przeworski and Teune deal with comparative politics. In a little book on *The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry* published in 1970, they developed two main strategies for comparisons:

- *Most Different Systems Design (MSDS)* This approach follows the logic of Mill's method of agreement. **Most Different Systems Designs** recommend selecting countries that are very different from each other, but which share the characteristic we want to study. Following this approach, comparing India and Denmark is a good choice because both countries have little in common (are most different systems) apart from being consolidated democracies.
- *Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD)* Following Mill's method of difference, **Most Similar Systems Design** suggests looking at countries that have a lot in common (that is, are 'most similar systems'), but do not show the same phenomenon or outcome we want to explain. In trying to find out whether British colonial legacies are important for democracy, a comparison between India and Pakistan could be useful since these countries have a lot in common, but only India is a consolidated democracy. Something particular to India in this comparison must be the explanation.

Most Different Systems Design (MDSD)

Comparison of countries that have little in common but the effect or outcome we want to explain.

Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD)

Comparison of countries that have a lot in common but the effect or outcome we want to explain.

Both MDSD and MSSD are widely used in comparative politics as strategies for the selection of countries, but before we actually select the countries for our own comparative study, two more preliminary steps are required:

- First, a lot of information is required about the countries selected for comparison. Are India and Canada different or similar? What do Latin

American countries have in common? Which aspects of British colonial rule could be relevant to democracy? Should Brazil be considered? We can only start comparison if these questions are answered and if we have a very good background knowledge of India, Canada, Brazil, Latin America and the history of the British Empire.

- Second, and even more important, before we can start to compare countries we have to be able to pick out factors that are presumed to be crucial to our causal explanation, and to distinguish them from irrelevant ones. Should we compare India and Canada because of their common British legacy and size, ignoring their obvious differences in economic development, population, climate and religious composition?

It is very important to notice that these requirements have to be fulfilled before the merits of deciding between an MDSD or MSSD strategy can be considered. It is easy to compile an endless list of differences and similarities between various countries, but that does not help us. For this we need a theory that specifies what we think are the causal factors to look for and that guide our selection of appropriate countries for our comparison and our appropriate research strategies. Although empirical data of either a qualitative or quantitative kind play a prominent part in comparative politics, it is theory that underpins the whole exercise. Theory guides us in what to look for and which comparative strategy to use.

■ How many countries is enough?

The distinction between MDSD and MSSD strategies helps us to answer the question of which countries should be selected for our comparisons, but it does not answer the question of how many countries are needed. Efficiency dictates the reduction of cases whereas generalisation suggests covering as many as possible. How many countries is enough?

In searching for an answer to this question, researchers are confronted with one of the nastiest problems of comparative research. This complication cannot be solved by theoretical specification. In fact, the clear specification of crucial factors in our theories brings the problem to the surface in the first place. Suppose we want to find out if Britain’s colonial legacy is relevant for democracy. In the simplest case we have two dichotomous properties (British/non-British and democratic/non-democratic), which produce four possible types. To study each of these combinations in the real world, therefore, we must base our comparisons on at least four countries. If we use less than four countries, we would not even have the opportunity to find an example of each of the four possible combinations.

	Democratic	Non-democratic
Ex-British colony	Type 1	Type 2
Ex non-British colony	Type 3	Type 4

It does not follow that our search will necessarily produce examples of each of the four simply because one of the combinations may not exist in the real world. But it does mean that we must search for all four, and if one is missing, that itself is evidence that we should take into account in drawing conclusions. The nasty problem, however, becomes clear if we make our theoretical explanations more realistic by adding more factors or variables. With two dichotomous properties the minimum number of cases required is $2 \times 2 = 4$. If we add country size as a third factor to our explanation of democratic consolidation then the minimum number of cases required is $2 \times 2 \times 2 = 8$. If we want to test four explanatory variables we increase the number to $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 = 16$, and adding more variables increases the number exponentially (the rate of increase would itself increase). With less than 200 states in the world it is clear that we run out of enough cases even with only eight explanatory factors. This situation is reached even sooner if we do not use dichotomous properties but variables with more categories – for instance, if we use a distinction between democracies, defective democracies and undemocratic political systems. Since either the number of variables (V) is too large or the number of cases available (n) is too small for a comparison, this problem is referred to as the ‘**small-n/large-V problem**’ in comparative politics.

Small-n/large-V problem With each additional explanatory variable (V) the number of cases (n) required for comparisons grows exponentially. Therefore, only a few explanatory variables are often too many for the relatively small number of cases available, in which case an empirical test is not possible.

If we want to test explanations statistically, the number of cases must be much larger than the number of variables. Since in cross-national comparative research the number of cases is very limited almost by definition, it becomes logically impossible to test all but the simplest explanations. Three basic strategies are available to deal with this problem:

- The first one is, of course, to drop the goal of testing general statements. By opting for MSSD strategies we might be able to delete a number of factors from our analyses and concentrate on a more limited number of factors that we think are important. The problem is that we arrive at limited conclusions that are valid only for the group of countries with ‘similar systems’. That might be unproblematic if we want, for instance, to analyse democratic consolidation in Latin America, but it does not help if we want to test a more general theory about democracy and economic development in Africa and Asia as well. For variable-oriented approaches this strategy is unattractive.
- A second strategy is to reduce the number of explanatory variables by specifying our theories more rigorously. If we have clear theoretical arguments to link a few phenomena, we can apply an MDSD strategy and compare a relative small number of very different countries. For instance, a well-developed theory resulting in the expectation that British colonial legacies lead to democracy can be tested by comparing India, Denmark, Canada and Pakistan.

- A final strategy is to increase the number of cases. Germany, for instance, has sixteen middle level units of government – the Länder – and Italy has twenty regional units of government. Brazil has another twenty-six states and a federal district. Why should we not consider these as sixty-three different political systems, especially since some of them are larger and more powerful than the smaller nations of the world? By doing so we might avoid the implications of the exponential growth function of the small- n /large- V problem. This solution has its problems, though. Lower levels of government within the same nation share their respective national institutions, and something of a common history and culture. Therefore, there are not sixteen separate cases but sixteen replications of a single German case. Only if we stress the unique aspects of each of these states are we allowed to treat them as different cases in comparative research. Moreover, if our goal is to compare nations it is not very helpful to recommend a comparison of sub-national entities. Simply looking for ‘more of the same’ does not solve the problem. This is known as Galton’s problem in comparative research, named after the British scholar Francis Galton (1822–1911) who pointed out the complications of replicating cases in 1889.

For each of these three strategies it is clear that only by carefully specifying our theory can we deal with the small- n /large- V problem. We have to develop a specific theory stating precisely the causal variables involved and their relationship with the effect we are trying to explain. This is easier said than done. There is, for example, no satisfactory general theory explaining the development of states and democracies, at least not one that works for a wide variety of different cases. In this situation relying on MSSD strategies seems to be the easiest way out (that is, restrict comparisons to groups of similar countries such as Latin America, federal states or the Indian sub-continent). And yet this strategy risks falling back into ad hoc explanations that do not necessarily apply to the circumstances of other places, precisely because more general approaches to the problem are excluded in the first place.

■ Comparing apples and oranges

The difficult task of selecting countries is not the only challenge for comparative research. Each state has its own historical development, national institutions, customs and traditions, and so on. For instance, although the French and Indian presidents have the same title, their position and powers are very different and not much can be gained from a comparison of them. In fact, no two things in the world are identical, and therefore comparative politics runs into a difficulty when it wants to compare the ‘same phenomena’ or ‘similar objects’ in different countries. As it happens, the position of the French president is more like that of the Indian prime minister, and it makes more sense to compare them than the presidents of the two countries.

This raises the whole problem of what exactly it is that we want to compare, a question that is ever-present in comparative research. For instance, is the collection of financial support by German voluntary associations ‘the same’ as ‘fundraising’ in the United States, even though the American term cannot be directly translated into German? Indeed, if we were to use only the national terms for institutions and practices in our research no comparative work would be possible at all. What the French call their ‘president’ does not exist in India. Therefore, a fundamental problem of comparative research is finding concepts that can be used in different countries when each is unique. Two strategies to deal with this problem are available to us:

- looking for more abstract concepts
- looking for equivalent concepts.

Looking for more abstract concepts

In one sense the problem of comparative concepts is simple and one that we solve all the time in everyday life: apples and oranges are different but we put them in the same category when we call them fruit. In the same way we can compare the French president and the Indian prime minister by treating them both as government leaders – political executives. Canadian Catholics are different from Indian Hindus, but both are religious. In all these cases we simply use a more general term to cover different sets of objects.

The Italian political scientist Giovanni Sartori (1924–) discussed this procedure in a seminal article on *Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics*, published in 1970. As the title suggests, Sartori sees a number of risks attached to the search for general concepts because this inevitably involves losing information. There are, for instance, more than 7,500 different types of apples and each has properties that distinguish it from the others, so that the word ‘apple’ loses information and covers up differences. When we move to the still more general term ‘fruit’ we lose still more information about the differences between apples, oranges and pears, to take only three examples.

Using more general and abstract terms for comparisons implies **conceptual stretching**, which inevitably introduces ambiguity into our concepts because it remains unclear what is to be included and excluded. The advantage of using a more abstract concept is that it makes comparisons of different phenomena possible; the danger is that the actual phenomena we want to study disappear behind a cloud of rather nebulous general concepts and that we lose more information than we gain. The main task of comparativists, then, is to develop general concepts for comparisons which are at the same time precise, clearly defined and well grounded ones but which lose as little information as possible.

Sartori presents a ‘ladder of abstraction’ to clarify this procedure. In order to make comparisons we climb the ladder to some higher level of abstraction

Conceptual stretching Broadening the meaning, and thereby the range of application, of a concept or term.

by using more general terms or concepts. In a similar way, we can also descend the ladder and replace our general concepts by more specific ones. Climbing the ladder makes comparisons easier at the price of losing information; descending the ladder makes more information available but endangers comparisons. Sartori summarised the level of abstraction in three categories:

1. *High-level categories* Universal concepts that can be used for comparisons across the world no matter how different the circumstances. In comparative politics 'political system' is a high-level concept that applies to all circumstances.
2. *Medium-level categories* At this level, general concepts are used to compare reasonably similar things. In comparative politics, 'left-wing party' is pitched at this level to cover everything from communist to centrist democratic socialist parties in established democracies.
3. *Low-level categories* For country-by-country comparisons specific terms can be used, such as the Indian prime minister or the French president.

Developing appropriate concepts is a theoretical task that should precede the selection of countries as well as the collection of information. Once again, we see that finding solutions for problems in comparative politics can only be based on careful theoretical reflection.

Looking for equivalent concepts

A second strategy to handle country-specific information in comparative politics is to focus on specific contexts. Every comparison must start from the idea that even very similar phenomena or objects are not identical. This does not have to bother us all the time. The fact that German and American voluntary associations differ in the way they raise money does not mean that we cannot compare their roles in community politics. Besides, we can also use devices for making different things similar. One example concerns the exchange rate of different currencies. The money used in our country can be readily changed into that of other countries at a given and recognised exchange rate, but this rate may vary according to whether our currency is over-valued or under-valued for some reason. How can we tell whether our currency is over- or under-valued when each country has its own currency with its own purchasing power in another currency? The *Economist* has invented the 'Hamburger Standard' or 'Big Mac Index' to do this. Since Big Macs are made to exactly the same specification in every country, they should, in theory, cost the same amount in every country at the current exchange rates. The difference between the actual price and official exchange rate price tells you how much a foreign currency is over-valued or under-valued (see www.economist.com/markets/Bigmac/index.cfm).

Hence the Big Mac Index is based on the idea that different things (local currencies) can be compared systematically by means of a standard measure (purchasing power) if we can identify what the different countries have

in common (a Big Mac). In a similar way, we could analyse decision-making processes among the executive branches in India and France and see that the president in France has a lot in common with the Indian prime minister. Likewise, no matter how voluntary associations are financed or named in the USA and Germany, the fact that they exist in the spaces between the state, commercial and private spheres in both countries is sufficient ground for comparison.

These examples make clear that we can compare apparently very different phenomena in different countries if we know that they have similar positions in those countries or perform similar functions. Instead of identity, comparisons are based on the idea of **equivalence**. Whether or not the phenomena compared have the same or different names is absolutely irrelevant. What matters is that they operate in similar ways or perform similar functions in different situations. It is this contextual correspondence that makes it meaningful to compare them. In other words, it is possible to compare different institutions if they perform the same functions in their respective countries, as the French president and Indian prime minister do. In terms of concepts we cover them with the term ‘political executive’. By using information about specific situations in specific countries we can identify similar phenomena without running the risk of losing information by stretching our concepts unacceptably. In fact, only if we rely on specific information can we answer the question of what phenomena can be considered as equivalent.

Equivalence Two objects or phenomena are equivalent if they have the same value, importance, use, function or result.

By looking for equivalence, comparisons do not have to rely on identical indicators and nor do we have to stretch our concepts. Equivalence can be established by careful analyses of the similarities and differences between countries but this, in turn, requires that we know what we are looking for in the first place. This is a theoretical and conceptual challenge that requires careful consideration at the outset of our comparative exercise. This brings us back, once again, to the vital importance of theory and the need to start with good theory before we start any empirical work in searching for equivalents.

■ What have we learned?

At first sight, making comparisons seems to be unproblematic: Why should we not just get on with the business of comparing India, Canada, Denmark and Pakistan? Yet the question ‘How and what to compare?’ is not easy to answer. The complications arise mainly because comparativists are not only interested in learning about other countries, important though this may be. They also want to generalise about political life and explain in causal terms why it happens. This produces a set of difficult problems:

- Comparing a large number of countries is appropriate for testing general conclusions but depends on quantitative, statistical analyses of

standardised data. This means that information that cannot be quantified and standardised is lost.

- Comparing a few countries in order to acquire a broad and deep understanding of them depends on qualitative information. This means that testing more general theories is difficult.
- The number of cases available for comparisons is almost always too small for the number of explanatory variables used (small-n/large-V problem).
- Comparative studies can be divided in Most Different System Designs and Most Similar Systems Designs. Whereas MDSD searches for causes of similar effects in countries that differ greatly in many ways, MSSD focus on similar countries that differ in one respect that is thought to be important.
- Using more general concepts or terms makes it possible to compare but at the price of losing specific information. Using specific information, however, makes comparisons much more difficult.
- Comparisons can be based on equivalent but not necessarily identical terms.
- Although empirical information about countries plays a very important role in comparative politics, it is only its theoretical underpinning that makes it truly comparative and makes comparison meaningful.

Projects

1. Suppose you want to make a comparison of voting behaviour in sixteen countries. Present the main steps in your comparison using a small-n design or, alternatively, a large-n design.
2. Compare the advantages and disadvantages of MSSD and MDSD strategies. Give an example of each strategy to underline your arguments.
3. Compare and contrast the process of democratic consolidation in your own and two other countries. What conclusions can you reach from such a comparison?
4. Give three examples of conceptual stretching and explain the conditions in which it is appropriate to climb the ladder of abstraction in these cases.

Further reading

T. Landman, *Issues and Methods in Comparative Politics: An Introduction*, London: Routledge, 2008.

An accessible introduction to comparative methods with many examples and explanations

P. Pennings, H. Keman and J. Kleinnijenhuis, *Doing Research in Political Science. An Introduction to Comparative Methods and Statistics*, London: Sage, 2005.

Overview of comparative methods and approaches

G. L. Munck and R. Snyder (eds.), *Passion, Craft, and Method in Comparative Politics*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007.

Interviews with the most prominent scholars in comparative politics.

A. Przeworski and H. Teune, *The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry*, New York: Wiley, 1970.

Seminal text on the goals and major strategies in comparative research.

Websites

www.nd.edu/~apsacp/index.html

The official newsletter of the APSA's Organized Section in Comparative Politics. Provides a forum for discussing trends and innovations and sharing news of general interest to comparativists.

www.u.arizona.edu/~cragin/fsQCA/index.shtml

Information about qualitative comparative analysis (including literature and software).

www.maxwell.syr.edu/moynihan/programs/cqrm/

The Consortium on Qualitative Research Methods (CQRM) promotes the teaching and use of qualitative research methods in the social sciences.