

Visions of Comparative Politics

A Reply to Mahoney and Wibbels

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Which approaches to theory and methods are most likely to advance knowledge about politics around the world? This question has generated much heated and often divisive debate among comparativists recently. Yet this debate about what comparativists *should do* has been carried out largely in the absence of any systematic analysis of what comparativists *actually do*. Seeking to get beyond ungrounded polemics about the direction of the field, we constructed a data set on theory, methods, and substance in comparative politics by coding publications in *Comparative Political Studies*, *Comparative Politics*, and *World Politics* between 1989 and 2004 on 29 variables. We explicitly articulated our coding criteria and applied them equally to all articles; that is, we used the same standards to assess different kinds of research.

Based on an analysis of our data, we concluded that the tendency to frame choices about the direction of the field in terms of a stark alternative between an old area studies approach and a new economics-inspired approach relies on largely unsupported assumptions. We also suggested it would be productive if scholars focused on a set of problematic methodological practices in both quantitative and qualitative comparative research. By calling attention to widespread research practices that hinder the production of knowledge, we aimed to center the discussion on ways to improve comparative politics.

We are, unsurprisingly, gratified by James Mahoney's and Erik Wibbels's endorsements of our effort to empirically ground the debate about the future of comparative politics. We find Mahoney's discussion of his new data on research practices in *The American Political Science Review*, *The American Journal of Political Science*, and *The Journal of Politics* to be a valuable contribution that supplements our work. And the suggestions for further data gathering made by both authors are interesting and worth pursuing. Still, we disagree with Mahoney and Wibbels on several key points.

Mahoney raises questions about our data and, by implication, our discussion of weaknesses in qualitative research. For example, he argues that our

measure of within-case analysis “seems problematic” because we neglect the “causal-process observations” that are critical to qualitative research. Moreover, Mahoney suggests that our results concerning the narrow scope of generalization in much comparative research would have been different had we measured “the domain of cases to which comparativists believe their arguments are applicable.” Yet can a valid measure be devised to distinguish causal-process observations from other types of observations? Does not such a distinction assume that we know *a priori*, before any testing, what factors are causally significant? And are there, in fact, strong grounds for inferring that single-country and small-*N* studies offer generalizable conclusions? After all, making valid generalizations beyond one’s data requires more than a sense of the relevant universe of cases. A sound sampling method is also necessary, and this is rare in comparative research (Bollen, Entwisle, & Alderson, 1993, pp. 330-334). In short, we are less optimistic than Mahoney about the contributions that small-*N* studies make to the testing of hypotheses.

Wibbels, in contrast, suggests that an analysis of further data—were they available—would reveal that the methodological status quo in comparative politics is actually worse than we find. Wibbels thus calls for a vigorous debate about the social scientific status of comparative politics, even if it upsets the live-and-let-live policy across camps that has characterized the field since the more overt confrontations of the 1990s. Indeed, Wibbels argues that we “underplay” a series of important divisions in comparative politics, especially between those who adhere to “basic methodological rules of social science” and those who do not, and he asserts that “explicit fighting [in the name of science] is in order.” We are skeptical of this call for a new round of conflict to make the field more scientific. Is divisiveness fruitful? Does an “us against them” mentality advance or hinder the mission of comparative politics to produce knowledge about politics around the world? Rivalries across camps can potentially advance knowledge by stimulating the competitive urges of scholars. Yet this competition may also have the opposite effect when it deflects energy away from actual research and toward defending professional turf. The drive to defend one’s camp may even produce a stifling “tone deafness” to any external criticism, a sure recipe for intellectual sterility.

The commentaries by Mahoney and Wibbels thus help clarify the choices that comparativists face about the direction of the field. Mahoney focuses on qualitative research, expressing a strong concern that top journals “shut out” this kind of research and that not enough training in qualitative methods is being offered. In turn, Wibbels focuses on the scientific status of comparative politics, arguing that too many comparativists lack even a basic understanding of methodology and, hence, comparativists

committed to science should put up a stronger fight. We are sympathetic to these two distinct visions of comparative politics. Still, we think it is more productive to frame the choices faced by comparativists in different terms.

Carving the field into camps defined along methodological lines (e.g., qualitative methods vs. quantitative methods) has several drawbacks. The resulting clash of methods can generate unhealthy compartmentalization and divisiveness. Moreover, an emphasis on methodologically defined differences falsely masks the great freedom and flexibility that comparativists actually enjoy to use and combine different kinds of methods. The same researcher can employ quite distinct methodological tools across projects, at different phases of a career, and in collaboration with colleagues who have diverse, yet complementary, skill sets. And the increasing emphasis in comparative politics on “multimethods” research that spans the putative qualitative–quantitative divide suggests that in practice, comparativists resist being straightjacketed by methodologically defined identities. The challenge, then, is to bring together scholars with diverse methodological skills who share a passion for the same substantive research problems.

Regarding the scientific status of comparative politics, we emphasize in our article the need for empirically and methodologically rigorous research, and, hence, we endorse the scientific aspirations of comparative politics. Still, we are wary of a new round of conflict over methods. The vigorous debate about methods in the early 1990s was productive in that it raised the overall level of methodological awareness among comparativists. But it also deflected much energy away from substantive research. Moreover, we appreciate the deep roots of comparative politics in the humanistic tradition and see comparative politics as more than just a science. Thus, another key challenge facing comparativists is to better integrate their concerns with substance and method, politics and science.

In sum, our vision of comparative politics is pluralistic. There are many paths to knowledge about politics around the globe, and the diversity that characterizes comparative politics in terms of theory, methods, and substance is thus a great source of strength. Respecting this diversity is vital to the health of the field.

Reference

- Bollen, K. A., Entwisle, B., & Alderson, A. S. (1993). Macrocomparative research methods. *Annual Review of Sociology, 19*, 321-351.