POLI210: Political Science Research Methods

Lecture 6.1: Case studies

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Small-N Research

Today and Thursday: small-N research

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- Today: case study

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    - Without aim of generality and theory, we would be doing history

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Generalizability and scope conditions

K&R, p.117: "The best approach is to qualify the generalization: the case study is *certain* in its explanation for the phenomenon being studied; it is *highly probably* to have a significant insight on a set of similar cases; and it *suggests* some interesting questions to ask in the widest population of cases."

Types of case studies

Broadly, 2 types of case studies:

- Descriptive/exploratory case studies
    - Particularly useful when there is little theory to guide observation
    - B&R, p.211: "the phenomenon is either completely or partially unknown…[the goal is] describing the phenomenon as the basis of contributing to an emerging or future research agenda."
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- Theory-testing case studies
    - The situation: a well-established theory that has clear implications for a case
    - We will exploit some chosen cases in order to refine theory

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- Failed most-likely: "if I cannot make it there, I cannot make it anywhere" (Levy 2008, 12)
    - All the conditions for the theory to hold are met – *and yet*
    - This is an easy case for the theory; it should pass it with flying colors
    - Democratic peace theory:
        - Two highly democratic countries that are "rich, culturally similar and economically codependent" (Gerring and Cojocaru 2016, 405)
    - These cases seriously damage the theory
    - Does it mean it's *wrong*? Well, we want to think probabilistically
        - X clearly does not have a *deterministic* relationship with Y
        - Maybe we shouldn't discard theory entirely; but refine it

Which case to analyze? Successful least-likely

- Successful least-likely: "if I can make it there, I can make it anywhere" (Levy 2008, 12)
  - A hard case for the theory; the conditions are not conducive to success
  - If the theory succeeds here, this is a sign that it "works" in more ways than expected
  - We expand the scope conditions
  - Democratic peace theory:
    - Two marginally democratic countries that are poor, dissimilar, with contested territory, and historic grievances

Causal mechanisms

Gerring (2004, 348): "Case studies, if well constructed, allow one to peer into the box of causality to the intermediate causes lying between some cause and its purported effect."

Remember our example of the link between attending Harvard and earnings?

- Using data alone, we can perhaps estimate the causal effect *Going to Harvard -> Earnings*
- But oftentimes, the precise causal mechanism is left unclear

Causal mechanisms and the DPT

Remember Maoz and Russett (1993)? 2 mechanisms

- Normative: "norms of compromise and cooperation"
- Structural: "institutional constraints" make warmaking more costly/complex for leaders of democracy countries

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In a large-N study, I can estimate the relationship between democracy and war

- A large-N dataset: something like one observation for each country in each year
- But once I establish a relationship between X and Y, it can be hard to tease apart competing mechanisms
- Enter the case study

Causal mechanisms and the DPT

If I can find a "successful least-likely" case...

- i.e. a democratic "dyad" (two countries) for which all conditions were conducive to war
- I can try to identify why war didn't break out in this particular instance
- For instance, if I can find...
    - Memoranda of Cabinet meetings that have been declassified
    - In which the PM expresses desire for war
    - But a minister/chief of staff points out the hurdle that the legislature represents...
    - I have a good example of the "structural" mechanism in action!

Case study example: Berman 1997

Neo-Tocquevillian thought

Putnam and neo-Tocquevillian thought

- Associations ("civil society") as central to democracy
- Putnam (1993): why do institutions succeed in certain contexts and fail in other contexts?
    - The Italian "experiment": decentralization in the 1970s
    - Institutions are "fixed" across regions; yet some regions (in the North) perform a lot better than others
    - Why? Because of civic culture
    - "the success of a democratic government depends on the degree to which its surroundings approximate the ideal of a 'civic community."
    - What is this "ideal?"

The civic ideal

- While citizens are not expected to abandon self-interest, they should "pursue what Tocqueville termed 'self-interest properly understood,' that is, self-interest defined in the context of broader public needs."
- "Such a community is bound together by horizontal relations of reciprocity and cooperation, not by vertical relations of authority and dependency."
- "the heart of the distinction between civic and uncivic communities": "[c]ollective life in the civic regions is eased by the expectation that others will probably follow the rules."

Berman's critique

We have this theory: associational life -> democratic performance

- In short: deep networks of (nonpolitical) associations are good!
- Putnam's "Bowling Alone"

Berman points to a "deviant" case: Weimar Germany

- In Weimar Germany, deep networks of associations
- And yet, democracy did not flourish – it collapsed
- Why? We can exploit this case to learn more about the role of civil society in democratic performance
- An example of the "failed most-likely" case study
    - The theory posits that X leads to Y, but it did not

Berman's method

Berman works chronologically from the mid-1800s to 1933, when Hitler became Chancellor

- Includes comments from contemporaries and work by historians
- uses work by historians to analyze German associational life from the mid-1800s to 1933

Berman's answer

Why does the case of interwar Germany not follow the theory?

- One possibility: "Hitler's supporters were drawn primarily from alienated individuals who lacked a wide range of associational memberships and saw in the NSDAP a way of integrating themselves into a larger community, had German civil society been stronger, the republic might not have fallen."
  - But that's not empirically supported!
- Instead, Berman says, "associationism should be considered a politically neutral multiplier – neither inherently good nor inherently bad, but rather dependent for its effects on the wider political context."
  - What was the political context of Weimar Germany?
  - Weak institutions, widepsread discontent
- Germans frustrated with the national government retreated to private associations

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A crucial case

"One might counter, of course, that a theory based on only a single case is inherently problematic and that, moreover, German political development during this period was certainly influenced by a range of factors extending beyond civil society, many of them highly particular. Nevertheless, there are several reasons why an inability of neo-Tocquevillean analysis to account for the central features of this case should be significant and troubling. First, scholars have long viewed the Weimar Republic and its collapse as a crucial theoretical testing ground. The disintegration of democracy in interwar Germany is so central to our understanding of comparative politics and so critical for the history of modern Europe that we should at the least be wary of any theory of political development that cannot explain it. Second, the postwar neo-Tocquevilleans highlighted precisely this case as an example of the impact of associationism (or lack thereof) on political out-comes. And third, while the United States has been considered the homeland of associationism ever since Tocqueville, comparable honors could also be bestowed on Germany, making it resemble a most likely case for determining the reliability of the neo-Tocquevillean theory."

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Qualitative vs quantitative

We've said before that one is not better than the other

They are *complementary*

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    - Gerring (2004) speaks of the "triangulation of evidence"

Berman vs Satyanath et al. on social capital and Nazis

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