POLI210: Political Science Research Methods

Lecture 6.2: The comparative method

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Boring admin stuff

- Assignment 3 due on Monday October 25th, 11:59pm
    - See email for OH and tutoring
- Quiz 1 from the 25th to the 27th
    - How to prepare: review lecture slides
- UNICEF fundraiser: make me dress up for Halloween

The comparative method

- The comparative method: select a few cases and compare them
- How many cases? From 2 to roughly 10
- But not too many because the benefit of this method is in-depth knowledge of the cases
- Two designs:
  - Most-similar-systems design (MSS)
  - Most-different-systems design (MDS)

The Most-Similar Systems design

What is the Most-Similar-Systems design?

- Select cases that are:
    - Similar in terms of many potential confounders/IVs
    - But different in terms of the outcome (DV)
- This "controls for" the confounders by holding them constant
- The question is then: what explains the difference in outcome?
    - We look for a variable that differs between the cases

Ghana's Freedom House score (2019): 83/100

Togo's Freedom House score (2019): 43/100

The MSS design: why is Ghana more democratic than Togo?

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Climate	Hot	Hot
Income	Low	Low
Ethnic diversity	Heterogenous	Heterogenous
Largest religion	Christian	Christian
Other religions	Islam, Traditional	Islam, Traditional

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- In an observational (non-experimental) setting, the causal relationship between X and Y can only be uncovered if we adjust for confounders
- In the case of comparative method, "adjusting for" means finding a case with similar values of the confounder
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6

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- The question: what is different between Ghana and Togo?

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  - So we are convinced the confounders have truly been accounted for
- We would also want an account of how $Colonizer \rightarrow Regime$
  - Benefit of small-N research is to know the cases in depth
  - How did the British rule Ghana? How did they come to leave Ghana?
  - In short: what is the causal mechanism?

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    - The more complicated the operationalization, the harder it is
- Can be hard to account for all confounders
    - Especially given the small N
    - Unlikely to find two cases that are exactly the same on all relevant confounders, except for the IV of interest

Most-different-systems design

- Selects cases that are:
    - Very different in terms of independent variables
    - Yet very similar in terms of outcome
    - By finding one independent variable that is the same across cases, we can point to it as the cause of the outcome
        - But not very convincingly – see later
- By saying that X_1, X_2, X_3... are all different between the two cases despite the similar Y, we can show that the X's are not necessary conditions for Y to occur

Country	Pop. density	Colonized?	Wealthy?	Political system?	Populist parties? (DV)
A	High	Yes	No	Federal	Yes
B	Low	No	Yes	Federal	Yes

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        - They all drank water!
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- This is at the heart of Geddes' critique of Theda Skocpol
  - Skocpol is interested in the causes of revolutions
  - She studies countries in which revolutions occured – France, China, and Russia
  - She finds what the countries had in common: external threat
  - What she doesn't see are all cases of countries under external threat that did not undergo a revolution

What flavor of the comparative method does Michael Moore (implicitly) use?

Do you find it convincing? Why or why not?

- If you find it convincing: what evidence would convince you it's wrong?
- If you're not convinced: what more do you need to see in order to be convinced?

Purposive sampling

Why not identify a universe of relevant cases and sample randomly?

- The benefits of randomization are "lost" in small samples
    - If I randomly select 100 of you into group A and another 100 into group B, chances are the groups will be very similar on average
    - But if I select just one of you into each group, very unlikely I'll get similar people
- As in case studies, we believe some cases give us more leverage over our research question
    - Specifically, selecting cases based on similarity/difference
- Practical considerations: I know some of the cases much better than others!
    - We want detailed description of processes and events
    - I certainly couldn't tell you much about Togo (though I could include it in a statistical model)