The Comparative Method in Political Science

Political Science 432. Spring 2002

Professor Gerardo Munck

1. Course Description

This course offers an introduction to the comparative method, a method that has traditionally been associated with research in comparative politics but which is not specific to any substantive subfield within political science, and is equally relevant to students of international relations and American politics. Indeed, rather than being linked with any substantive area of research, the comparative method is best seen as the subfield of methodology that provides guidelines for the systematic conduct of research based on the study of a relatively small number of cases.

Small N researchers face a broad range of methodological issues in designing, conducting, and writing up their research. Thus, this course will attempt to be comprehensive, touching upon problems of conceptualization and measurement, causal theorizing, and causal inference. However, even though small N research can stand on its own, this course will stress the advantages of not viewing the comparative method in isolation from other methods. Indeed, a basic thesis that underpins this course is that, just as there are good reasons why large N researchers might draw on the comparative method, so too should small-N researchers be aware of the way in which their research might be strengthened by turning to other methodologies. Thus, the perspective and contributions of quantitative methods will be broached at various points in the course and especially toward the end of the course; moreover, the uses of a multi-method approach will also be explored.

2. Requirements

i) Short papers (8 three page, double-spaced, papers; worth a total of 50% of the final grade). These papers should summarize the key issues in the assigned readings and highlight their significance and implications for research practices.

ii) Essays (2 seven page, double-spaced, essays; worth a total of 20% of the final grade). The first essay concerns data collection, the topic of unit 5. Students will pick a data collection technique, and discuss its procedures, its strengths and weaknesses, and its potential areas of use in political science. These papers will be presented in class.

For the second essay, students are required to find articles and books that exemplify different small N research strategies and discuss the methodology employed in three publications (one of which must be a book) and evaluate its strengths and weaknesses. This paper is due in class in meeting 12.

iii) Final assignment (not more than a 10 page paper, 15% of the final grade). As a final assignment, students will be asked to discuss the main insights they have gained about small N research and the tools they have learned about in the course.
iv) **Class participation** (15% of the final grade) on the basis of the required readings, each and every week.

### 3. Books to Purchase

Regarding the readings, articles, which make up much of the readings, they will be made available for photocopying by the students themselves. In addition, the following required books can be purchased at the university bookstore.


### 4. Outline of Topics

Part I. Introduction

1. Overview I. Small-N, Case Study Analysis
2. Overview II. Small-N, Case Study Analysis

Part II. Conceptualization and Measurement

3. Conceptualization: Classifications, Typologies, Taxonomies
5. Data Collection: Varieties of Data Collection Techniques

Part III. Causal Theorizing and Assessment

6. Thinking about Causality
7. Generating Causal Theory
8. Causal Assessment I. An Overview
9. Causal Assessment II. The Case Study
10. Causal Assessment III. Cross-Case Analysis
11. Causal Assessment IV. Combining Cross-Case and Within-Case Analysis

Part IV. The Dialogue between Qualitative and Quantitative Methods

12. A Statistical Perspective on Qualitative Research
13. Medium-N Research and Boolean Algebra
14. Combining Small-N and Large-N Methods
Part V. Conclusion

15. A Reassessment and a Look Forward

Each unit will be covered in one weekly class.
Part I. Introduction

1. Overview I. Small-N, Case Study Analysis


2. Overview II. Small-N, Case Study Analysis


OTHER SOURCES

Skocpol, Theda and Margaret Somers, “The Uses of Comparative History in Macrosocial Inquiry,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22 (2) 1980: 174-97.


Part II. Conceptualization and Measurement

3. Conceptualization: Classifications, Typologies, Taxonomies


OTHER SOURCES


OTHER SOURCES


5. Data Collection: Varieties of Data Collection Techniques
Student presentations on data collection techniques.

Part III. Causal Theorizing and Assessment

6. Thinking about Causality

OTHER SOURCES
Cook, Thomas D. and Donald T. Campbell, “Causal Inference and the Language of Experimentation,” Chapter 1 in Thomas D. Cook and Donald T. Campbell, *Quasi-


Salmon, Wesley, Four Decades of Scientific Explanation (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1989).


7. Generating Causal Theory


OTHER SOURCES

8. Causal Assessment I. An Overview
Ragin, The Comparative Method, Chapters 1 and 2.

OTHER SOURCES
Campbell, Donald Thomas Methodology and Epistemology for Social Science: Selected Papers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). [Parts II and III]

Cronbach, Lee J. *Designing Evaluations of Educational and Social Programs* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1982).


9. Causal Assessment II. The Case Study


Campbell, Donald T. “‘Degrees of Freedom’ and the Case Study,” *Comparative Political Studies* 8 (2) 1975: 178-93.


OTHER SOURCES


George, Alexander L. and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, forth.).


*Sociological Methods and Research* 20, 4 (May 1992), special issue on narrative analysis.


10. Causal Assessment III. Cross-Case Analysis


OTHER SOURCES


11. Causal Assessment IV. Combining Cross-Case and Within-Case Analysis


OTHER SOURCES


Part IV. The Dialogue between Qualitative and Quantitative Methods

12. A Statistical Perspective on Qualitative Research

King, Keohane and Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry*, Chapters 4 and 5

OTHER SOURCES


13. Medium-N Research and Boolean Algebra


OTHER SOURCES

14. Combining Small-N and Large-N Methods
Janoski, Thomas and Alexander Hicks (eds.), The Comparative Political Economy of the Welfare State (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), Ch. 1 and pp. 365-70 of Ch. 15.
Ragin, The Comparative Method, Reread Preface and Overview and Chapters 1 and 2, and read Chapters 3-5, and 9.

OTHER SOURCES


Part V. Conclusion

15. A Reassessment and a Look Forward

Collier, David, Henry E. Brady, and Jason Seawright, “Building Blocks for a New Formulation,” in Brady and Collier (eds.), *Rethinking Social Inquiry*.
