

The Central Role of Comparative Politics in Political Analysis

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I can hardly find words to thank adequately Swedish academia in general and Swedish political science in particular for the way you are honouring me today. As some of you know, I cherish Sweden in a special fashion. After I made a first trip to your country in the early 1970s, as Director of the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR), and visited the political science departments at Goteborg, Stockholm, Uppsala, Umea and Lund, I had the privilege to be invited several times to Sweden for periods of intensive teaching, in both Stockholm and Uppsala, and to address the Swedish Political Science Association. I was then honoured some years ago to be made a member of the Royal Swedish Academy. Meanwhile, my wife and I enjoyed the friendship of many among you and, in particular, of Gunnar Sjöblom, Olof and Inger Ruin and Leif and Barbro Lewin. You are now awarding me the most treasured prize in political science and thus associating me with the illustrious scholars on whom you have bestowed the Skytte Prize. I am immensely proud to feel that I am part of such a group. Thank you, thank you, thank you and long live Sweden!

Allow me to thank, in the context of the honour that you are awarding me, the institutions with which I have been most closely involved over the last forty years: the Department of Government at the University of Essex, the European Consortium for Political Research and, since the mid-1980s, the European University Institute in Florence and the University of Siena. These institutions have given me the opportunity to devote my life to comparative politics. I wish to thank them profoundly.

I also wish to record three mentors to whom I owe a particular debt. The first, chronologically, is Maurice Duverger. I never was close to him, but his *Les partis politiques* (1951) shaped my interests. I learnt that institutions had a key role in political life but that, to understand them, one had to study them across nations. Still chronologically, my second mentor was, naturally,

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Sammy Finer. I am indebted to him in so many ways that I cannot even begin to record here. Let me only mention his extraordinary curiosity which gave me the audacity to study government on a truly comparative basis (Finer 1970). Sammy Finer also induced me to go to Yale on a fellowship for an academic year and thus get to know my third mentor, Robert Dahl, who guided me into the ebullience of American political science of the early 1960s and showed me the way of linking empirical comparative analyses to broad-based theory (Dahl 1963). All three mentors made me realise how rich were the opportunities for new research in comparative politics and also how crucial comparative politics was as a bridge between single-country studies, which tend otherwise to be merely descriptive, and abstract theory, which tends otherwise to be unrealistic. These are the points I wish to examine briefly here, first by looking at the problem in general and then by stressing that regimes and institutions, such as governments, parties, legislatures, groups and bureaucracies, can and must be studied in a comparative context.

Comparative Politics Occupies the Central Ground of Political Analysis

In their work on *The Methodology of Comparative Research* (1970), Holt and Turner said that comparison was essentially an approach and therefore should not be given any special status. This may be so elsewhere, but not in political science. In political analysis, comparison is the only way by which one can move beyond the specificity of the political life of individual countries and arrive at realistic generalisations.

This is largely because of three peculiar characteristics of the study of politics. First, to study politics means to study decisions at the top of the pyramid of power in the state: one can scarcely understand and interpret correctly the decisions taken in one state, however, unless one has some idea of the way similar processes take place in others. Second, political scientists tend to be concerned above all with what goes on 'at the very top', with leaders in particular. There are very few of these in each state, perhaps only one, even if many often attempt to exercise pressure on these leaders: to assess their role realistically, it is imperative to look beyond one state. Third, politics in the state is structured by institutions, such as legislatures and parties: as there is only one legislature and there are at most few relevant parties, cross-national comparisons are necessary at that level as well. Comparative analyses are thus not just one aspect of political analyses among others: they are central to the study of political life in all its aspects.

This means that it is through comparative work that concepts and models of political life can be elaborated. Take notions such as legitimacy and liberalism, for instance. Their character, their realistic content, cannot be detailed

at the level of single countries: they have to be seen in the context of several, ideally many, countries. Nor can one go to the other extreme and expect to be able to determine the nature and character of these concepts in the abstract. We just do not have enough imagination to discover a priori all the types of situations in which these concepts can flourish. Human nature is much too complex for us to believe that we can conceive of its meandering modes of action without an empirical base. The true weight of individuals as ‘agents’, in particular, and especially what can be described as the institutional legacy of these agents are elements of the puzzle which only comparative analyses can help to put together. In sum, the analysis of political life cannot be purely deductive: it needs a mixture of induction and deduction.

The role of cross-national comparisons in political analysis is central even in those aspects of political study which seem very distant and indeed wholly distinct. This is so with respect to what is typically referred to as ‘normative political theory’, which discusses what ought to be done in politics and in particular how governments should be organised – for instance, ‘What are the merits of democracy?’ To proceed and develop, normative analyses require observations or at least hunches about the character (generally regarded as unpleasant) of real-world situations. Judgements about how politics ought to be conducted originate from reflections (consciously recognised as such or not) about what exists. Comparative politics is there to provide the starting point.

The key role of comparative politics can also be seen in the context of international relations studies. Theories of international relations, let alone empirical studies of international relations, have to take into account the characteristics of political life within states, such as the strength and nature of the regime (do democracies fight each other or not?) and the kind of leadership – for instance, whether it is stable or whether groups outside the leadership are able to exercise effective pressure. These studies have therefore to be guided by the findings of comparative analyses of political life.

Comparisons across states are also essential for studies taking place below the national level, for instance of regions or of local governments. Findings among these bodies within a single state are likely to be valid for that state only: to be able to go beyond these and to generalise, one must undertake cross-national studies examining these regions or local governments among a number of states.

Comparative analyses of politics are thus central. Yet there have been – and continue to be to some extent – controversies on the matter; there are also practical problems to overcome, these often seeming to be the *raison d’être* or the starting point for the controversies. Access to information is sometimes not easy. It may be restricted, of course more often in authoritarian than in liberal states, but in liberal states as well; for instance about what happens in cabinets. Interviews can help to circumvent that problem. More commonly, there is the vast burden of data collection when one examines the

activities of parties, of legislatures, of bureaucracies. This affects single-country studies as well, of course, but the problem is naturally multiplied in comparative work, since information has to be found simultaneously for several countries. There may then be a question of language competence when many countries are involved. Yet much of this could be avoided, even easily, were international organisations to collect and publish data on the composition of governments, on parties, on groups, on legislatures, on bureaucracies, on courts. Note that these same international organisations collect and publish huge amounts of social and economic data, but not political data. This discrimination must cease.

Meanwhile, the controversies focus on 'cultural specificity'. So much of political life is viewed as shaped by the particular characteristics of each country that cross-national endeavours are sometimes regarded with suspicion as likely to lead to misleading interpretations. The point has some validity, so long as it is a warning only: we must be careful when drawing conclusions on the basis of comparisons. Yet it is absurd to make the blanket point that comparisons should simply not take place. Not only is it the case that, if one concentrates on one country only, one cannot truly understand what goes on, even in that country, but, as everything is specific, even in a single nation, one should undertake microscopic studies. 'Cultural specificity' therefore leads to parochialism, whereas one ought to broaden one's outlook. There are regularities in patterns of human behaviour beyond these 'cultural specificities'. Comparisons are the means by which the regularities can be identified and, in this way, concepts and theories can be elaborated enabling us to make sense of political life in general.

Comparative Politics and the Study of Regimes and Institutions

Let me now turn to a number of examples and see concretely how comparative analyses have advanced our knowledge and how much still needs to be done, largely because not enough comparative work has as yet been undertaken. Let me first look at the study of *regimes*, that is to say whether countries are liberal democratic, authoritarian or something else. Such an analysis must be comparative, since it makes no sense to discover that a country is liberal democratic if we do not look at other countries that have similar or different regimes, a point that has seemed obvious to political thinkers since Aristotle.

There are at least four ways in which modern comparative politics has handled the analysis of political regimes. The first has consisted in examining how far liberal democracy is a 'rich man's way of organising society'. In what was a famous chapter of a famous book, *Political Man* (1983 [1960]), Lipset

showed that Western nations – relatively rich countries – were more likely to enjoy stable liberal democratic governments than Latin American countries – countries that are relatively less well-off. Many increasingly sophisticated studies followed. The most recent ones, those of the Finnish political scientist Vanhanen (1997; 2003), consider 170 countries and look at the association between liberal democracy and a number of what he calls ‘resources’, including intellectual ones (education), social ones (the spread of property, for instance) and economic ones (per capita income). He ranks countries on this basis and finds that, above a certain point (a threshold) countries tend to be liberal democratic. He discovered that some of the European communist states were above that threshold: however, communism collapsed in these countries.

This is a first answer to the question of political regimes. There is another, which relates to the values held by the citizens: do these play a part in ‘explaining’ why countries are liberal democratic or authoritarian, as some have claimed? For a long time it was impossible even to begin to consider this problem and to study the values of the people at large. The increasing sophistication of survey techniques changed that situation. The pioneering work in the field, *The Civic Culture*, by Almond and Verba (1963), dealt with five countries, four of them Western, the fifth being Mexico. Broader work followed, first in Western countries and later across the world. Inglehart (1977; 1997) elaborated the distinction between ‘materialism’ and ‘post-materialism’; Hofstede (1980) undertook a systematic sociopsychological analysis of values. Both cast their net widely across the world. Even if a close connection between regimes and citizens’ value patterns has not yet been demonstrated, a much clearer picture has emerged from these comparisons.

It is not sufficient to study political regimes and values statically, especially in the contemporary world: one must look at change. The first analyses were very ambitious: they linked all forms of development, political, social and economic, and aimed at discovering a truly universal model. The data at the disposal of political scientists were too imprecise, too ‘soft’, however: even such well-known concepts as legitimacy, national integration and ‘institutionalisation’ could not be measured in practice or even assessed in broad terms.

The waves of ‘democratisation’ in Southern and Eastern Europe, Latin America, East and Southeast Asia and Africa since the 1980s brought about a renewal of interest in the subject, but on a more concrete basis. One wanted to see whether these new liberal democracies were likely to be stable, unlike those of earlier decades, such as many Latin American ones, a goal that was more limited and therefore more realistic. The ‘democratisation process’ in Southern Europe, Latin America and Eastern Europe was compared, for instance, by Linz, a Skytte Prize holder, and Stepan (1996); stages of that democratisation process were identified; indicators of the ‘consolidation’ of new regimes were elaborated, based on the growth and stability of institutions such as interest groups and political parties.

Meanwhile, a fourth type of comparative analysis of political regimes mushroomed in the last quarter of the twentieth century: these examined the moves away from the state towards some form of 'super-state' organisation, partly as a result of the growth in the number and role of international bodies, but even more because of the setting up of several important regional bodies, such as Mercosur, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and, above all, the European Union (EU). There are now large numbers of studies of the EU which attempt to determine the specific character of that 'extraordinary' organisation and to predict its future. Comparative politics is the natural home of these studies, since they require a combined analysis of the part played by 'supra-national' elements, of the part played by the various nation-states and of the extent to which the EU is similar to or different from other unions of states. Comparative analysis is thus truly central to the analysis of political regimes and it is doing that job well.

Comparative politics also provides the key to the understanding of *institutions*. Institutions have become fashionable again since the 1980s: this is how it should be, but institutions need a comparative context to be assessed adequately. Current studies demonstrate this point, both by what they have achieved and by what they have not achieved. Analyses of national executives have been successful, while, perhaps surprisingly, there are problems in the analysis of parties and legislatures, where comparative work has not sufficiently kept pace with developments on the ground. Meanwhile, there has been very little attempt to study the way groups and social movements and also public bureaucracies operate cross-nationally.

Especially since the 1980s, the analysis of national executives in liberal democracies has been markedly boosted by the comparative context in which the work has been undertaken. Very little was undertaken earlier to distinguish among subtypes of parliamentary or presidential governments, the British model being regarded as the parliamentary system par excellence. A closer comparative examination enabled Lijphart (1999), to whom you awarded the Skytte Prize, to demonstrate that, on the contrary, parliamentary governments tended towards one or the other of two sharply distinct types, majoritarian and consensual; he showed also that both types were stable and efficient. At almost the same time and as a result of the increase in the number of liberal democratic presidential systems in Latin America, Shugart and Carey (1992) proved that presidential systems were not all of the same (allegedly unstable) type and that differences in the powers of president and congress affected markedly the stability of these systems.

Through comparative analyses, studies of national executives had ceased to concentrate on single countries: general models could then emerge. Comparative analysis had once had the same effect for parties and legislatures. In the 1950s and 1960s the works of Duverger (1951) and of Lipset and Rokkan

(1967) focused on the notion of the mass party and on social 'cleavages', such as class, religion or geography, which appeared to constitute the link between modern parties and their supporters. Yet rapid changes started to occur in Western European societies and, although some 'adjustments' were made to the 'classical' model, these proved insufficient to account for the significant popular disaffection leading to the decline of some well-established parties and even the disappearance of a few. Moreover, the classical model seemed to be relevant to Western Europe only: its applicability to the United States was at most very limited; it was of very little use for the rest of the world, although the number of liberal democratic polities has sharply increased since the 1980s. By the turn of the new century, party theory seemed in need of major reconstruction.

Something similar occurred with respect to legislatures. In the late nineteenth century, Bryce (1921) had felt able to refer to a 'decline of legislatures' in the Western world. The point was taken up subsequently, as legislatures were again examined after World War II in texts even including Third World countries. Efforts were made to explain why legislatures, which formally have a major part to play in liberal democracies, were typically rather weak and even subservient to the executive, except principally in the United States. The increased complexity of the public decision-making process was felt to be responsible for this weakness, but the case of the US Congress still remained to be explained. That massively strong exception to the norm of 'legislature weakness' may have accounted partly for the fact that the search for a comparative model was abandoned; there was also the point that, for significant advances to take place, the daily life of legislatures and their committees needed careful study, a task most difficult to fulfil, since language problems could only be overcome by multinational teams. This was somewhat unrealistic to expect at the time. Comparative analyses of legislatures thus ceased to be undertaken on a worldwide basis; cross-national work continued, mainly in Western Europe, but even there comparative analyses tended to be limited to the introductions and conclusions of edited volumes while the principal chapters of these volumes were devoted to single countries.

If the analysis of parties and legislatures has to be more broadly comparative in order to advance, the comparative analysis of groups and social movements and of public bureaucracies has scarcely begun. Groups and movements remain studied essentially at the level of each country: these descriptions are valuable, but do not tell us whether any points that are made are or are not applicable elsewhere, although some of the work undertaken or directed by Tarrow (1998) is a move towards a cross-national framework. Meanwhile, if the analysis of groups and movements is essentially country based, that of public bureaucracies is primarily theoretical; one of the main issues, partly following Weber (1976), being whether bureaucracies can be expected to act rationally. Simon's classic text *Administrative Behavior* (1957)

does indeed neatly examine the reasons why 'pure rationality' is unrealistic, but little attempt is made to investigate whether public bureaucracies in various countries conform really to his or any other model. One must discover to what extent bureaucracies vary in the way they operate: this can be achieved only by studying real-world bureaucracies on a cross-national basis, a point that is perhaps beginning to be realised, as the work undertaken by Peters and Pierre (2002) suggests. So long as this is not widely the case, however, studies of bureaucracies and of groups and movements will either be descriptive without being guided by a robust model or be theoretical without the support of a strong empirical base.

Conclusion

Comparisons are central to the study of politics: only through them can real-world generalisations emerge. Otherwise, models are either hunches based on purely theoretical assertions or, as is often the case, extrapolations based on a single-country experience. Comparative politics must therefore be given the status it deserves. Teaching and research must be guided by comparisons – real-world comparisons across many countries. Younger scholars must be induced to engage in comparative work, even if there are difficulties to overcome and the payoff is a bit slower. Meanwhile, there has to be an active policy on the part of political science as a whole to ensure that cross-national data are readily available: strong pressure must be applied as a top priority to obtain from international organisations that they collect political information on a fully cross-national basis. If that information is collected, if younger scholars do become more involved in comparative work in a context of departments giving comparative work the place it deserves, not only will our knowledge of politics in the real world become much broader, but that knowledge will be structured on the basis of tested models. This is how political science will be able to accomplish its two main tasks, which are to understand public decision-making processes in the contemporary world and to help in this way the rulers and the ruled to manage our societies better.

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