

# The Return of the Single-Country Study

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## Keywords

comparative methods, case studies, methodology, internal validity, subnational research

## Abstract

This article reviews the changing status of single-country research in comparative politics, a field defined by the concept of comparison. An analysis of single-country research published in top general interest and comparative politics journals reveals that single-country research has evolved from an emphasis on description and theory generation to an emphasis on hypothesis testing and research design. This change is a result of shifting preferences for internal versus external validity combined with the quantitative and causal inference revolutions in the social sciences. A consequence of this shift is a change in substantive focus from macropolitical phenomena to micro-level processes, with consequences for the ability of comparative politics to address many substantive political phenomena that have long been at the center of the field.

## INTRODUCTION

Generations of scholars of comparative politics have been trained to understand their field as one that compares political systems across countries. Yet while cross-national statistical research and small-*n* qualitative comparisons remain central to the field of comparative politics, a substantial amount of published research in the field studies just one country. Single-country research in comparative politics ranges widely in form, from descriptive analyses of important political phenomena to randomized controlled trials and natural experiments. Single-country research has always faced the criticism that it lacks generalizability. The push to test causal claims using the comparative method motivated the rise of cross-national research, both qualitative and quantitative in nature, and the decline of single-country studies in political science outside of the field of American politics. Since the early 2000s, however, there has been a resurgence of single-country research in comparative politics, motivated by a renewed concern with internal validity.

A single-country study means, simply, a study that uses empirical data exclusively from one country. Single-country research is not defined by methodology (single-country studies may be qualitative or quantitative, historical or contemporary, idiographic or theoretical), nor by the size of the sample (single-country studies may be single case studies at the country level or large-*n* quantitative studies using subnational, administrative, or individual data). As I describe below, some kinds of single-country research share with comparative historical analysis a concern with macropolitical outcomes, configurative causation, and “getting the cases right” (Thelen & Mahoney 2015, p. 14). Some kinds of single-country research share with area studies (Szanton 2002) or comparative area studies (Ahram et al. 2018) a concern for understanding politics in its local context. Still other types of single-country research hew more closely to a design-based inference model that shares concerns about causal inference with applied and development economics (Angrist & Pischke 2010, Dunning 2012). What makes single-country research an interesting challenge for the field of comparative politics is the premise that the intensive study of a single country can yield general theoretical insights with comparative implications.

This article documents the return of the single-country study in comparative politics and critically evaluates the role of single-country research in the field. I make three main points. First, the so-called return of the single-country study is best understood as the emergence of a new type of single-country research. Whereas the single-country study of the 1960s and 1970s was usually descriptive or theory generating in orientation, the single-country study of the 2010s is usually a quantitative subnational or individual-level analysis. Second, the decline of the single-country study in the 1980s and 1990s was driven by concerns about the external validity or generalizability of small-*n* research, whereas the return of the single-country study is driven by a greater concern for internal validity. Yet—critically—both trends rest on assumptions about external and internal validity that do not follow automatically from either methodology or unit of analysis. Third, the main implication of the changing nature of single-country research in comparative politics is a change in substantive focus from macro-level or systemic phenomena to micro-level processes or individual-level analyses. However, there are signs of growing concern with internal validity despite the growing methodological sophistication of single-country research.

I begin by analyzing trends in comparative politics journal articles over the past 50 years, identifying a relative decline in single-country research in the 1980s that has rapidly reversed since the 2000s. Next, I describe the changing nature of single-country research, from qualitative and theory generating to quantitative and theory testing. The subsequent sections address issues of internal versus external validity and examine which countries are most likely to contribute to single-country research in top journals. The conclusion turns to questions of substantive focus and political relevance given the changing nature of single-country research.

**Table 1** Empirical coverage by field

Field	Single country	Paired comparison	Medium- <i>n</i>	Other
AP	723	0	0	17
CP	443	84	118	405
CP/IR	33	7	17	126
CP/methods	0	0	0	1
IR	7	0	3	169
IR/methods	0	0	0	1
Methods	2	0	0	29
Theory	0	0	0	168

Abbreviations: AP, American politics; CP, comparative politics; IR, international relations.

## TRENDS IN SINGLE-COUNTRY RESEARCH, 1965–2017

To evaluate changes over time in single-country research in comparative politics, I assembled data on journal articles in three major general interest journals [*American Political Science Review* (APSR), *American Journal of Political Science* (AJPS), and *Journal of Politics* (JOP)] and three major comparative politics journals [*World Politics* (WP), *Comparative Political Studies* (CPS), and *Comparative Politics* (CP)] in five-year increments between 1965 and 2015 and then again for 2017. Articles were coded by methodology (quantitative, qualitative, formal theory, experimental) and empirical focus [single country, paired comparison (two countries), or medium-*n* (between three and ten countries)].<sup>1</sup> Methodological classifications are not mutually exclusive, meaning that articles may be coded as containing, for example, both qualitative and quantitative analysis. However, empirical-focus classifications are mutually exclusive: All articles are classified as single country, paired comparison, medium-*n*, or other (which encompasses large-*n* cross-national articles, articles covering global or systemic phenomena, and articles with no empirical content). Because the articles are drawn from general interest journals and because *WP* commonly publishes articles in international relations, articles were also classified by field [American politics (AP), comparative politics (CP), international relations (IR), political theory, methods, and other<sup>2</sup>]. Where it proved difficult to differentiate between articles in CP or IR and articles in methods, they were coded as both. **Table 1** compares empirical coverage by field; note that this sample deliberately overrepresents articles in comparative politics.

Unsurprisingly, the majority of single-country articles are from AP, a field defined by its focus on a single country. CP comprises nearly all the remaining single-country articles in the data set. **Table 2** examines only those articles coded as CP (with or without IR or methods) and compares across journals in the data set.

Single-country articles are more common than either paired-comparison or medium-*n* articles in all journals, but they are less common than the category of “other” (which contains cross-national large-*n* research) in every journal but *CP*. Over the past 50 years, then, we observe a clear divide within the field of CP between single-country research and large-*n* research; small- or medium-*n* cross-national research is much less likely to be published either in general interest journals or in the top CP journals.

These summary figures do not allow us to examine change over time in the prevalence of single-country research in CP. To do this, **Figure 1** displays the relative proportion of all articles in each of the six journals in the data set coded as single-country studies. To preview subsequent discussions

<sup>1</sup>The raw data and a codebook with coding rules are provided by Obermeier & Pepinsky (2018).

<sup>2</sup>The category “other” contains comments, replies, and rejoinders, all of which are excluded from the analysis.

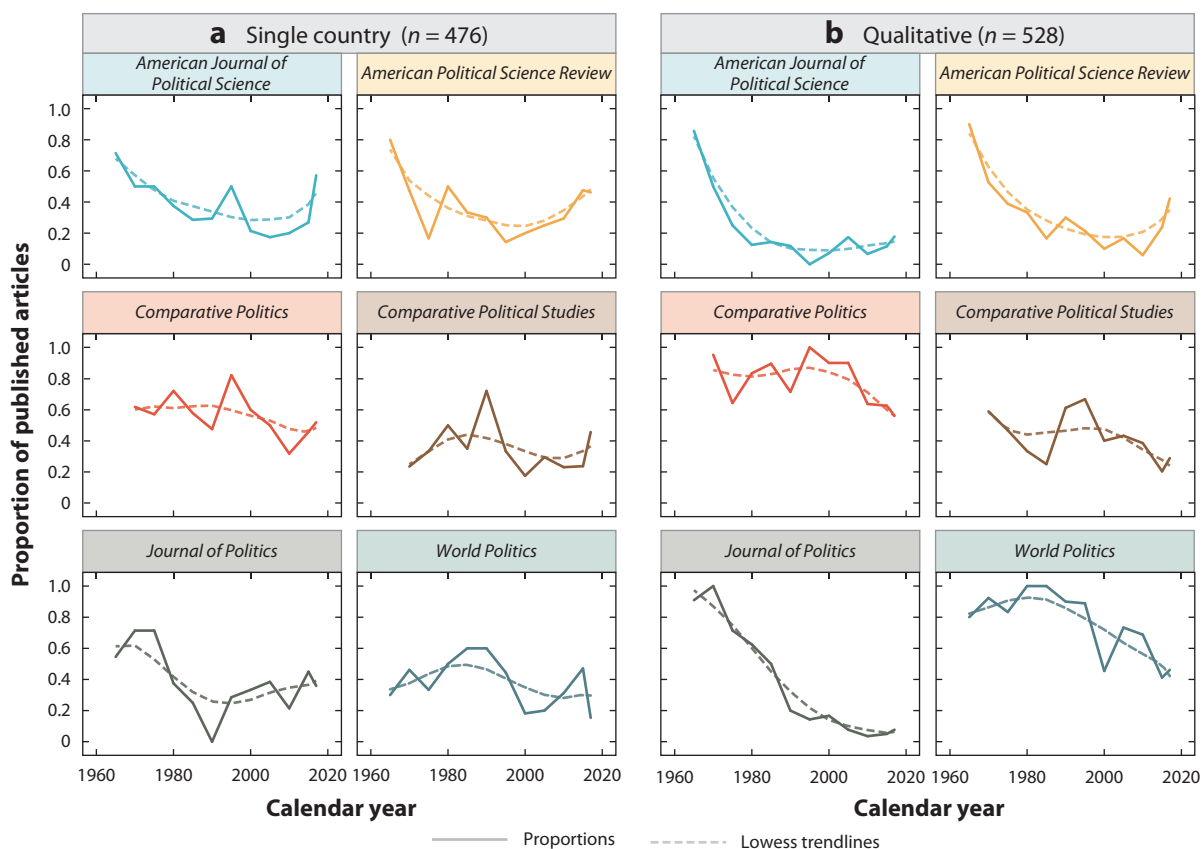
**Table 2** Empirical coverage in comparative politics by journal

Journal	Single country	Paired comparison	Medium- <i>n</i>	Other
<i>AJPS</i>	55	7	14	83
<i>APSR</i>	66	8	15	92
<i>CP</i>	122	25	32	42
<i>CPS</i>	116	30	47	164
<i>JOP</i>	68	8	11	92
<i>WP</i>	49	13	16	59

Abbreviations: *AJPS*, *American Journal of Political Science*; *APSR*, *American Political Science Review*; *CP*, *Comparative Politics*; *CPS*, *Comparative Political Studies*; *JOP*, *Journal of Politics*; *WP*, *World Politics*.

of the changing face of single-country research, **Figure 1** also plots the relative proportion of all articles in the data set coded as containing qualitative analysis.

These time-series plots reveal two distinct trends. In the general interest journals *AJPS*, *APSR*, and *JOP*, the relative proportion of single-country articles in CP decreased substantially between



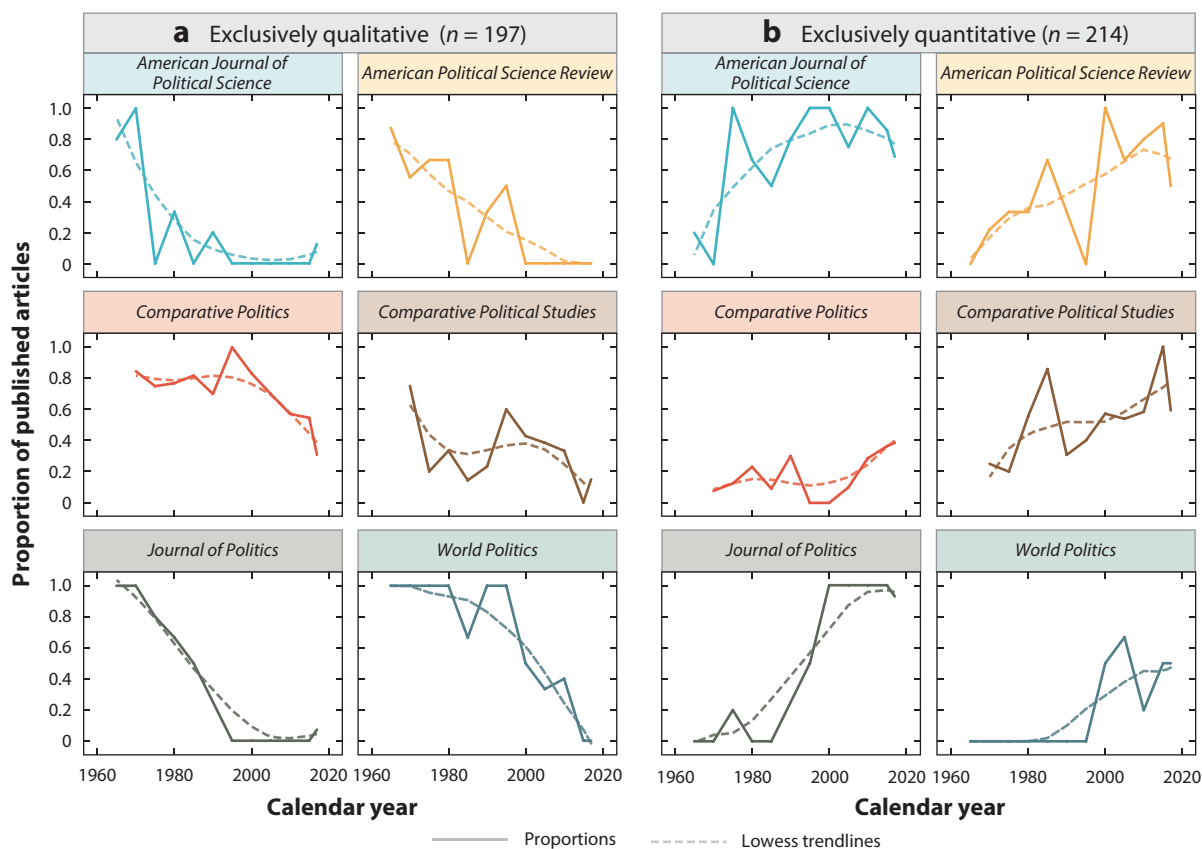
**Figure 1**

Proportions of published articles that used empirical data exclusively from one country (*a*) and articles that used qualitative data (*b*) in six selected journals of comparative politics. Proportions are in solid lines, and locally weighted scatterplot smoothed (lowess) trendlines are in dashed lines.

1965 and the late 1990s. Recent years have seen a notable reverse in this trend in these three journals. In the CP journals *CP*, *CPS*, and *WP*, we see a more moderate decline in the proportion of single-country articles published, accompanied by a more provisional uptick in the late 2000s. The same trend does not hold for qualitative articles in CP. Although the declines in the CP-specific journals are more modest, there has been a substantial decrease in the proportion of qualitative articles across all six journals. There has been an uptick in qualitative articles only in *APSR*; all other journals have seen the proportion of qualitative articles drop, without the post-2000 reversal seen in the proportion of single-country studies.

Recalling that single-country articles can be qualitative, quantitative, or mixed, the next step is to examine changes in methodology among single-country articles. **Figure 2** compares the proportion of published single-country articles that are exclusively qualitative with the proportion of those that are exclusively quantitative.

The data are clear: Single-country articles in CP are much less likely to be exclusively qualitative today than they were in the 1970s or 1980s, and much more likely to be exclusively quantitative. In fact, in most journals, exclusively qualitative single-country studies have altogether



**Figure 2**

Proportions of published single-country articles that used exclusively qualitative (a) and exclusively quantitative (b) data in six selected journals of comparative politics. Proportions are in solid lines, and locally weighted scatterplot smoothed (lowess) trendlines are in dashed lines. The figure excludes any article that contains both quantitative and qualitative analysis ( $n = 64$ ).

disappeared as of the early 2010s and have been replaced by quantitative and mixed qualitative and quantitative articles.

The summary message from the data in **Figures 1** and **2** is threefold. First, single-country articles today are a central part of published CP research in both general interest and field journals, a point that mirrors analyses of CP journals by Munck & Snyder (2007) and Schedler & Mudde (2010) that covered a more limited time span. Their importance is matched only by cross-national large-*n* articles. Second, single-country research declined substantially in prevalence in the 1980s and 1990s, only to reemerge in the 2000s. Third, there has been a marked change in the kinds of single-country articles that are being published, from primarily qualitative to primarily quantitative or mixed qualitative-quantitative research.

## FROM DESCRIPTION AND THEORY GENERATION TO DESIGN AND THEORY TESTING

The shift in methodological focus identified in **Figure 2** represents a distinct change in the nature of single-country research in CP. Through the 1980s, single-country research articles were predominantly descriptive in orientation, or they were designed to subject general propositions to focused analysis in the context of a single country in order to (*a*) demonstrate the (in)applicability of a theoretical paradigm or (*b*) generate new theoretical insights based on the experiences of that country. The unit of analysis, in other words, was the country, and a single-country study usually amounted to a single case study.

Single-country research can only be quantitative if it amasses a sufficient number of units of analysis for large-*n* cross-unit comparisons. This is feasible—by definition—only if the unit of analysis is redefined not as the country itself but as something else. Examples of this might include a temporal comparison of the country across various points in time (for example, a time-series analysis of gross domestic product and democracy within one country), or of individuals within a country (such as an analysis of public opinion data drawn from one country), or a comparative analysis of subnational jurisdictions (such as a comparison in local state capacity across cities, districts, or provinces). It may be possible to speak of the country itself as a case, but the unit of analysis is some individual, region, institution, or process with multiple observations within that case.

A quick inspection of the data reveals that indeed this has been the modal strategy in single-country studies over the past two decades. From the sample of all single-country studies, I randomly selected one article per year. The articles selected between 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2017 (the last four years in the data set) each offer a quantitative empirical test of a theoretical proposition, using data on subnational elections in Argentina (Calvo & Micozzi 2005), sweep operations in Chechnya (Lyal 2010), Chinese college students (Huang 2015), and all proposals in Argentina's Legislative Advisory Commission (Bonvecchi & Simison 2017). Although chosen randomly, these articles capture well the general trends identified above. In contrast with the earlier generation of single-country research, which tended to focus on macropolitical phenomena that often (though not always) resisted quantitative empirical testing, contemporary single-country research tends to hew more closely to a quantitative template.

To be clear, my argument is not that the single-country studies from previous decades were “just” descriptive exercises (on theory, concepts, and description see Gerring 2012). The sample of articles from general political science and top CP journals tends not to include the country-focused regional or area studies research that motivated criticism from some comparativists during the so-called area studies wars of the 1980s and 1990s (see, e.g., Bates 1996). Munck & Snyder (2007) found in an analysis of articles in *CP*, *CPS*, and *WP* from 1989 to 2004 that research that they

classified as “area studies” was more likely to be descriptive than causal in its aim. Most (though not all) of the single-country articles in my sample pitch themselves as contributing more generally to our understanding of the politics of a particular country through intensive, theoretically informed analysis of that country.

These qualitative single-country case studies, in other words, serve a broader comparative function: inductive exploration, hypothesis generation, and sometimes plausibility probing (see Levy 2008 for a review). Although Eckstein (1975) identified the “crucial case” as an example of how the analysis of a single case can provide comparative insights, it is only since the 1990s that the literature on case studies in CP has attempted to clarify systematically how the analysis of a single case can contribute to a cross-national (or other form of cross-case) comparative research project (see George & Bennett 2005, Gerring 2007). The implication of this approach for single-country studies is that they can serve the goals of comparative analysis only insofar as their selection is justified with reference to a larger population of countries—or relationships across countries—of which they are or are not representative.

The quantitative single-country studies in the sample, by contrast, focus overwhelmingly on hypothesis testing using data from within a single country.<sup>3</sup> The general approach is as follows: theory  $T$  (or theories  $T_1, T_2, \dots$ ) implies hypothesis  $H$  (or  $H_1, H_2, \dots$ ) that can be tested using data collected within a single country. In this, these studies resemble the large- $n$ , cross-national statistical tests that were ascendant in the 1980s and 1990s. Although it is possible for single-country research in this mode to be descriptive rather than designed to test hypotheses, quantitative single-country studies that aim simply to describe correlations are exceedingly rare in both general interest and top field journals.

## EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL VALIDITY

The shift from qualitative to quantitative single-country studies over the past half century encompasses more than just a shift from description and theory generation to hypothesis testing. It also reflects the tensions between internal and external validity in CP. Qualitative single-country studies favor internal validity: proper measurement of key variables, appropriate concepts, and contextually sensitive understanding of causal processes. They are vulnerable, however, to the criticism that they lack external validity, for the simple reason that single-country analyses in which the country is the case under study are by their very nature unable to establish whether or not their findings generalize across country cases. Doing so requires a comparative approach that extends beyond single-country studies to cross-national comparative work. The rise of quantitative cross-national comparative politics was intended to correct the limits to external validity inherent in the single-country/single-case approach (see Jackman 1985, p. 164; Lieberman 2005, p. 441). This is visible in **Figure 1a** in the decline of single-country studies that date to the 1970s in *AJPS*, *APSR*, and *JOP* and to the 1980s in *CP*, *CPS*, and *WP*.

Closely related to the issue of generalizability is the problem of selection bias, which Geddes (1990) and Collier & Mahoney (1996) have identified as a key challenge facing small- $n$  research in CP. Most of these authors' discussion focuses on small- $n$  qualitative comparisons; however, the single-country case study can be considered an extreme version of small- $n$  research design where  $n = 1$ , so any comparison is counterfactual or otherwise implicit (although Gerring & McDermott 2007 do identify longitudinal comparison as a variety of single-unit case study). Qualitative single-country studies may be incredibly powerful and have comparative implications, such as Berman's

<sup>3</sup>It is possible to imagine qualitative comparative single-country studies that leverage focused comparisons across a small number of subnational units to test hypotheses. These prove to be rare in the sample of published single-country articles, although they are more commonly published in books.



(1997) analysis of civil society and the collapse of the Weimar Republic or Parkinson's (2013) research on high-risk mobilization during the Lebanese civil war. As Cammett (2020) argues, "positive deviance" cases can also be "inspirational," showing that success is possible when it would otherwise seem unlikely. However, single-country case studies cannot test hypotheses using any sort of cross-case comparative method.

## The Return of Internal Validity

Although external validity remains a key concern for many comparativists, the return of the single-country study represents a backlash of sorts in favor of internal validity. Snyder (2001) provided an early articulation of the value of subnational research designs that anticipates much of the subsequent development in quantitative single-country research. Comparisons of units within one country can mitigate the problem of unit heterogeneity, controlling by construction for national-level variables that may hopelessly confound cross-national comparative work. Single-country studies also allow for better measurement and coding of multiple cases, because (a) the analyst is better able to understand the coding process, (b) the data are more consistently coded within one national case, and/or (c) the substantive and linguistic knowledge required to code every state in Germany is less than the knowledge required to code every country in Europe. The general theme is that cross-national comparisons are difficult to justify with reference to the assumptions required for causal inference (valid measurement, unit homogeneity, unconfoundedness, etc.). The promise of external validity is meaningless if research designs lack internal validity, and it is often easier to justify the assumptions necessary for causal inference when drawing data from one country than when drawing data from many.

The implications of this argument are perhaps surprising. Both qualitative/theory-generating and quantitative/hypothesis-testing modes of single-country analysis prioritize internal validity. The preference for internal versus external validity is orthogonal to methodology, and the promise of single-country research in both qualitative and quantitative modes is that it facilitates better command of the empirical details necessary for making valid descriptive or causal inferences.

Research design plays a particularly large role in contemporary quantitative single-country research, and here it is possible to identify a natural complementarity between field research, country or area knowledge, and modern causal inference methods (see Dunning 2012, pp. 25–26; Malesky 2008; Pepinsky 2014, p. 456). Comparativists with some understanding of history and contemporary politics within one country have a natural advantage in understanding the causal processes that generate the observational data that they use. They may also have a particular ability to uncover quasi-experiments—e.g., policies with discontinuous thresholds that allow for regression discontinuity designs, accidents of history that can be interpreted as natural experiments, administrative procedures that generate random variation in causal variables of interest—that can uncover causal effects. Of course, researchers who have connections with local governments and nongovernmental organizations should face lower costs in implementing field experiments and randomized controlled trials than would researchers without such connections. They should likewise be best positioned to interpret the results of those field experiments, because they are more likely to understand the data and the meaning of the intervention or treatment in context. Although Snyder (2001) emphasized measurement and concepts in his discussion of the promise of the subnational comparative method, design-based inference appears to have surpassed measurement validity as the main motivation for quantitative single-country studies in CP.



## Internal Validity and Levels of Analysis

Concerns about internal validity—measurement, conceptual appropriateness, and the credibility of causal inferences—have driven the reemergence of the single-country study as a central part of CP research. However, it is important to recognize that internal validity does not necessarily follow from a lower level of analysis. Although the difference between single-country subnational research and cross-national research can be framed as a trade-off between internal validity and external validity, this need not be the case. Claims about measurement validity or causal identification are properties of the data and design, not of the level of analysis; validity in the abstract is scale invariant.

To see why, consider Aronow & Samii's (2016) analysis of the representativeness of multiple regression analyses. They highlight that when interpreting multiple regression as a tool for estimating causal effects, the inclusion of more units in the analysis does not mean that all units contribute equally to the estimated average treatment effect. (The average treatment effect is a weighted average of unit-level treatment effects based on the conditional variance of the treatment.) Practically, this means that some units contribute more to the estimate of the treatment effect than others do, specifically those units for which the causal variable of interest is not predicted well by the covariates in the regression model. As a result, it is not possible to generalize equally across all units that are found in the data set [what Aronow & Samii (2016) term the nominal sample] unless one is willing to extrapolate. Thus, increasing the sample size to include all units in the population does not in and of itself generate external validity across that population—an argument against the view that cross-national regressions automatically increase external validity. Instead, Aronow & Samii (2016) show that multiple regression describes the casual effect for what they term the effective sample, with units weighted by their contribution to the estimated effect.

Critically, this principle applies equally to quantitative studies using data from a single country. Imagine a subnational research design using data from across states in Nigeria. One might hold that whether or not the findings from Nigeria generalize to other national contexts, they are at least internally valid findings about Nigeria as a whole. However, this does not follow; as Aronow & Samii (2016, p. 256) write, “the effective sample may be a gross distortion of the type of population that one intends to characterize.” If (a) the causal variable of interest is independent of the covariates, and (b) units are drawn randomly from the entire population of interest (or encompass that entire population), only then does it follow that findings from a subnational design generalize to the entire population without extrapolation. It is clear that the findings from a field experiment such as Paler's (2013), which relies on data from one district in Indonesia, cannot be generalized across all districts in Indonesia without assumptions. But it is also true that the results of an observational study such as Cruz et al.'s (2017), which relies on data from across the Philippines, cannot be generalized across all provinces in the Philippines without further assumptions.

Contemporary single-country research in the quantitative mode shares with the largely qualitative mode of single-country research from previous decades a focus on internal validity. Indeed, concerns about measurement and research design suggest that single-country research has a particular advantage over cross-national research in terms of internal validity for many descriptive and causal questions of interest in CP. However, there are grounds for skepticism. In the same way that external validity does not follow automatically from increasing the sample beyond a single-country to a cross-national statistical analysis, internal validity does not follow automatically from “scaling down” (Snyder 2001). If the argument for single-country research is that it provides more internal validity at the possible expense of external validity, then for quantitative single-country studies, it

pays to interrogate what exactly the sample is for which inferences are internally valid. Moreover, as I will argue in the conclusion, there is growing concern among some country specialists about the emphasis on design and causal identification rather than substantive understanding, which also amounts to a threat to internal validity.

## Internal Validity and Cumulation Across Countries

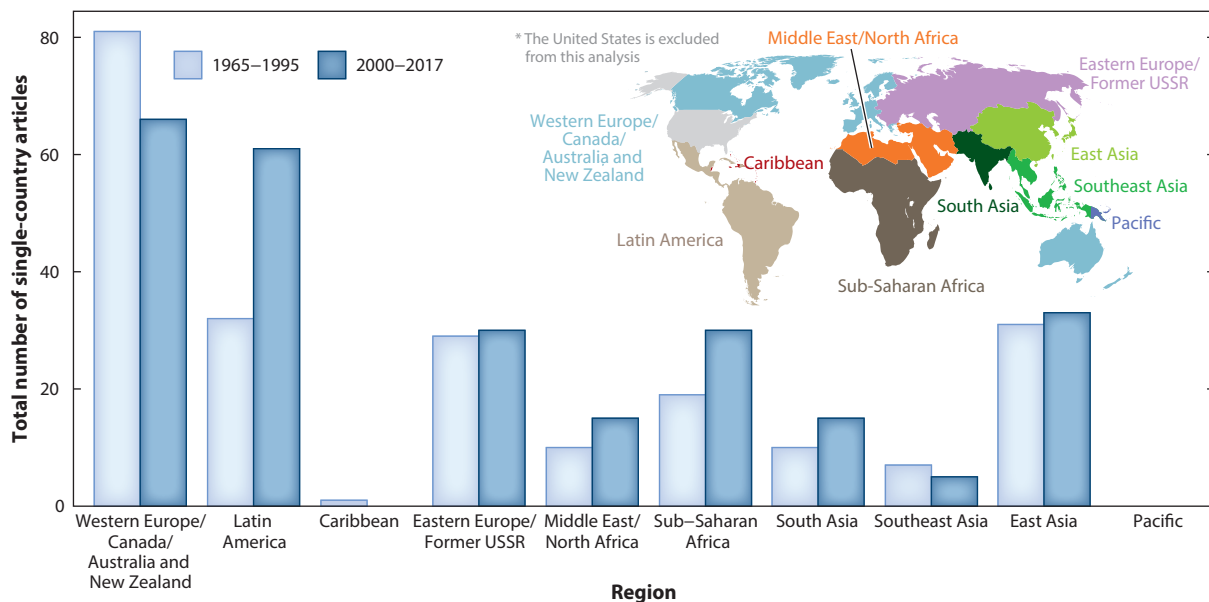
Cumulation also remains a problem for single-country studies. The same concerns about external validity and generalizability in single-country case study research that prompted the rise of cross-national statistical research may be applied to quantitative single-country research, although with different consequences. What can one learn about, say, the general effects of military aid on conflict based on a well-identified estimate of the effect of military aid on conflict in Colombia (Dube & Naidu 2015)? Instead of coding variables at the national level and then seeking correlations across countries or country-years to test whether causal findings are externally valid, now the task is to find comparable research designs that can estimate whether a finding from one country applies in others. This is a daunting task, and indeed, the Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP) community reports that it “sees an on-going crisis of external validity of development research and few systemic efforts to address it” (see <https://egap.org/metaketa>).

There are two reasons why addressing this challenge of external validity is difficult. The first is a sociological feature of the discipline and the other a specific instance of the common challenge of generalization. One perverse consequence of the demand for novelty in academia is that there are few professional incentives for comparativists to replicate the same single-country study in another country.<sup>4</sup> In some cases, a single research project can encompass multiple single-country studies. For example, Stokes et al.’s (2013) analysis of clientelism relies on data from Argentina, Mexico, India, and Venezuela. Likewise, EGAP’s Metaketa Initiative has tasked teams of researchers with conducting roughly identical field experiments across different countries, with the goal of combining the internal validity of the single-country quantitative study with the generalizability of the cross-national comparative approach (see Dunning et al. 2019). However, the logistical and financial requirements for such types of research are high.

Without replication, all claims about the generalizability of findings from one country rely on assumptions about the comparability of the different national contexts. But if they are to rely on assumptions, then we have returned to the same problem that descriptive single-country research has always faced. Are findings from one country likely to apply to another? The answer depends on the scope conditions of the theoretical account and on a host of other contextual features that may or may not affect the causal relations of interest. The generalizability of the inferences drawn from a single country depends on the plausibility of the assumptions that justify what is in essence a form of counterfactual comparative thought experiment. We may be more skeptical now about the utility of those comparisons, but without either assumptions or replications, it is not clear how empirical findings about general theoretical arguments in CP could ever cumulate.

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<sup>4</sup>I use “replicate” here to refer to an attempt to study the same phenomenon in a different empirical context. This differs from the understanding of “replication” as an attempt to recreate the same findings using the original data or using a different sample from what is understood to be the same population (e.g., replicating a finding in social psychology that used college students using a different sample of college students; see Klein et al. 2014).



**Figure 3**

Single-country articles by region. Data for 1965–1995 are separated from data for 2000–2017 to capture general differences between the earlier tradition of single-country research and its more modern counterparts.

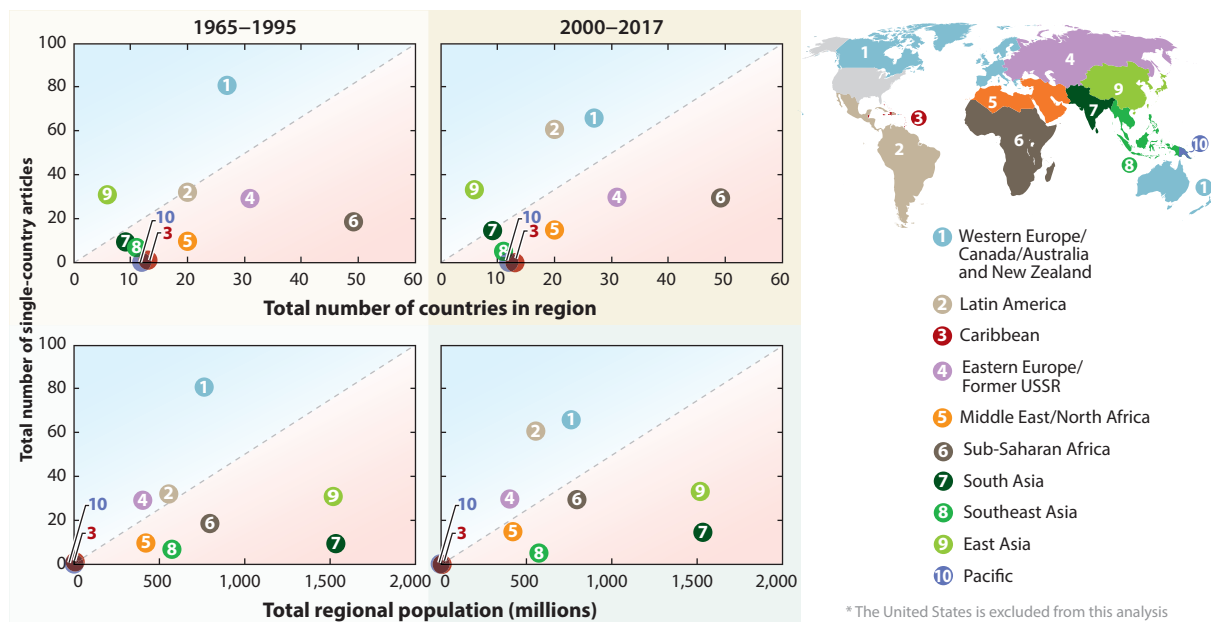
## WHICH COUNTRIES CONTRIBUTE TO SINGLE-COUNTRY RESEARCH?

One indirect way to get at the question of cumulation and external validity is to investigate whether certain countries are overrepresented among single-country studies. If so, that would suggest that even if there were the possibility of accumulating findings across national contexts, whatever cumulated findings emerged would be driven by a nonrepresentative set of countries. The data on single-country journal articles contain information about the countries being studied, providing an easy way to explore which types of countries are most likely to appear in single-country articles.

**Figure 3** counts the number of articles appearing in the sample by world region, excluding the United States (which is excluded from all analyses here). Countries from Western Europe, Canada, and Australia and New Zealand were by far the most common objects of single-country studies from 1965 to 1995. Since 2000, these countries have been joined by Latin American countries as the most common objects of single-country studies. Single-country studies from other world regions are notably less common, with regions such as the Caribbean and the Pacific contributing almost no cases to the sample.

One explanation might be that the distribution of single-country studies by region must depend on the distribution of countries by region; perhaps certain regions have fewer countries, and this explains their relative underrepresentation. It could also be the case that some regions are underrepresented because their countries tend to be small in population. **Figure 4** investigates these possibilities.

The main conclusions from **Figure 3** about the relative overrepresentation of Western Europe and Latin America are unchanged in **Figure 4**. However, new insights emerge. Relative to the number of countries in the region, sub-Saharan Africa has long been underrepresented in single-country research, but things look better when the region's total population is taken



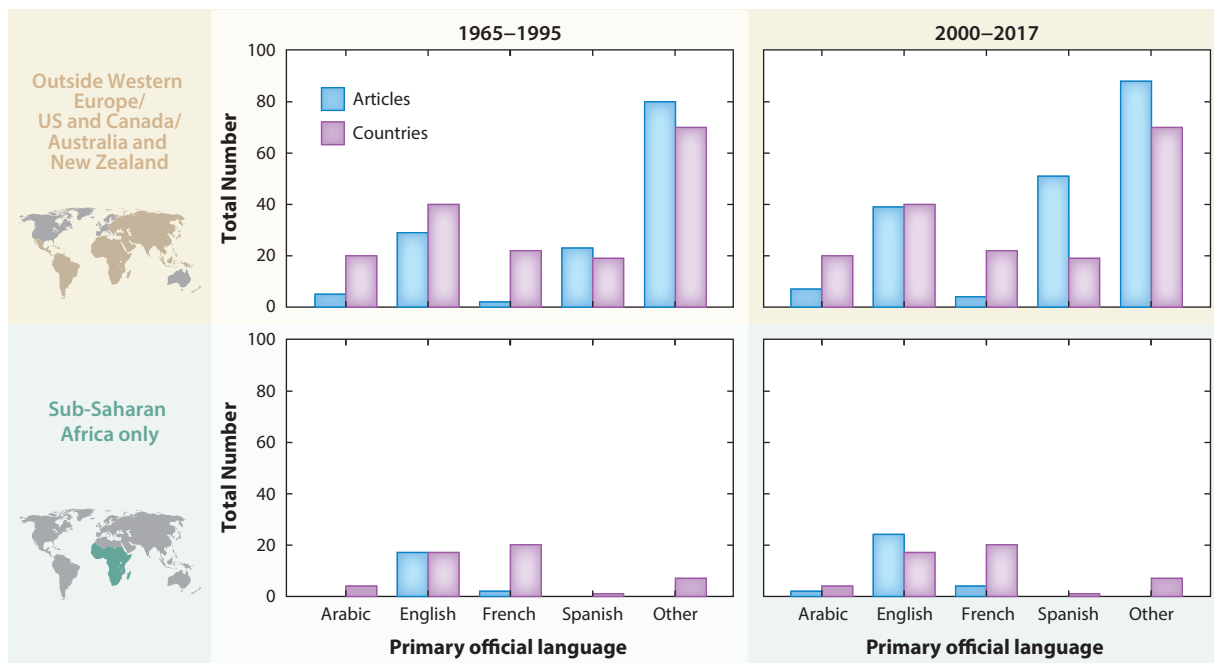
**Figure 4**

The total number of single-country articles per region is compared with the total number of countries in the region (*top two panels*) and the total population of the region (*bottom two panels*; calculated from Dahlberg et al. 2018, Feenstra et al. 2015). Regions that lie above each dashed line in blue areas (below in red areas) are those that have been the subject of more (fewer) articles than would be predicted by the region's population or number of countries.

into account. Southeast Asia and the Middle East and North Africa are underrepresented in single-country research by either metric. East and South Asia are underrepresented relative to their regional populations only. It is clear from the data that published single-country articles do not represent all world regions equally.

An additional way to look at differences across countries would be to see if single-country studies tend to have a linguistic bias. **Figure 5** compares the total number of published single-country studies to the total number of countries with English, French, Spanish, Arabic, or some other language as one of their official languages.<sup>5</sup> Countries with French or Arabic as an official language were far less likely to appear in single-country studies than countries with other official languages, whose incidence roughly matches the number of countries with those official languages. When focusing on Africa in particular, there is evidence of a bias against all non-English-speaking countries (see also Briggs 2017); when focusing on the rest of the world, this bias disappears.

<sup>5</sup>The list of countries with English as an official language was obtained from [https://web.archive.org/web/20180603001417/https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_territorial\\_entities\\_where\\_English\\_is\\_an\\_official\\_language](https://web.archive.org/web/20180603001417/https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_territorial_entities_where_English_is_an_official_language). The list of countries with French as an official language was obtained from [https://web.archive.org/web/20180522050241/https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_territorial\\_entities\\_where\\_French\\_is\\_an\\_official\\_language](https://web.archive.org/web/20180522050241/https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_territorial_entities_where_French_is_an_official_language). The list of countries with Spanish as an official language was obtained from [https://web.archive.org/web/20170411084358/https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_countries\\_where\\_Spanish\\_is\\_an\\_official\\_language](https://web.archive.org/web/20170411084358/https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_where_Spanish_is_an_official_language). The list of countries with Arabic as an official language was obtained from [https://web.archive.org/web/20180316121948/https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_countries\\_where\\_Arabic\\_is\\_an\\_official\\_language](https://web.archive.org/web/20180316121948/https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_where_Arabic_is_an_official_language).



**Figure 5**

The total number of single-country articles is compared with the total number of countries whose official languages include English, French, Spanish, Arabic, or some other language. Because we already know that Western Europe is overrepresented in the data, the top two panels exclude Western Europe, Canada, and Australia/New Zealand. The bottom two panels include sub-Saharan Africa only. Canada (dual English-French) and Tanzania (Arabic is official in Zanzibar) are grouped with English-speaking countries. Burundi, Cameroon, Rwanda, Seychelles, and Vanuatu (dual English-French) and Chad, Comoros, and Djibouti (dual French-Arabic) are grouped with French-speaking countries. Israel is coded as “other” even though Arabic has official status.

These results indicate that in addition to not representing all world regions equally, single-country research tends to overrepresent English- and Spanish-speaking countries, especially relative to French-speaking countries in Africa.

Analyzing the distribution of single-country studies by world region and language provides a better sense of the challenges of external validity facing CP. Let us assume that every one of the published single-country articles in the sample is internally valid. It nevertheless remains the case that any cumulative findings from single-country research will be driven primarily by studies from Western Europe and Latin America; to the extent that Africa contributes, it is almost exclusively anglophone Africa. This analysis of course neglects the role of area-focused journals in producing research on other parts of the world; Africanists can publish on lusophone Africa in the *Journal of Modern African Studies*, and Asianists can publish on South Korea in the *Journal of Contemporary Asia*. But comparativists should be attentive to how nonrepresentative single-country research is in general interest and top field journals; if they wish to learn about those other countries, they must look elsewhere.

## SUBSTANCE AND POLITICAL RELEVANCE

If trends in single-country research have increasingly prioritized internal validity and research design in a largely quantitative template, what does this say about the substantive topics that this

new mode of single-country research addresses? By way of conclusion, in this section I address the twin issues of substance and political relevance that have long animated criticisms of mainstream CP.

As outlined above, the shift from qualitative to quantitative single-country research necessarily implies a shift in the unit of analysis. In practice, this means a shift away from the study of macro-level or systemic phenomena such as democratic consolidation, quality of government, political order, or judicial independence. These are concepts that apply to the country as a whole. Of course, quantitative single-country studies may be able to investigate the micro-level empirical implications of theoretical approaches to understanding these macropolitical phenomena. There are also other substantive and important topics in CP—like gendered incumbency effects (Shair-Rosenfield 2012), the returns to committee service in parliament (Cirone & Van Coppenolle 2018), and subnational authoritarianism (Gervasoni 2010)—that become visible only when turning away from an exclusive focus on national politics. Still, the new style of single-country research implies a shift in focus from national politics and macropolitical processes to local politics, individual beliefs, and micro-level causal processes. There is a remarkable disconnect between the three dependent variables—order, democracy, and forms of capitalism—that Laitin's (2003) "state of the subdiscipline" essay identified just 15 years ago and the type of political phenomena that contemporary single-country studies are able to capture.

In the shift from national politics to micro-level processes, what is lost, in addition to aggregate country-level phenomena such as democracy or inequality, is attention to political systems, actors, policy processes, social movements, and other macropolitical phenomena that matter for understanding politics in individual countries. One may hold the position that it is not the task of CP to understand these phenomena. More generously, one may hold that it is not the task of single-country CP research to theorize or capture empirically these phenomena. Perhaps these are subjects best captured in CP through small-*n* paired comparisons of country cases, comparative historical analyses, or cross-national regressions, where comparison puts these national processes in context. Descriptive analyses of a single country's political system, in this understanding, do not fall within the proper ambit of CP unless they follow a template similar to that outlined by Gerring (2007).

I suggested above that there is a natural complementarity between field experience, country expertise, and design-based research in CP. However, a 2015 issue of the *Comparative Politics Newsletter* from the American Political Science Association's Comparative Politics Section identified mounting concerns about the relationship between quantitative, causal identification-focused CP research, and substantive political knowledge. Chandra (2015) describes errors in substantive knowledge about Indian and South Asian politics in the single-country quantitative research that she encounters. Geddes (2015) worries that PhD training places such high demands on students that they have little time to develop substantive expertise or political intuition.

These criticisms raise the prospect that contemporary single-country research may actually lack internal validity. Such perspectives—echoed widely in the halls of disciplinary and regional studies conferences alike—also suggest that there is a trade-off between the methodological training that students receive and the substantive knowledge and deep experience required of a true country expert. This represents an important change from the mode of qualitative single-country research that predominated in the 1960s and 1970s. That research suffered from the accusation that it was too focused on national politics and insufficiently attentive to the problem of generalization. Contemporary single-country research faces nearly the opposite concern: It is insufficiently attentive to national political and social conditions relative to its methodological

and theoretical contributions. The field may encourage comparativists to produce well-identified estimates of substantively meaningless causal quantities.

Is there actually a trade-off between substantive political knowledge and methodological expertise? An optimistic view is that the type of country expertise required to develop useful subnational research designs or interesting randomized controlled trials can produce good substantive knowledge as a side effect. For example, a comparativist who works for years on a quasi-experimental subnational research design in Mozambique may not intend to learn about party politics or elite maneuvering within the ruling Frelimo party, but almost certainly that scholar will be more expert on these and other issues in Mozambican politics than colleagues without such country experience. In this perspective, even if disciplinary incentives lead researchers to focus on the theoretical or methodological contributions that the new style of quantitative single-country research can make, comparativists will nevertheless find themselves equipped to contribute to substantive political debates in the countries that they study. The two- to four-week research trips that Chandra (2015) believes produce superficial research would not suffice, but there is the possibility that students who do invest in country expertise to engage in the contemporary style of quantitative single-country research will also become country experts.

This optimistic perspective notwithstanding, there are certainly trade-offs between in-depth knowledge of political systems, actors, policy processes, and social movements and rigorous research designs devised to contribute to theoretical and conceptual debates in CP. Very few comparativists will be equipped to master both; those who can will nevertheless have a comparative advantage in one (see also Gehlbach 2015 on multimethod research). Single-country research from the 1960s and 1970s—by dint of being concerned with carefully describing national political processes and relating them to general theoretical debates in the social sciences—produced direct knowledge about national politics and the actors, institutions, and movements that shape it. This sort of research continues to be done by comparativists and also by country or area specialists, but it is much less likely to appear in top disciplinary or field journals. Contemporary design-focused single-country research in top journals is well suited, for example, to answer the question, “What is the effect of national origin on the outcomes of citizenship referenda in Switzerland?” (see Hainmueller & Hangartner 2013). It is less able to answer the question, “Why does Switzerland regulate citizenship this way?”

The substantive implication of the changing nature of single-country research is a greater emphasis on empirical research on well-identified causal questions than on a theoretically informed analysis of national political systems or aggregate political phenomena. It may be that there are other venues besides top journals for this type of research, but it is hard to argue that the field of CP should delegate the responsibility for understanding national political systems in individual countries to some other field or discipline. The easiest way to incentivize comparativists to remain focused on substantively important macropolitical phenomena in individual countries would be to publish this kind of research in general interest and top field journals. If that is not possible (and I think it is not), then the field must compensate by finding other ways to encourage comparativists to develop substantive country expertise.

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## Errata

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