

Comparative Politics Newsletter

The Organized Section in Comparative Politics of the American Political Science Association

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Contents

Letter from the Editors by Matt Golder and Sona N. Golder	1
I. Symposium: Training the Next Generation of Comparative Politics Scholars	
Faculty-student Research Collaboration as a Training Tool by James F. Adams	5
Redefining the Relationship with the Field by Kanchan Chandra	7
Training for Both Skills and Substance by Barbara Geddes	9
The Fallacy of Multiple Methods by Scott Gehlbach	11
Balancing Trade-offs and Leveraging Experience by Gretchen Helmke and G. Bingham Powell, Jr.	13
Improving Graduate Education through the Undergraduate Curriculum by Jeffrey K. Staton	16
Training Graduate Students in Comparative Politics by Leonard Wantchekon	21
Qualitative and Archival Methods by Elisabeth Jean Wood	24
II. Special Topic: Ukraine and Comparative Politics	
Russia's War in Ukraine and Putin's Propaganda State by Mark R. Beissinger	26
Election Integrity in Ukraine: A Comparative Perspective by Erik S. Herron	29
Ukraine's Judiciary after Euromaidan by Maria Popova	32
Attitudinal Geography in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine by Oxana Shevel	36
III. Data Set	
Archigos: A Database on Political Leaders by Hein Goemans	39
IV. Other	
Contributors	41
Announcements and Additional Information	48

Letter from the Editors: Training the Next Generation of Comparative Politics Scholars

by Matt Golder & Sona N. Golder

The Pennsylvania State University

with the data set, *Archigos: A Database on Political Leaders*.

I. Symposium

Welcome to the Fall 2015 issue of the Comparative Politics Newsletter. Our current issue includes a symposium on training the next generation of comparative politics scholars, a special topic looking at the evolving situation in Ukraine, and an overview of recent developments

We are incredibly grateful to the individuals who contributed to our symposium on training the next generation of comparative politics scholars. This is an important topic and our contributors all have an excellent track record in training and placing graduate students, as well as in receiving awards for their teaching and men-

have tried adding more descriptive content to course requirements, though with mixed results. I have tried requiring students to read books and articles that provide detailed descriptions of real dictatorships, but in class discussions and papers I find that most students do not integrate the descriptive material with the theories. Giving students incentives to invest in gathering information about times and places that interest them seems to work better than adding requirements. I have found, for example, that requiring students to apply theories to one or more cases in assigned papers can stimulate deep digging into information sources. For quantitative papers, students can be required to include a case sketch showing the empirical process they claim to have shown in the data analysis. Such assignments encourage students to find the information needed to bring a theory into conversation with the real world or to embed data analysis in its substantive context. These are small changes that add incremental amounts to the store of background knowledge, and no doubt other faculty have found other ways of organizing their classes to provide these incentives. Over time even small changes should add up.

In my department, and many others I'm sure, comparativist faculty often complain about students' lack of substantive knowledge. To judge by my own experience, this problem has existed for a very long time. Unlike other deficiencies in my graduate education, however, this one is not being remedied over time. Indeed, the great investments in various kinds of methods training that students now need may have further reduced their ability to spend time acquiring contextual and historical knowledge. I cannot offer a solution to this problem. Instead, I suggest that all of us who teach substantive classes should try to figure out ways to use discussion, assignments, and whatever else we can think of to encourage students to acquire the background knowledge they need in order to have good academic judgment, regardless of the methods that they use.

The Fallacy of Multiple Methods

by Scott Gehlbach

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Political scientists are trained to identify logical fallacies, yet as a subfield, comparativists have fallen victim to a pernicious failure of reasoning, one that I will call the fallacy of multiple methods. The fallacy goes like this: Comparative politics maximizes its understanding of the political world when multiple methods are employed; therefore, graduate students in comparative politics should produce work that employs multiple methods.

To understand why this is a fallacy, it is helpful to unpack the argument into its constituent parts. The premise of the statement, in my view, is on firm ground. Ethnographic and interpretive work offers deep insight into the motivations and understandings of particular political actors. Statistics gives us the tools to make statements of more or less confidence about populations of political actors or governing entities. Experimental research identifies causal relationships that are otherwise difficult or impossible to observe. Game theory provides a language for understanding the strategic interaction that is often central to politics. One could go on. The point is that the diversity of methods in comparative politics exists for a reason.

However, it does not follow that comparativists should employ multiple methods in their own work. This is a fallacy of division (the opposite of a fallacy of composition): concluding that because something is true for the whole, it must be true for its constituent parts. Comparative politics as a subfield can effectively employ multiple methods even if none of its practitioners do. All that is required — more on this below — is that (i) there be a diversity of comparativists in terms of methods employed, and (ii) comparativists be able to read and synthesize each others' work. In short, all that is necessary is a division of labor.

Some fallacies are harmless, but this is not true of the fallacy of multiple methods. This fallacy guides the advice that we provide to graduate students, the projects that we choose to fund, the awards that we provide for dissertations and published work, and the judgments of referees and editors at some of our top journals. And so graduate students attempt to do what is often impossible:

master multiple methods, not all of which are suited to a scholar's intellectual temperament, in a short period of time. The consequence, all too often, is research that does many things poorly — theoretically ungrounded ethnographies, poorly identified regressions, inexpertly conceived experiments, mathematically incoherent models — rather than a few things well.

This jack-of-all-trades tendency echoes the corporate practice of assembling diverse enterprises within a single conglomerate — a practice that had become hegemonic by the 1970s (Porter, 1987). As with comparative politics, the justification for this strategy rested in part on a logical error: the idea that firms could better diversify investor risk by participating in a variety of unrelated businesses. The fallacy, as eventually understood by the corporate world, is that investors are perfectly capable of diversifying risk on their own by holding diverse portfolios; there is no need for firms themselves to be organized as such (Alberts, 1966; Levy and Sarnat, 1970). Rather, firms should concentrate on their “core competencies.” As explained by Prahalad and Hamel (1990) in their seminal work, this does not necessarily mean making just one thing. In their example, Honda was a major player in automobiles, lawn mowers, generators, and motorcycles. It does, however, imply that the various activities of the firm should follow its expertise in doing just a few things — in Honda's case, producing engines and power trains.

Political scientists are trained to identify logical fallacies, yet as a subfield, comparativists have fallen victim to a pernicious failure of reasoning, one that I will call the fallacy of multiple methods.

Those of us in a position to guide graduate students should encourage them to develop their core competencies; that is, develop a portfolio of complementary skills (perhaps under the umbrella of some overarching method within a particular epistemological tradition) that will enable them to excel in a variety of research endeavors. We should discourage them from “triangulating” among methods in which they have only a semester's training. Finally, in our various professional capacities, we should reward scholarship that is convincing in a narrow domain — even when our own core

competencies might have led us in a different direction — over that which pursues multiple methods for its own sake.

At the same time, we should encourage graduate students to obtain basic training in a variety of methods. This is not paradoxical. Rather, it is only through exposure to diverse methods that the gains from trade of a division of labor can be realized. Comparativists must be able to read each others' work. They must be able to synthesize what has been done on a topic by practitioners of other methods. Finally, when collaborating with those who have different core competencies (a way for graduate students to signal that they are methodologically ecumenical without trying to do it all themselves), they must be able to monitor each others' contributions.

Empirical research demonstrates that firms became more valuable once conglomerates were broken up and companies reorganized around closely related activities (Bhagat and Vishny, 1990). Scholarship in comparative politics will similarly benefit when we appreciate that the use of multiple methods should be a goal for the subfield, not for any particular scholar.

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