Concepts | Single Case Studies and Process Tracing

Doing Political Research, Week 6

Concepts

- How should we understand concepts? Do you take the classical view or the prototype/family resemblance view?
- What makes for a good concept?
- Consider a concept that you have come across in your studies.
  - Is it useful?
  - Is it contested?
  - Has it been stretched?
  - Can it be sub-divided or aggregated with other concepts? Can you move up and down the ladder of abstraction?

Russell and Serban

- What is the ‘Westminster model’?
- Why do Russell and Serban criticise it as a concept?
- Should we abandon the concept? Are there ways in which it could be useful?

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Government & Opposition

ARTICLE

The Muddle of the ‘Westminster Model’: A Concept Stretched Beyond Repair

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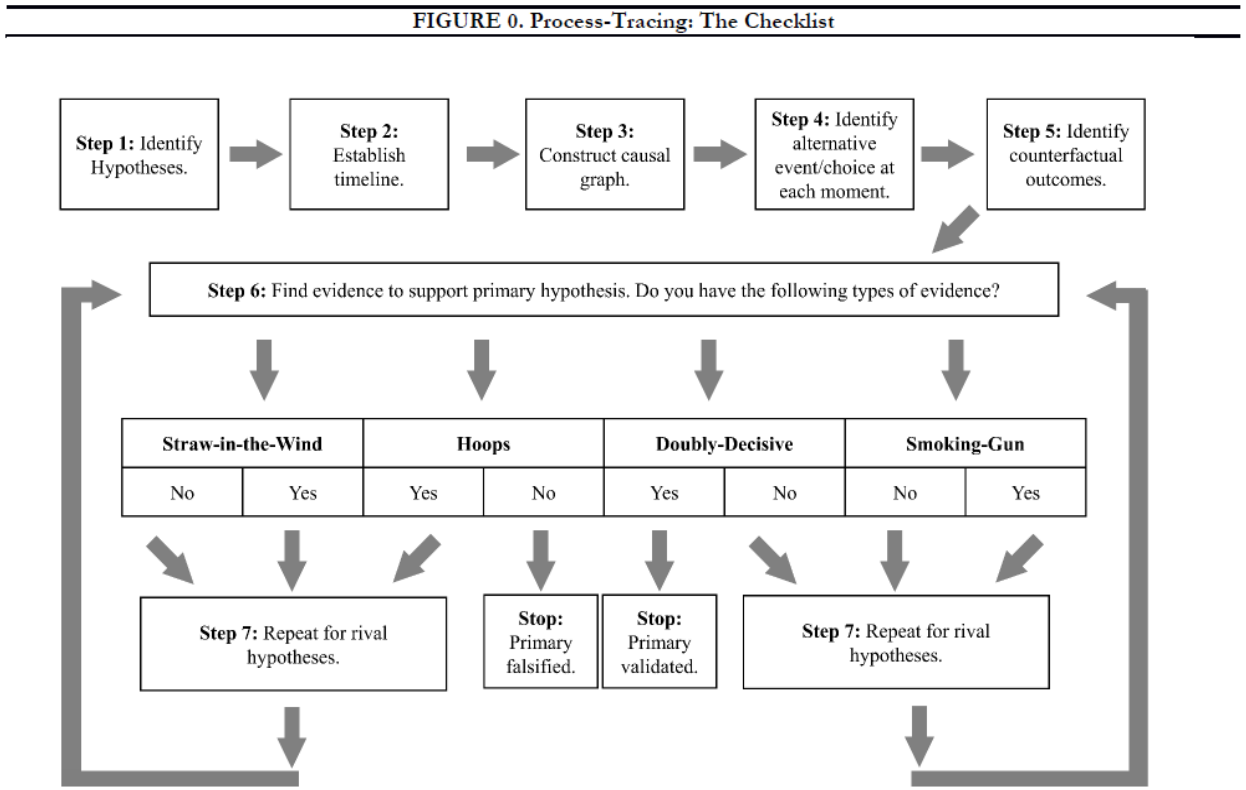
Abstract
The term ‘Westminster model’, widely used in both the academic and practitioner literatures, is a familiar one. But detailed examination finds significant confusion about its meaning. This article follows Giovanni Sartori’s advice for ‘reconstructing’ a social science term whose meaning may be unclear through review of its use in the recent literature. It finds that many authors in comparative politics use the term ‘Westminster model’ without definition, while those providing definitions associate it with a large (and sometimes conflicting) set of attributes, and a set of countries often not demonstrating those attributes. Some have sought to respect this diversity by proposing variants like ‘Washminster’ or ‘Eastminster’, while others suggest that the term should be seen as a loose ‘family resemblance’ concept. But on examination it no longer meets even the – relatively weak – requirements for family resemblance. To end the muddle, and the risk of flawed inferences and false generalization, comparative scholars should drop this term, and select cases based on more precise attributes instead.

Keywords: Westminster model; Westminster democracy; Westminster system; concepts; constitutions

The term ‘Westminster model’ appears frequently in both the academic and practitioner literatures and will be familiar to many specialists in comparative politics, public administration and law. But what precisely does it mean, and is there consistency in its application? If put under the microscope, can any clear meaning actually be discerned? This article suggests that while ostensibly serving as a ‘model’ in the comparative literature, the term instead risks inducing muddle and unclear thinking.

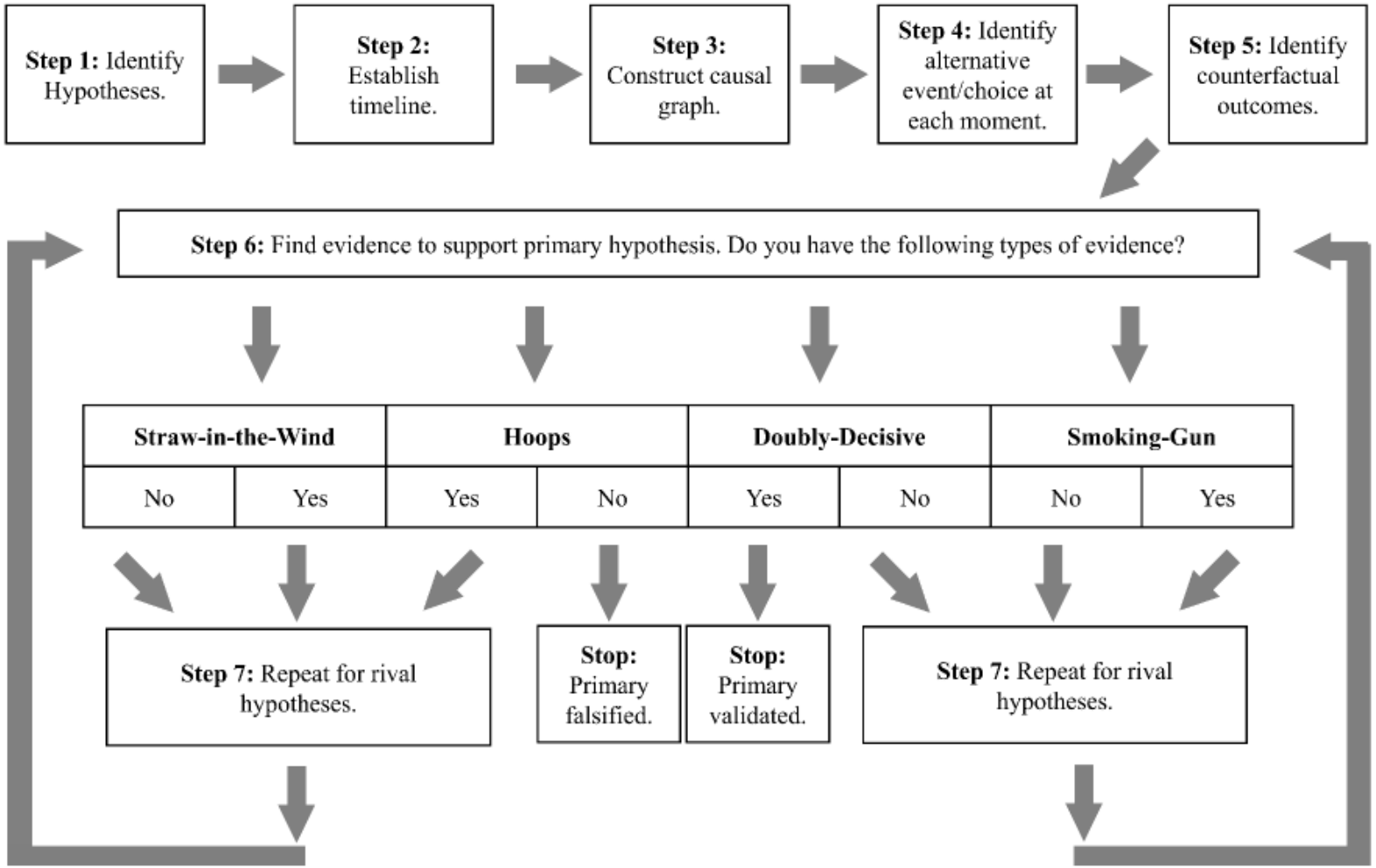
Following Giovanni Sartori’s (2009 [1984]) advice for ‘reconstructing’ a social science term whose meaning may be unclear, our article analyses uses of the term ‘Westminster model’ and its equivalents in the academic literature since 1999. We find that, while the term occurs frequently in comparative texts, authors’ interpretations of it are often unclear. Definitions are often absent, and, where present, they are frequently partial, divergent and sometimes even mutually contradictory. If a dominant interpretation exists, this is probably of a majoritarian parliamentary

Designing a Single Case Study Project



- Choose a research question to investigate a political process or phenomenon and design a process tracing case study to answer it.
- What is your case a case of? To what extent can you generalise from your case?
- What is the process you are trying to trace? What are the important explanatory variables?
- What evidence will you collect? How will you establish the causal process?

FIGURE 0. Process-Tracing: The Checklist



Morgan

- What case does Morgan examine? What is this a case of?
- How generalisable are the findings from this single case?
- What evidence did Morgan use? How convincing is it?
- How could the study have been improved? What other methods could have been used? Would a comparative case study have worked better?

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Using Process Tracing to Investigate Elite Experience Accrual: Explaining Margaret Thatcher's Support for US Air Strikes Against Libya

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Abstract

The United States' invasion of Grenada in 1983 represented the lowest point in Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan's relationship, with Thatcher incensed at what she perceived to be her ally's misuse of military force. However, in April 1986, Thatcher gave permission for the United States to use British-based aircraft for air strikes against the Gaddafi regime in Libya, a mission as tenuously grounded in international law as Grenada. How do we explain Thatcher's apparent change in approach to foreign policy, now placing strategic interests above her previous deference to international law, and what does this tell us about the role experience plays in a leader's foreign policy decisions? Drawing on insights from the ongoing behavioural revolution in International Relations, this paper argues that the experience Thatcher gained during the Grenada episode led to her support for US strikes against Libya. A process tracing approach using documents from the UK National Archives, as well as biographies and memoirs, tests this individual-level hypothesis against a rival structuralist explanation. This research shows how experience gained in office can influence a leader's future foreign policy decision-making and demonstrates the utility of process tracing methods for investigations into the role of experience in international politics.

Keywords

process tracing, elites, experience, behavioural IR, foreign policy, British politics

Introduction

The United States' invasion of Grenada in 1983 represented the lowest point in Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan's relationship. Incensed that her closest ally had launched an invasion of a Commonwealth country without fully consulting her government, Thatcher publicly criticised the President's use of military force. Thatcher's instinctive response to the US invasion was to defer to international law and norms of sovereignty, which she had relied on in her own response to Argentina's invasion of the Falklands the previous year. However, in April 1986, Thatcher gave permission for the United States to use British-based aircraft for air strikes against the Gaddafi regime in Libya, a mission as tenuously grounded in international law as the invasion of Grenada 3 years earlier (Malawer 1988, 89). How do we explain Thatcher's apparent change in approach to foreign policy, now placing strategic interests above her previous deference to international law, and what does this tell us about the role experience accrual plays in a leader's foreign policy decisions?

This paper will argue that the experience Thatcher gained during the Grenada episode informed her decision to allow the US to use UK-based aircraft in the 1986 Libya strikes. Prior to and during the invasion of Grenada, it is argued that Thatcher relied on a heuristic that placed international law at the forefront of her foreign policy. However, the diplomatic fallout caused by adherence to this approach in Grenada saw this heuristic side-lined in favour of the maintenance of strong Anglo-American relations. A process tracing approach, drawing on materials from The National Archives of the UK and

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