

# 33

## Using CAP Data for Qualitative Policy Research

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### 33.1 Introduction

The Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) is a measurement and a retrieval system (Jones, 2015). As such, it can be leveraged not only for quantitative but also for qualitative within-case analysis as it provides the researcher with access to rich and diverse material that enables the gathering and triangulating of empirical evidence for an in-depth case study. In addition, the coding procedures ensure that the content of the material under each subtopic is relevant and exhaustive. This can be especially time saving since case-study research involves going through a large volume of materials. Furthermore, due to its breadth, CAP is also useful for selecting the relevant population of policy cases when the population is less visible (Shpaizman, 2017). Although many policy scholars use CAP in qualitative within-case analysis, almost no formalization of CAP's advantages for such analysis has been done.

This chapter aims to demonstrate CAP's usefulness for case-oriented research, starting from case selection, going through familiarization with the case of interest, and ending with a collection of the needed evidence. After explaining each phase in case-oriented research and the role CAP can play, each use is demonstrated using CAP data from Spain and the United States. Specifically, case selection when the population is unknown is demonstrated using the outcome of policy drift—change in the policy impact without significant policy change (Hacker, 2004). This policy outcome was chosen because cases of drift are hard to identify without in-depth acquaintance with each case, due to drift's less visible character. Familiarization with a case and gathering relevant evidence is demonstrated using the example of child-care policy in Spain and the United States correspondingly. These countries

were chosen because, as opposed to other Western countries, they lag behind in developing a comprehensive publicly financed childcare policy.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, CAP's usefulness as a tool for identifying the relevant population of cases when the population is less visible is presented along with its limitations. Second, the way the trends tool can be used to assist the researcher to familiarize him/herself with the case in question and formulate the research questions is discussed. Third, CAP's appropriateness for evidence collection is explained. This part concludes by pointing to some of CAP's limitations to which researchers should pay attention when applying CAP in a within-case analysis.

### 33.2 CAP as a Tool for Identifying Relevant Population of Cases

One of the first phases of case-oriented research is identifying the relevant population of cases—all the cases that are analytically useful for the research from which the specific cases for analysis are drawn. It can also be termed the sampling frame. This population includes both positive cases where the outcome of interest took place and negative cases where it did not, although it could have. This stage is important because it has implications for the analytic findings, inferences, and generalizations made (Goertz, 2006).

The best practice for identifying the relevant population in qualitative research is first selecting positive cases based on their value on the dependent variable and then to distinguish the negative cases from irrelevant cases based on the possibility principle, according to which cases are relevant if there is at least one or a small number of independent variables predicting the outcome of interest (Goertz and Hewitt, 2006: 213).

Yet in many instances in politics and specifically in public policy and administration we cannot use this scheme because the independent variable is less visible, for example, in research on paradigmatic change, implementation gaps, or gradual policy change. In such cases, researchers find themselves looking for a needle in a haystack when trying to identify the positive and then the negative cases.

One way to overcome this challenge is to use a different case selection procedure. First, identify the entire relevant population based on the value of the independent variables and only then distinguish between positive and negative cases (Shpaizman, 2017). The relevant population may be identified by applying the possibility principle (Goertz and Hewitt, 2006). This principle can be useful because in some cases causes can be more easily traced than outcomes.

Applying the possibility principle requires a large dataset of the entire universe of cases (e.g., all the countries in the world) from which relevant cases can be drawn. In policy research, we can use CAP because it represents a

broad population of policy cases. CAP data can be “cased” (Ragin and Becker, 1992) in different ways. For example, each subtopic in each project can be seen as one case (elementary education in Germany, in France, and so on). Moreover, given the data’s long time span, each subtopic in each project can be divided into several cases based on the time frame (elementary education in Germany from 1950 to 1970). Some subtopics can act as more than one case. For example, the subtopic “childcare” includes information on policies regarding childcare and parental leave, and so can be divided into two cases in each project. Alternatively, several subtopics can be combined into one case; for example, air and water pollution. Consequently, CAP data can be sorted into hundreds of cases.

In addition, each observation includes not only information on the policy topic and subtopic but also contextual institutional and political information, which can be used to identify the presence or absence of various independent variables.

The usefulness of CAP for identifying the relevant population of cases can be illustrated using the outcome of policy drift. Drift is a change in the policy outcome (its operation on the ground) without significant change in the policy itself. It takes place when there is a gap between the existing policy and reality due to changes in the policy environment (e.g., demographic or technological changes), and lack of policy adjustment to these changes. As a result, while the policy remains stable, its outcome, such as its distributional effect, changes (Hacker, 2004; Hacker et al., 2015). For example, despite changes in the labor market, Congress did not adjust the US healthcare policy for many years. Consequently, existing policies did not address the new needs and the number of uninsured Americans increased (Hacker, 2004).

Positive cases of drift are extremely hard to identify without *ex ante* familiarization with the policy dynamics of each case over a long period. This is because drift occurs through non-decision and inaction and so we cannot observe it directly (Rocco and Thurston, 2014). As a result, to the best of my knowledge, there is no comparative research examining drift across fields and countries, and most works focus on a single national setting or policy field (Clegg, 2007; Hacker, 2004).

In order to identify relevant cases of drift using the possibility principle, we must have a theory of the independent variables leading to drift. Existing research has found that drift is more likely when the environment in which the policy is embedded is changed. In addition, the rules underlining the policy are precise or rigid, making it difficult to adjust the policy internally. Lastly, drift can result from failure to adjust the policy to reality due to veto players’ success in preventing enactment (Hacker et al., 2015).

CAP cannot identify changes in the environment or rule rigidity. The only independent variable it can identify is when efforts to update the policy are

blocked. Using CAP, we can recognize attempts to update the policy as indicated by the number of proposed bills on a specific subject, as well as the result of a successful blocking of policy update as indicated by the percentage of bills that fail to become law. In order to identify the relevant population of cases, the success rates of bills becoming law in all CAP subtopics in a specific project should be examined. Relevant cases of drift may be those in which the success rates of bills are the lowest compared to each country's/state's/unit's average success rate. Positive cases of drift will be those where a change in policy impact took place (Shpaizman, 2017).

The suggested method can be applied between and within all CAP projects. However, for the purpose of this chapter, it has been applied to the United States and Spain. This is first and foremost because these two projects have data series on bills and laws. In addition, most research on drift has examined US policy (Barnes, 2008; Béland, 2007; Hacker, 2004); therefore, using the US data enables us to validate the suggested method against findings from the existing research. Lastly, Spain was chosen as an example of a parliamentary democracy, since drift has been found to be prominent in parliamentary systems as well (Clegg, 2007; Gildiner, 2007).

### 33.2.1 *Drift in the United States*

To identify relevant cases of drift in the United States, the bill success rates on each subtopic from 1970, when drift became prominent (Hacker 2004), was examined. The US average success rate of bills becoming law is 15 percent (Krutz, 2005). A low success rate has been determined as less than 1 percent. The identified possible cases of drift can be seen in Table 33.1.

**Table 33.1.** Relevant cases of drift identified using the US CAP

The policy case	Laws/Bills success rate
Drug coverage and costs	0.56%
Long term care	0.8%
Childcare	0.49%
Taxation	0.93%
Labor unions	0.65%
White-collar crime	0.43%
Elderly assistance (including social security)	0.7%
Minority discrimination	0.7%
Rural housing	0.74%
Low-income housing assistance	0.91%
Elderly and handicapped housing	0.28%
Interest rates	0.3%

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—United States

Reviewing the existing literature reveals that some of the cases identified using CAP are also categorized as drift in the literature. For example, CAP has identified prescription drug coverage (0.56 percent success rate) and long-term care (0.8 percent) as two possible cases of drift. Hacker (2004) supports this classification. In his study of US social policy, he demonstrates that the failure to add prescription drug coverage to Medicare and include long-term care in the program resulted in policy drift that shifted the risk of healthcare costs from the government to individuals. CAP has identified employee relations and labor unions (0.65 percent) and taxation (0.93 percent) as additional cases of drift. Similarly, Hacker and Pierson (2010) discuss how attempts to update labor union policy due to changes in the labor market were blocked by employers and conservative Congress members. As a result, there was a significant decrease in union membership. In addition, they also found that the Republicans blocked any attempt to update the taxation policy, and thus contributed to growing inequality.

### 33.2.2 *Drift in Spain*

To identify relevant cases of drift in Spain, the ratio between the bills (suggested by the legislators and by the cabinet) and the laws (organic and ordinary laws) between 1982 and 2011 (the period of available data) was examined in each subtopic. The number of veto points in Spain is lower than in the United States. Consequently, the average success rate as seen in the CAP data is 53 percent. A low success rate was established as less than 20 percent. The identified possible cases of drift in Spain are seen in Table 33.2.

Reviewing the existing literature reveals that some of the identified relevant cases of drift were also identified as such in previous research. CAP identified childcare as a possible case of policy drift with 13 percent success rate. Research on childcare policy in Spain found that despite the increase in

**Table 33.2.** Relevant cases of drift identified using the Spain CAP

The policy case	Laws/Bills success rate
Gender discrimination	15%
Right to privacy	19%
Drinking water	15%
Low-income assistance	0%
Assistance to elderly	7%
Childcare	13%
Urban development	0%
Government appointments	19%

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Spain

women's participation in the labor market, Spain's childcare policy lags behind other EU countries. This, among other things, is a result of issue preferences of the political parties, labor unions, and conservative civil society organizations that block policymaking (Bianculli and Jordana, 2013; León, 2007; Valiente, 2003). CAP has also identified assistance to elderly and social security as a possible case of drift (7 percent). This corresponds to studies finding that the financial situation of the Spanish social security system is worsening and that policymakers face high barriers when trying to reform existing policy. In fact, only in 2013, after many failed attempts, was the Spanish government able to pass pension reform (Boldrin, Jiménez-Martín, and Peracchi, 1999; Gruber and Wise, 2000). Lastly, CAP identified gender discrimination (15 percent) as a possible case of drift. Research has found that the gender wage gap has increased, especially for highly educated women, that there are few women serving on boards of directors, and that there are significant barriers to gender equality due to conservative policy legacies (de Cabo, Gimeno, and Escot, 2011; Pena-Boquete, 2009; Rica et al. 2008).

As seen in Tables 33.1 and 33.2, the number of possible cases of drift in the United States is higher than in Spain. This is not surprising given the US institutional system and its multiple veto points (Tsebelis, 1995). In addition, it seems that the actors which cause the policy to drift are different in the two countries. In the United States the minority party is usually the one favoring drift (Hacker and Pierson, 2010). In Spain, however, it seems that the minority party is the one trying to update the policy, and the majority party is the one causing it to drift (as evident from the many parliamentary bills that fail to become laws). This opens a new direction for further research on the nature of policy drift in different political settings. Lastly, assistance to the elderly and childcare were found in both countries as possible cases of drift. Although the outcome in both countries is the same (drift), the conditions are most likely different due to the difference in the political and institutional settings. An in-depth analysis of these two cases in the context of policy drift can shed more light on the conditions for drift's evolution and maintenance.

### 33.2.3 *Limitations*

Although CAP is a comprehensive and exhaustive system, it cannot identify all relevant cases, first, because it cannot identify all independent variables. Yet one should remember that some independent variables are more important than others, and therefore identifying certain independent variables may be more productive in identifying relevant cases. Second, its coding procedure may miss some significant cases. The coding scheme is based on already known topics. As a result, if a new issue rises on the agenda, it takes time before it is identified as such, and until then, it is coded under already known

categories (Jones, 2015). Moreover, when new issues cannot be coded under any existing subtopic, and when there are not enough observations to justify creating a new subtopic, they will be coded under the subtopic “other,” which is included in every major topic. Similarly, due to the mutual-exclusiveness characteristic, when a specific observation equally addresses two subtopic categories, it will be coded under the category “general,” also available under each major topic. Some of these general observations are thus not coded according to their substantive content. Although there are not that many observations in the “general” or “other” categories, these can turn out to be significant.

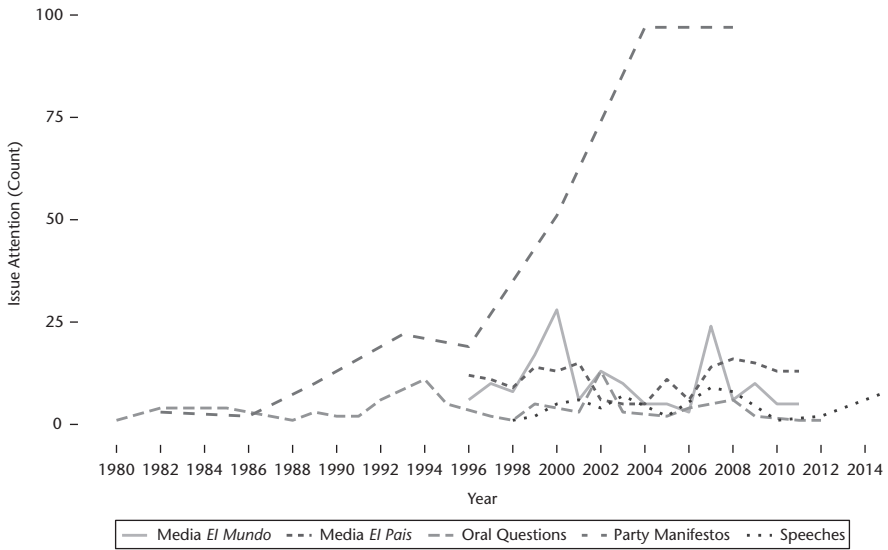
### 33.3 CAP as a Tool for Familiarization with the Case of Interest

After identifying the relevant population and distinguishing between the positive and the negative cases, the researcher selects the specific cases of interest, usually the more important ones (George and Bennett, 2005; Goertz and Mahoney, 2012). Next, the researcher must obtain the contextual information on the case and familiarize herself with it so that she can formulate the general questions, the data requirements, and the expectations from the future gathered evidence. The familiarization is often based on previous research or interviews (George and Bennett, 2005). Relying on existing research can be insufficient when the topic of interest is understudied. Interviews can also be unsatisfactory when the researcher is not familiar with the issue in question and thus, finds it hard to ask the questions that will provide her with the relevant information.

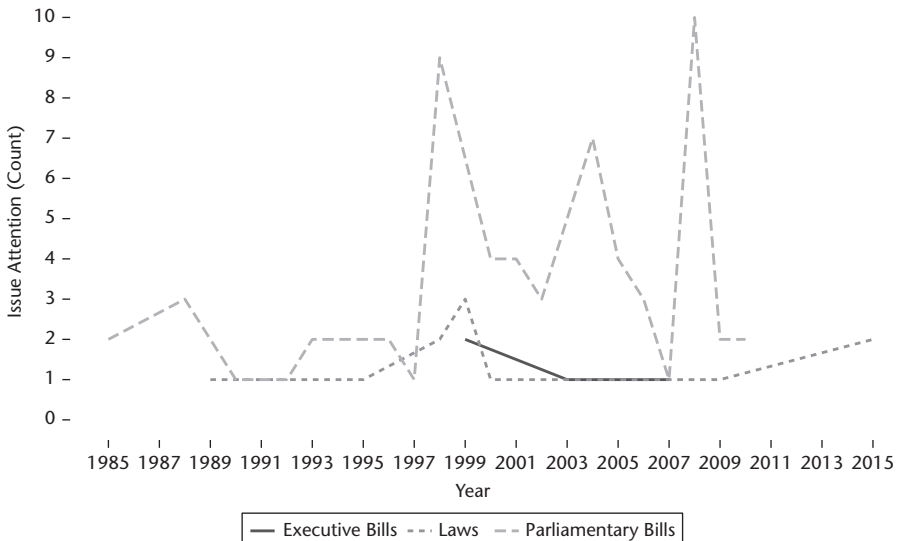
CAP’s trend analysis tool can help the researcher familiarizing herself with the case of interest and provide guidelines for future interviews. The trends tool can assist the researcher to narrow the time span based on the researcher’s interests. For instance, there may be a period when more/less attention was given to a specific issue, or when there was a venue shift from one policy arena to another (e.g., from the legislator to the court), or when policymakers moved from declarations and proposals as seen, for example, in executive speeches and bills, to action, as seen in laws or budget changes. Furthermore, it can also help the researcher to formulate the research questions by narrowing the possible explanations and highlighting the puzzles.

#### 33.3.1 *Childcare Policy in Spain*

For instance, let us assume that a researcher would like to examine the mechanisms that prevent Western countries from adopting a comprehensive childcare policy (a publicly financed universal childcare system for children



**Figure 33.1.** Issue attention for childcare policy in Spain (count)  
 Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Spain



**Figure 33.2.** Issue attention for childcare policy in Spain in legislation (count)  
 Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Spain



under the age of six). One country found to lag behind in childcare policy is Spain (León, 2007). Using the trend analysis tool as seen in Figure 33.1, we find that the issue of childcare appeared on the agenda at the end of the 1990s and it has remained at a relatively high level since. This is evident from media attention, the number of bills proposed, party manifestos, and parliamentary questions. Therefore, the researcher will most likely focus on that period. In addition, the researcher could also infer that the existing childcare policy is not a result of a low level of attention. However, when comparing the different data series, we find that the increase in issue attention has not been evident throughout the series. Most of the proposed bills were parliamentary (forty-one) and not raised in the cabinet (four), and there has been relatively little legislation (nine laws) (see Figure 33.2). Consequently, the researcher can focus on the barriers that prevented the issue attention from being translated into policymaking.

### 33.4 CAP as a Tool for Gathering Evidence

Following familiarization with the case of interest, the researcher turns to the actual analysis. A within-case analysis is conducted as detective work, in which the researcher gathers evidence (empirical fingerprints left on a case) to increase her confidence in the presence of the suggested cause/mechanisms for the outcome of interest (Beach and Pedersen, 2013; George and Bennett, 2005). Four types of evidence can be gathered: (1) trace evidence—evidence in which mere existence provides proof that something exists; (2) sequence evidence—evidence that demonstrates the chronology of events; (3) pattern evidence—evidence that demonstrates some statistical pattern in the evidence; and (4) account evidence—evidence based on the content of the material (Beach and Pedersen, 2013). Evidence is gathered after predictions are made regarding the empirical fingerprints the activities/entities will leave in a case (George and Bennett, 2005).

CAP contains a rich body of empirical material, making it possible to gather all four types of evidence. Other than pattern evidence that is used in many CAP quantitative works, scholars can use the content of the source material and the long time span to identify account, trace, and sequence evidence.

Gathering evidence is insufficient for a within-case analysis, because the researcher has to evaluate whether the collected material is sufficient and reliable enough for the causal inference (Beach and Pedersen, 2013, 2014; George and Bennett, 2005). CAP is especially well suited for this purpose because it enables a triangulation of evidence from various sources and types. In order to illustrate the type of evidence that can be gathered using CAP, I will use the case of childcare policy in the United States.

### 33.4.1 *Lock-in Effect in Childcare Policy in the United States*

The United States does not have a federally funded comprehensive childcare policy. Its policy is composed of two major policy tools: first, various tax exemptions, and second, subsidized childcare for low-income families (Solomon-Cohen, 2001). Based on my familiarization with the case, I would argue that the lack of a comprehensive policy in the United States is a result (among other reasons) of a lock-in effect according to which, regardless of partisan identity, policymakers almost exclusively consider only those policy tools already in action (assistance to low-income families and tax exemptions), and ignore other policy solutions. In order to demonstrate the lock-in effect, I should find evidence demonstrating that (1) policymakers consider only or mostly the existing solutions, (2) in the past there were other proposed solutions that were removed from the agenda, and (3) partisan affiliation does not affect the proposed solutions.

The evidence presented here is taken from three CAP series in order to enable triangulation: bills, State of the Union addresses, and party platforms from 1974 until the present.<sup>1</sup> The types of evidence gathered were: account evidence based on the content of the texts, sequence evidence, which examined the evolution of the suggested policy solutions over time, and pattern evidence examining the frequency of the proposed solutions.

*Congressional bills:* The content of all Congressional bills from 1974 under the subtopic childcare was examined (excluding bills on parental leave) (N = 500). Based on the policy tools suggested in the bills they were distinguished into four types: tax exemption bills (N = 236), assistance to low-income families (N = 178), federally financed comprehensive childcare programs (N = 11), other (mostly concrete regulations on the quality of childcare) (N = 75). Based on the frequency of each of the types we can see that tax exemptions and assistance to low-income families were almost the exclusive solutions proposed. In addition, the analysis reveals that policymakers were familiar with other solutions as seen in the bills on federally funded comprehensive childcare services or suggestions to encourage public-private partnerships. Both parties saw the two policy tools as plausible; 43 percent of Democrats' bills included tax exemptions (compared to 54 percent of the Republican bills), and 34 percent of the Republicans bills included assistance to low-income families (compared to 37 percent of the Democratic bills).

*State of the Union Address:* The policy tools suggested in the addresses from 1983 (the year childcare was first mentioned in the address) were examined. The analysis found that since the end of the 1980s regardless of the party in power, tax exemptions are the main policy tool suggested. For instance, President H.W. Bush stated in 1989:

I believe we should help working families cope with the burden of childcare. I support a new childcare tax credit that will aim our efforts at exactly those families without discriminating against mothers who choose to stay at home.

(Bush, 1989)

Sixteen years later President Barak Obama suggested the same type of solution:

In today's economy, when having both parents in the workforce is an economic necessity for many families, we need affordable, high-quality childcare more than ever... And that's why my plan will make quality childcare more available and more affordable for every middle-class and low-income family with young children in America—by creating more slots and a new tax cut of up to \$3,000 per child, per year. (Obama, 2015)

*Party platforms:* An analysis of the content of party platforms of both the Republican and the Democratic parties revealed that while during 1970s to the 1980s the Democrats suggested federally funded comprehensive childcare and this idea was removed from the agenda in the mid-1980s. Since then the only proposed solution has been tax-credit expansions. As for the Republicans, in the 1970s to the 1980s they proposed providing financial incentives for private community providers to expand childcare services. From the 1990s however, the main solution has been expanding existing tax exemptions or suggesting new ones.

A comparison between the findings in all three series reveals the same pattern. During the 1970s to the 1980s there were different solutions for the problem of lack of childcare. From the mid-1980s regardless of party affiliation all policy-makers have suggested the same policy tools, mostly tax exemptions.

### 33.4.2 *Limitations*

CAP provides data on issue attention. As such, it does not address the policy tools, policy targets, issue definitions, and other dimensions examined in policy research (Jones, 2015). This should be taken into account when using CAP for familiarization with the case of interest. For instance, the number of laws does not imply their importance since some laws are more significant than others. Therefore, the use of CAP's trends tool for gaining acquaintance with the case of interest should be used with care and re-evaluated against other data/research. In addition, in some series, the information is coded based on the observation's heading or abbreviation. However, in some cases two observations with the same heading (e.g., bills) can address different policy targets or tools, and the same policy tools will operate differently in different countries. Therefore, when gathering and evaluating evidence, the

researcher should examine the source material, paying specific attention to the context of the policy in each country.

### 33.5 Conclusion

This chapter has aimed to encourage more qualitative scholars to use CAP in their research by suggesting several ways in which CAP can be useful for qualitative case-oriented research. It has suggested looking at CAP as a pool of possible policy cases and as an archival system that provides the rich material needed for the analysis. In addition, it has also demonstrated that CAP trends tool could assist the researcher to familiarize herself with the case and help her to formulate the specific research questions.

The chapter demonstrated more generic ways in which CAP can be used in a within-case analysis. In practice, scholars use CAP in more concrete situations, for instance, when illustrating shadow cases or when looking for the presence of specific evidence such as laws, bills, or hearings. However, the rich and high-quality CAP data provides many opportunities for scholars to be creative not only when looking for the empirical fingerprints in a specific case, but also when trying to overcome more general challenges that exist in policy research, as in identifying a less visible population of cases. Qualitative policy scholars should further examine CAP as a methodological tool and suggest ways for overcoming other policy research challenges, for instance, identifying latent processes such as keeping issues off the agenda. Broadening the use of CAP data beyond quantitative research can not only contribute to a better understanding of causal mechanisms in the policy process but also increase the methodological pluralism in the discipline.

### Note

1. The evidence presented is only that retrieved using CAP and does not represent all the evidence gathered to demonstrate the presence of the lock-in effect.

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