

Advancing the Study of Comparative Public Policy

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Throughout the preceding chapters, the contributors to this book have explained the shared methodology that characterizes the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) and have explored some of the policy-related, institutional, and comparative questions that can be addressed using our approach and infrastructure. This volume merely scratches the surface, however, in addressing the range of practical and theoretical questions that can be examined through the shared resources of the CAP. In this concluding chapter we assess the contributions and possibilities of the CAP.

35.1 A Vast Infrastructure for the Study of Comparative Public Policy

To date, the comparative study of public policy can be considered still to be in its infancy. Unlike the comparative study of voting, partisanship, attitudes, or elections, most comparative studies of public policy typically have been relatively small in scope: either just a few countries compared, or a single policy domain (often the “old standards” of the welfare state: pensions, health, or different forms of poverty assistance). As with any research approach where the underlying issues are highly complex and the available data are limited, attention often focuses on peculiarities and idiosyncrasies of particular country- or institution-specific situations that generate a given outcome or cross-national difference. But perhaps we see these trees because we lack the perspective to see the forest. Of course, detailed observations of an individual policy are worthwhile, just as a botanist would benefit from studies of an individual

species of tree. But it is also useful to understand the structure of the forest. Understanding one enhances the understanding of the other.

Deeply detailed analyses of individual cases will remain a staple of the comparative approach to the study of public policy, as well they should. But so far the vast majority of research on public policy has concentrated on individual policy fields. The real challenge is to embed these detailed comparisons into the larger patterns and broad categories into which they might fit. For example, French and Italian voters may relate to their respective political parties in different and sometimes idiosyncratic ways, but they can still be understood with some common characteristics similar across multi-party systems. By the same token, each advanced democracy has faced growing pressures on their healthcare systems as costs have risen and technologies have advanced, on pensions as the population has aged, and on immigration systems as the numbers demanding entry have increased. Those of us involved in the CAP seek to allow scholars of comparative public policy to do what scholars in other fields of comparative politics have long been able to do: observe both the broadest patterns according to policy domain, institutional design, and political system, as well as explore the detailed and historically contingent development of public policy within individual systems. Doing both can only be done if we have the resources and perspective to see the broad patterns.

As each of the chapters in this volume has made clear, the CAP provides the opportunity to ask the same question in multiple contexts. With close attention to the differences across national systems, we nonetheless can get equivalent indicators about such basic elements as the legislative process, executive actions, spending, and media coverage. And with our consistent coding of policy topics, we know that what is called “endangered species protection” in one country can be easily identified in another. Our primary goal is to reduce the barriers to systematic comparison. This consistency enables several types of comparison: over time (as our databases typically cover many decades of political history); across policy domains (as all our projects are comprehensive, covering all actions of public policy from agriculture to defense, economics, foreign affairs, and everything in between); and across countries and political systems (the CAP network has over twenty national teams and continues to grow).

Over twenty years ago Frank Baumgartner and Beth Leech (1998) reviewed the US literature on interest groups and lobbying and noted that the literature was essentially based on case studies. While each individual study may have been well done, they noted, the accumulated literature was arguably less than the sum of its parts. This drawback prevailed because each study was *designed specifically* to be different from all previous studies: authors purposefully emphasized different aspects of lobbying strategies that led to success, for

example, so that they could claim a theoretical innovation as well as an observational one. After all, a single new case confirming old theoretical perspectives while adding nothing to the theory would not be published, nor would the authors be recognized as leading scholars in the field. Professional norms, in effect, demanded incomparability, ensuring that the literature could not accumulate as one might hope. Baumgartner and Leech argued that interest-group scholars needed to find a way to build shared infrastructure, and with the CAP we are making the same argument here. By sharing resources, we reduce the costs of comparisons and we make possible what had previously not been feasible at all.

Of course, scholars cannot merely replicate studies in new domains; there will always be theoretical innovations, disputes, and advances. But to the extent that a broad community of scholars can be built who share some common resources, we promote shared knowledge and theory is likely to grow more quickly than if we each build our own case study. Such, in a nutshell, is the motivation of the CAP.

Comparative studies of public policy are usually limited to clearly circumscribed policy areas: healthcare, energy, immigration, employment, pensions, foreign trade, and so on. This domain restriction is intended to control for policy-specific constraints and dynamics, as well as for the way in which policies interact with country-specific variables and institutional setups. In some cases, such as for welfare policies, entire academic communities have emerged to address the difficulties of comparison. It is a way of holding constant at least some variables in exceedingly complex contexts. Similar attempts exist in other areas, but tend to federate a smaller research community. Our hope is to allow these scholarly communities to communicate and to allow individual scholars or teams to increase the number of observations in their work.

Just as scholars of the welfare state, pensions, or energy policy typically work in only one or a few policy domains, those interested in the policy process often engage in only the most limited comparisons: perhaps two countries, rarely more than a dozen of the advanced democracies. Some scholars of the developing world have used larger research designs to explore such things as the degree of institutionalization in the policy process in a relatively large sample of countries (Scartascini and Tommasi, 2012; Shugart and Haggard, 2001), or the conditions under which political leaders deliver private or public goods and policies (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2005). However, we are aware of no studies of advanced industrial democracies with a similar focus on such important elements of the policy process as opinion-policy responsiveness (but for smaller comparisons see Soroka and Wlezien, 2010 or, on the topic of negativity, Soroka, 2014). Similarly, studies of the dynamics of how various institutions of government interact with each other have mostly been limited to a single country at a time (see, e.g., Baumgartner and Jones, 2015;

Chaqués-Bonafont et al., 2015; John et al., 2013), but some scholars, drawing from our datasets, have taken a different approach: a similar set of policy issues compared across a larger number of countries and political systems (e.g., Engeli et al., 2012).

We have been able to address some generalizable issues by using the databases of the CAP. In one paper (Jones et al., 2009) we postulated a “general law of public budgeting”—that the annual distributions of changes in spending follows, inevitably and in every country, a “fat tailed” distribution because of the overwhelming complexity of decision-making and the vast array of public policy concerns that affect every modern government. Using data from the CAP, we looked at patterns of budgeting in twelve different budgetary systems in seven nations. In that same year we published another comparison of many different policymaking processes in three countries (the United States, Belgium, Denmark), showing similar and predictable increases in the institutional friction associated with monitoring functions of government, law-making and policymaking, and budgeting (see Baumgartner et al., 2009). More recently, a team took the budgeting idea more broadly and compared the distribution of budget changes in democratic systems and in autocracies (see Baumgartner et al., 2017). These studies were very much “inside” the CAP, in that the authors were assessing questions derived from the punctuated equilibrium perspective and were using data from the national projects described here. The autocracy article added some further breadth and pushed beyond the “usual suspects” of the advanced industrial world.

CAP has progressively also included media data and has studied the influence of the media on policy agenda-setting. While much of the early work was essentially limited to single-country case studies, this has recently changed. A paper by Vliegenthart and colleagues (2016a) has illustrated how media attention may influence the focus of attention of parliamentary debates. A related piece (Vliegenthart et al., 2016b) shows how the media may filter the influence of protest on parliamentary debates, by relaying certain protests more than others. While debates do not equate political action or public policy, of course, the media thus have a very sizeable and concrete effect on the debates that may lead to the adoption of policy.

Our hope and expectation is that the CAP will continue to grow and our own members will of course continue to be active in the analysis of the data we have been collecting. However, more important than that is the multiplication of studies using the data as a starting point by scholars fully disconnected with any of our work, both intellectually and in terms of scholarly networks. By making the data freely available, we hope to reduce the cost of comparative analysis of public policy across the board. Logically, the subsidy to research inherent in the CAP should lead to more, bigger, and better studies. Of course, bigger by itself is not necessarily better. But certainly we can hope

that more scholars will take the data we provide as a starting point for a variety of questions that can now be addressed in a larger scale and fully comparative manner.

35.2 Setting Standards for Collecting and Assembling Comparative Policy Data

The main strengths of the CAP have been outlined throughout this volume. The chapters highlight how CAP would contribute to the emergence of a more powerful research agenda in comparative public policy. The first reason has to do with the transparency of the data collection process. Building on the experience of early projects, CAP has been able to avoid many of the dangers and errors that have bedeviled many other comparative projects. From the very beginning, CAP has been a largely decentralized project, building on the research goals of national research teams. While this loose structure could have been a disadvantage, making coordination more difficult, it ensured that national teams had an independent and autonomous interest in the continued success of the project.

Despite this apparently dispersed data collection process, we have developed a single standard for categorizing all public policies in a hierarchical taxonomy that has proved workable in every country. The US project was the first in chronological order, and when the Danish team sought to apply the US codes in their country, a number of anomalies became immediately apparent. With time and the development of many projects, we have established a standard applicable to all. In the interest of maximum use to all audiences, most national projects also provide a country-specific codebook with some differences from the international classification and thereby many projects offer distinctions that seem indispensable for national experts but not generalizable to other systems. This coordination on the basis of subject matter for each political activity is the most important defining feature of the CAP. As explained in the introductory section, coordination meetings have taken place on a regular basis since 2007, leading common standards, similar data-collection procedures, and intercoder reliability tests (see Bevan in this volume).

For a long time, many similar efforts have restricted data access or provided data in raw format only. While this has changed in recent years, CAP stands out in its will to make all data easily available. Access has taken several forms. During the first years, national projects have maintained dedicated websites with spreadsheets giving access to some of the data. Increasingly, though, there was a will to conform to a common Master Codebook, beyond existing national specificities. More importantly, this led to the creation of dedicated website that allows for easy data retrieval, of course, but which allows also for

much more complex operations. The new website allows for selective retrieval, limiting data to certain types of agendas, certain topic codes, certain countries, and so on. Its online visualization tool, moreover, allows researchers to explore possible relations or dynamics in the data and thus to draw preliminary conclusions concerning the interest of a given research project.

35.3 The Future of Comparative Public Policy Studies

The CAP allows scholars to look across countries, across time, across institutional venues of politics, across media systems, and across policy domains in ways that have not previously been possible. The data are all made available at the micro-level, meaning that scholars can easily re-tool them to fit many needs, even if those have nothing to do with the original intent of the compilers of the databases. While most of the uses of the CAP thus far have been oriented toward quantitative usages, the databases themselves should be used for qualitative studies as well; they can provide the “first cut” before a deeper dive into the intricacies of policy development in a particular area, and they can provide the context to situate a detailed case study into its larger environment (as illustrated by Shpaizman in this volume).

More important than what the CAP currently allows might be what it could allow in the future. By moving from a single county to a growing international infrastructure, questions that were once addressed within a single national system now become amenable to systematic comparisons, rendering national structures variables rather than givens. We provide a few examples here.

How do different bureaucratic structures, media systems, partisan systems, federalism, active/reactive judiciaries, electoral systems affect the policy process? We have the opportunity to assess systematic variation in how various institutional structures affect the policy process. And of course, there is no single “policy process” but rather many elements of interest in considering the roles of interest groups, legislatures, executives, journalists, campaigners, and other actors in the policy process.

What do all political systems appear to have in common? No modern state fails to be involved in healthcare, and yet it would be hypothetically possible for a state to leave that to the private market. What are the common features of all governments? We literally have not addressed this issue at all. But we could begin. What issues are addressed in some countries but not in others? What contrasts can we draw between those issues that are commonly addressed in every country and that smaller set of issues that concern political leaders in some countries but not others?

What has been the range of responses to common public policy challenges? Is that range wider in some policy domains and more constrained in others?

What issue-characteristics explain the degree of cross-national variance in response? What system-level characteristics explain the variation in responses to a single policy challenge? Every Western democracy faces a powerful challenge to its pension system as an aging population moves increasingly toward retirement, and fewer are working. Every country faces increased demographic diversity in its schools, greater concern with environmental sustainability, and an employment threat from robots. What has been the timing of these common issues on the agendas of different states, and what has been the range of response?

How do elections and party leaders translate concrete policy challenges into the ideological structure of debate? Any review of the myriad challenges facing a modern government can quickly be summarized as overwhelming, complex, and bewildering. And yet partisan political leaders compete for control of government based on policy programs that are supposed to suggest a way forward in all those areas. How is the diversity of policy attention translated into the partisan structure of politics?

How do different type of media or media systems publicize the policy process and how does this affect it? Are there certain media systems that have a greater influence over policymaking or does it depend on specific issues? Does it vary over time?

How do citizens respond to policy failures and successes of their governments? Do they even realize that there are successes and failures? What models should we propose for evaluating the role of the citizen in public policy debates?

How have policy dynamics affected/been affected by partisan turnover? How do the policy agendas in those countries with historically stable party systems differ from those with greater “churning” in the party system? If we leave democratic polities, which issues do autocrats address? Who is reporting on the unaddressed problems given the likelihood of repercussions? Are autocratic leaders addressing fewer problems concerning the public and focusing more on issues that enable regime stability?

We purposefully conclude our review of the CAP with a series of questions. We have provided a tool. We hope that others will use it to address these and a wide variety of other puzzles.

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