

(Non)Comparative Politics in Britain

Ingrid van Biezen and Daniele Caramani

University of Birmingham

This article compares the state of the art of comparative politics in Britain with the US and continental Europe. Three main traditions are distinguished: a narrative single-country tradition, in which comparative politics is understood as the study of foreign countries, a methodology-oriented tradition, which is concerned with the development of the techniques of comparison, and an analytical comparative tradition, which understands comparative politics as a combination of substance and method. It is argued that comparative politics in Britain is dominated by single-country studies, while the methodology-oriented and the analytical comparative traditions are more strongly developed in the US and continental Europe respectively. A comparative analysis of research interests and teaching provision furthermore demonstrates that, in Britain, comparative politics is an underdeveloped sub-field in terms of both teaching and research. This currently results in the need to import comparativists trained outside the British system in order to sustain the discipline. The article concludes by stressing the potential for the development of comparative politics in Britain.

Introduction

Comparative politics occupies an ambiguous position as a sub-discipline in political science, because it cannot be defined 'strictly in terms of a single substantive field of study' (Mair, 1996, p. 309). The debate on the relevance of comparative politics as a separate sub-field has been discussed at length elsewhere and does not need to concern us (e.g. Dalton, 1991; Keman, 1993). It is sufficient to note that we endorse the view that comparative politics constitutes a sub-discipline of political science in its own right. As Peter Hall recently asserted, '[n]o respectable department of political science would be without scholars of comparative politics' (Hall, 2004, p. 1).

Following Peter Mair (1996; see also Rose, 1991), we understand comparative politics as defined by a combination of *substance* (the study of countries and their political systems, actors and processes) and *method* (identifying and explaining differences and similarities between cases following established rules and standards of comparative analysis and using concepts that are applicable in more than one case or country). In this article we review the state of the discipline of comparative politics in Britain. In doing so, we adopt a comparative perspective, contrasting Britain with university systems in other countries. We argue that, as a sub-discipline of political science, comparative politics in Britain is underdeveloped both in terms of substance (because of a prevailing conception of comparative politics as the study of the politics of foreign countries, often without any substantial comparison) and method (because of a predominantly narrative and historical tradition and a general aversion to methodology). To support this argument, we



provide a snapshot of the state of the discipline in Britain in numbers, comparing it with the US and continental Europe.¹

The discipline of comparative politics

Broadly speaking, we can distinguish three different traditions in comparative politics. The first tradition is oriented towards the study of *single countries*, representing a notion of comparative politics as the study of foreign countries. As such it reflects the understanding of comparative politics in its formative years in the US, where it simply meant the study of individual political systems outside the US, often in isolation from one another and involving little, if any, comparison. This is how comparative politics used to be understood in Anglo-American political science in particular, although the US has to some extent moved towards a more methodological approach. In Britain it is the single-country tradition that continues to dominate the field of comparative politics. Hugh Berrington and Pippa Norris (1988), for example, include the study of single countries when arguing that comparative politics is the largest single specialism in British political science.

British departments of political science would typically include individual country experts – of French politics, German politics, Italian politics, and so on – but relatively few scholars of comparative politics (see also below). Gordon Smith recalls that, when interviewed for a lectureship at the LSE in 1972, he was brusquely interrupted when he aimed to seek the interest of the selection committee in a comparative approach to European politics: ‘Mr Smith’, he was reminded, ‘we are interviewing you for a post in German politics’ (Smith, 1997, p. 157). In this sense, relatively little has changed in the last few decades. Comparative politics still typically involves single-country studies. Among British political scientists, Vernon Bogdanor (1999, p. 148) observes, there are no Almonds, Deutsches or Eastons, nor Lipsets and Rokkans, Lijpharts or Sartoris. With few exceptions, British scholars tend to have received international recognition for their expertise in a particular country, while much of the discipline continues to be premised on the assumption that the knowledge of at least one foreign country is a precondition for comparative analysis.

This country-by-country approach is also reflected in the definition of comparative politics for teaching purposes, with a strong reliance on courses on the politics of individual countries and a predominance of textbooks with single-country chapters, providing in-depth knowledge about the political history and institutions of particular countries (although often suffering from a large-country bias), but offering relatively little in terms of knowledge of the methods of comparison or conceptual frameworks and theories.

To be sure, studies of single countries can have a useful purpose for comparative analysis. Valuable research can constructively straddle the boundaries between case studies and comparative analysis, whereby the comparative relevance of the case study lies in the fact that it generates new hypotheses, contributes to the formulation of new theories or disproves established theories (Lijphart, 1971). The single-country tradition, however, tends to be geared towards thick description and often fails to use generic concepts that can also be applied in other contexts, thus providing essentially ideographic accounts and explanations. Studies in this tradition

typically focus on a single country or case, or at best provide cross-national (as opposed to analytically comparative) analyses, which successively examine one country after another without an overarching framework aimed at uncovering universal trends or relationships. While some of this work has comparative merit, in itself it is seldom comparative.

The second tradition is *methodology-oriented*. This tradition focuses on the method of comparison and is principally concerned with establishing rules and standards of comparative analysis. It problematises the act of comparison, which may seem intuitively unproblematic and natural, by concerning itself with the question of precisely how comparative analyses should be carried out in order to enhance their potential for the cumulation of scientific knowledge. The origins of a concern with the method of comparison can be traced to Aristotle; in its modern form it is more closely associated with the 'comparative method' inspired by John Stuart Mill, subsequently developed by Arend Lijphart (1971 and 1975) and elaborated elsewhere (e.g. Przeworski and Teune, 1970; Ragin, 1987).

At the heart of the methodology-oriented tradition is a concern with the potential of comparative politics to provide causal explanations of political phenomena. Oriented towards establishing the correlation or association between key variables, the relatively limited number of cases available to the comparativist inevitably contributed to the dilemma of 'too many variables, too few cases' for assessing the nature of the relationship between variables with a sufficient amount of validity or reasonable degree of reliability. Part of the methodology-oriented tradition is concerned with the issue of concept formation, a field of inquiry in the social sciences closely associated with the work of Giovanni Sartori (1970 and 1984). The broader questions centre on the problems of comparability, the extent to which concepts can 'travel' from one context to another and the problems of conceptual stretching (see also Collier and Levitsky, 1997; Collier and Mahon, 1993). A second strand deals with methodological issues such as the reliability of measurements and indicators, the rules for case selection, the development of probabilistic explanatory models and so on, as well as the further development of the method of comparison in new directions (e.g. Ragin, 2000). The methodology-oriented tradition has produced a body of literature that aims to establish rigorous rules for comparison, often based on statistical or logical techniques. While impressive for its methodological and statistical sophistication, however, work in this tradition may run the risk of elevating technique over substance.

With US scholars (or, indeed, US-educated continental Europeans) often at the forefront of the development of new and innovative techniques and methods of inquiry, this tradition in comparative politics originated in, and is typically associated with, the US. This is not only reflected in the type of scholarly enterprise but also in the undergraduate and graduate education of the American university system, which has a strong emphasis on methodological training. In Britain, by contrast, the attention to methodology in comparative politics is relatively weak, in part because of a general hostility to the methodological dimension of political analysis. Indeed, for Britain, we would doubt the accuracy of the assertion by Goodin and Klingemann (1996, p. 15) that 'virtually all political scientists nowadays can make tolerably good sense of regression equations'.

In the third tradition, comparative politics is understood as a *combination* of substance and method, rather than as a prioritisation of one over the other. The body of literature in this analytically comparative tradition is primarily concerned with the identification and explanation of differences and similarities between countries and their political institutions through systematic comparison. Its principal aim is to be explanatory, something it shares with the single-country tradition. However, it aims to go beyond merely ideographic descriptions through 'the substitution of variables for proper names' (Przeworski and Teune, 1970, p. 25) and ultimately aspires to arrive at the identification of law-like explanations. The key to achieving this is through comparison and by using generic concepts. Comparisons allow us to control, i.e. to verify or falsify whether correlations and generalisations hold true across cases. The analytical tradition shares with the methodology-oriented tradition a recognition of the value of systematic comparison abiding by established rules and methods for the cumulation of knowledge, but it does not concern itself with the development of the techniques governing comparisons.

This tradition is particularly strong in continental Europe, in large part influenced by the work of Alexis de Tocqueville, Max Weber and Stein Rokkan and their pleas for systematic comparisons. The focus of comparative politics is often, although not exclusively, on macro-societal units such as sovereign nation states and their political institutions, parties and party systems, cleavage structures, electoral behaviour, electoral systems and so on (e.g. Sartori, 1976; Bartolini and Mair, 1990). The comparative character is derived from the identification of shared attributes or properties among the cases, an assessment of their values and estimations of the relationship between variables. Comparative analysis in this tradition aims at establishing the validity of hypotheses on causal relationships by testing the correlations between key variables. It can be based on quantitative large-N studies, aimed at establishing probabilistic relationships between variables and using statistical techniques. More frequently it involves qualitative small-N studies, often based on the logic of inquiry first developed by John Stuart Mill. Designed to uncover general patterns of invariance and association, they offer a more holistic approach and aim to arrive at a more in-depth understanding (Ragin, 1987).

In our view, comparative politics strictly speaking corresponds to this third type of analysis. What the single-country tradition essentially lacks in method, the methodology-oriented tradition often lacks in substance. While they are potentially with comparative merit, studies concentrating exclusively on either methodological issues or thick descriptions of cases or countries are not themselves examples of comparative political analysis. In what follows, we will argue that there is a considerable potential to develop this third – genuinely comparative politics – approach in Britain. As we will demonstrate through a comparative assessment of the research interests of academic staff and a discussion of the teaching provision, analytical comparative politics in Britain is currently a neglected sub-field of political science.

Comparative politics in comparative perspective

It is beyond the scope of this brief article to provide an exhaustive and in-depth assessment of the state of comparative politics, in Britain and elsewhere, in terms of content and scope, or strengths and weaknesses.² For the purpose of the dis-

cussion we have chosen to provide a snapshot of the state of the discipline in Britain in numbers, comparing it with the US and continental Europe. We will also briefly discuss the teaching provision in comparative politics across the three regions.

One simple way of measuring the strength of comparative politics as a sub-field within political science is by calculating the number of 'comparativists' as a proportion of the total staff in a department. We have done this by selecting a total of 30 departments from Britain, the US and Europe, and counting the number of academic staff employed in the main political science department included on the departmental websites (in June 2005) who reported research interests in comparative politics.³ We have selected our sample by taking the 10 highest-placed departments⁴ from Simon Hix's (2004) global ranking of political science departments for each of the three regions.⁵

It is important to underline that, for the purpose of this exercise, we have made no qualitative assessment of the actual conception of 'comparative politics' entertained by the scholar reporting research interests in the field. Anyone reporting research interests in comparative politics has been included, regardless of their particular understanding of the discipline, while scholars making no mention of comparative politics have been excluded, even if we might have considered their work as belonging to the tradition. While we acknowledge the potential problems involved in building the analysis only on self-reported research interests, we think that it is possible to tease out a few general conclusions on the basis of our observations.

Our results are reported in Table 1, which lists 28 universities in the US, Britain and Europe according to the size of academic staff with research interests in comparative politics in relation to the total size of the department.⁶ This table reveals, first of all, that with six universities in the top 10 and only two in the bottom 10, the American departments clearly dominate the field. Europe comes comfortably second, with two institutions heading the ranking and a total of three in the top five. It is also evident that, with only one institution in the top 10 and the lowest average of 10.9 per cent, Britain fares comparatively weakly. On the other hand, British institutions clearly dominate the lower region of the list: five of the 10 lowest-ranking departments are located in Britain, against three for Europe and two for the US. Only three British departments rank above the overall mean of 14.4 per cent, i.e. Bristol, the LSE and Oxford.⁷ With 13.8 per cent, Essex comes relatively close to this figure. The position of Essex is interesting, in that it is also the least 'British' of departments, having embraced a strong methodological focus from its very foundation.

American departments also have the largest research communities in comparative politics: the absolute number for a faculty with research interests in the field averages a little under seven scholars. In comparison, with an average size of only 3.7 (UK) and 3.3 (Europe) academic staff, comparative politics communities in European departments (on either side of the Channel) are significantly smaller. In other words, the European research infrastructure for comparative politics is much weaker, as each department employs, at best, only a handful of comparativists.⁸ The majority of comparativists in Britain in our sample have only one or two immediate colleagues who share research interests within the same sub-discipline, which

Table 1. Research interests in comparative politics

Ranking	University	Total staff (N)	Staff with comparative politics interests (%)	Hix ranking	Region
1	TCD	6	50.0	40	Europe
2	Humboldt	28	28.6	97	Europe
3	Berkeley	49	22.4	11	US
4	EUI	18	22.2	5	Europe
5	Stanford	37	21.6	3	US
6	Columbia	44	20.5	1	US
7	UC San Diego	33	18.2	6	US
8	Michigan State	28	17.9	12	US
9	Harvard	53	17.0	2	US
10=	Bristol	24	16.7	34	UK
10=	Geneva	12	16.7	43	Europe
12	LSE	46	15.2	15	UK
13	Oxford	87	14.9	19	UK
14	Essex	29	13.8	16	UK
15	Ohio State	41	12.2	4	US
16	Aarhus	42	11.9	78	Europe
17	Yale	45	11.1	10	US
18	Mannheim	20	10.0	74	Europe
19	Princeton	64	9.4	9	US
20=	Birmingham	26	7.7	22	UK
20=	Cambridge	13	7.7	23	UK
20=	Leiden	26	7.7	55	Europe
23	UC Irvine	28	7.1	7	US
24	Sheffield	28	7.1	25	UK
25	Max Planck	32	6.3	108	Europe
26	Oslo	33	6.1	52	Europe
27	Aberystwyth	36	2.8	39	UK
28	UCL	7	0.0	46	UK
	<i>Overall mean</i>	<i>33.6</i>	<i>14.4</i>		
	<i>Mean US</i>	<i>42.2</i>	<i>15.7</i>		
	<i>Mean UK</i>	<i>30.9</i>	<i>10.9</i>		
	<i>Mean Europe</i>	<i>24.1</i>	<i>17.7</i>		

is arguably below the critical mass necessary for a vibrant intellectual community. In addition, insofar as the internal organisation of departments is concerned, British comparative politics, in contrast with its US and European counterparts, lacks the status of a recognised sub-discipline. This presents a further obstacle for its development into a substantive field of research on a par with the strength of the discipline elsewhere.

Finally, an interesting observation can be made with regard to the academic background of comparativists in Britain. Of the total of 36 comparative politics scholars in our sample affiliated to a British department, only 18 obtained their Ph.D. degree from a British institution. Eight scholars received their degree from the US, another eight from Europe (four of these from the EUI), while one person obtained a Ph.D. degree from both a European and a British institution; for one individual this information could not be ascertained. In other words, only a little over 50 per cent of the comparativists in our nine British political science departments⁹ for which information was available have been educated within the British university system, while nearly half of the comparativists received their education and training abroad. Essex is the only one of the top three comparative politics departments in Britain where the majority of comparativists received a Ph.D. degree from a home institution, which again illustrates the distinctiveness of political science there. These figures further underline that, with departments having to import a near majority of their comparativists from abroad in order to sustain the field, comparative politics is rather weakly developed in British political science, in particular as a home-grown sub-discipline.

The weakness of the discipline feeds into an underdeveloped teaching curriculum. Leading the profession also in terms of teaching comparative politics is the US. With few exceptions, US departments offer a major in comparative politics as one of the four to six majors in political science, while most departments also provide for a graduate (i.e. Ph.D.) major in comparative politics. This underlines the relative strength of comparative politics as a sub-field of political science in the US, which is reflected in the education of undergraduate students and the research training of Ph.D. students.

In the same vein, although constituting a less pivotal part of the curriculum, most European departments in our sample provide a degree in political (or social) science, including comparative politics as a compulsory element of the programme. Some departments offer the possibility for further specialisation in comparative politics (or other sub-disciplines) later on in the degree. Unlike the US, the political science curriculum of these European departments does not include a separate undergraduate programme in comparative politics. However, with the exception of Trinity College Dublin, for all of those offering undergraduate degrees, comparative politics constitutes a core and compulsory subject.

It should come as no surprise that training and education in comparative politics in Britain is rather limited. Very few, if any, British political science departments provide a specific undergraduate degree programme in comparative politics. While individual courses might be available, comparative politics tends not to constitute a core subject or compulsory component of the curriculum, Oxford being one of the few exceptions. On the postgraduate level (i.e. MA or MSc), only a handful of British departments offer a degree in comparative politics. Most notable in this respect are the LSE, Essex and Oxford, which are also, and probably not coincidentally, the three strongest comparative politics departments in terms of research interests. In many institutions no single course in comparative politics is available throughout the entire undergraduate or postgraduate programmes; some offer courses in comparative politics for undergraduates but not on the postgraduate

level. The curriculum thus rarely builds up to a systematic accumulation of courses in comparative politics and lacks the graduate training necessary at a minimum to sustain the field.

Conclusion

We have argued that what passes for comparative politics in Britain are essentially description-oriented area studies, reflecting a conception of comparative politics as the study of foreign countries. Significantly lacking is attention towards the methodological dimensions of comparative research and what we have called analytical comparative politics. We have presented some figures to illustrate our case, although it should be underlined that these are intended only as an illustration of a general contention rather than conclusive evidence or proof.

On a positive note, the relative weakness of the analytically comparative politics in Britain implies that there is an enormous potential for development of the discipline. What is important to underline in this respect is that the weakness of comparative research and the limited education and training in comparative politics are intimately related. The underdeveloped nature of analytically comparative politics coupled with the paucity of comparativists feeds into a deficient teaching curriculum, while the lack of proper education and training in comparative politics hinders the capacity of the system to produce a sufficiently strong field of comparativists. The result is a continued need to import scholars of comparative politics educated elsewhere in the world in order to sustain the field. This vicious circle needs to be broken if comparative politics in Britain is to escape from its currently bleak state.

Notes

- 1 For the sake of convenience, we will use Europe as shorthand for continental Western Europe, and Britain to refer to the United Kingdom.
- 2 For an overview (and different perspective), see Page (1990).
- 3 More detailed information on the methodology adopted is available from the authors.
- 4 Because Indiana (rank 8) encompasses several campuses, it has been substituted with the next institution down the line, Michigan State (rank 12).
- 5 Whether or not we endorse the overall argument or outcome of the Hix (2004) study is, in the context of the present article, a moot point. For the purpose of our exercise, Hix's ranking provides us with a single sample of political science departments across different university systems based on a common methodology.
- 6 Cardiff was excluded because it lacks a political science department, and Groningen because no information on the research interests of academic staff was available from the departmental website.
- 7 Bristol seems an outlier to us. We suspect that its relatively high ranking is best explained by a particular (single-country oriented) conception of comparative politics. That the high Bristol ranking is implausible is supported by its limited teaching provision in comparative politics. If this is correct, the LSE, Oxford and Essex would be the three strongest comparative politics departments in Britain in our sample.
- 8 It should be noted that the UK figure is substantially inflated by the large number of comparative politics scholars in Oxford ($N = 13$). Excluding Oxford would reduce the UK to an average of 2.7 scholars, bringing it down to below the European average.
- 9 I.e. excluding Cardiff (see Note 6).

References

- Bartolini, S. and P. Mair (1990), *Identity, Competition, and Electoral Availability: The Stabilisation of European Electorates, 1885–1985*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Berrington, H. and P. Norris (1988), *Political Studies in the Eighties*, Newcastle: Political Studies Association.
- Bogdanor, V. (1999), 'Comparative Politics' in J. Hayward, B. Barry and A. Brown (eds.), *The British Study of Politics in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 147–179.
- Collier, D. and S. Levitsky (1997), 'Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research', *World Politics* 49(3), pp. 430–451.
- Collier, D. and J.E. Mahon (1993), 'Conceptual "Stretching" Revisited: Adapting Categories in Comparative Analysis', *American Political Science Review* 87(4), pp. 845–855.
- Dalton, R.J. (1991), 'Comparative Politics of the Industrial Democracies: From the Golden Age to Island Hopping', in W.J. Crotty (ed.), *Political Science Vol. II*, pp. 15–43.
- Goodin, R.E. and H.-D. Klingemann (1996), 'Political Science: The Discipline' in R.E. Goodin and H.-D. Klingemann (eds.), *A New Handbook of Political Science*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 3–49.
- Hall, P.A. (2004), 'Beyond the Comparative Method', *APSA-Comparative Politics Newsletter* 15(2), pp. 1–4.
- Hix, S. (2004), 'A Global Ranking of Political Science Departments', *Political Studies Review* 2(3), pp. 293–313.
- Keman, H. (1993), 'Comparative Politics: A Distinctive Approach to Political Science?' in H. Keman (ed.), *Comparative Politics*, Amsterdam: Free University Press, pp. 31–57.
- Lijphart, A. (1971), 'Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method', *American Political Science Review* 65(3), pp. 682–693.
- Lijphart, A. (1975), 'The Comparable Cases Strategy in Comparative Research', *Comparative Political Studies* 8(1), pp. 158–177.
- Mair, P. (1996), 'Comparative Politics: An Overview' in R.E. Goodin and H.-D. Klingemann (eds.), *A New Handbook of Political Science*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 309–335.
- Page, E.C. (1990), 'British Political Science and Comparative Politics', *Political Studies* 38(3), pp. 438–452.
- Przeworski, A. and H. Teune (1970), *The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry*, New York: Wiley.
- Ragin, C. (1987), *The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ragin, C. (2000), *Fuzzy-Set Social Science*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rose, R. (1991), 'Comparing Forms of Comparative Analysis', *Political Studies* 39(3), pp. 446–462.
- Sartori, G. (1970), 'Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics', *American Political Science Review* 64(4), pp. 1033–1053.
- Sartori, G. (1976), *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sartori, G. (ed.) (1984), *Social Science Concepts: A Systematic Analysis*, London: Sage.
- Smith, G. (1997), 'Seeking to Understand European Politics', in H. Daalder (ed.), *Comparative European Politics: The Story of a Profession*, London and Washington: Pinter, pp. 152–161.

Copyright of Politics is the property of Blackwell Publishing Limited and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.