Neither Systematic nor Idiographic: Drawing on Family Resemblances and Eclectic Affinities to Compare Deliberative Systems

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Abstract

There is a move to draw on the rich research traditions of comparative politics in the effort to begin studying deliberative systems in practice. However, in this paper, we caution that the dominant research traditions in comparative political science—rigidly systematic comparison or thickly descriptive area studies—may be of only limited utility in this enterprise. On the one hand, deliberative systems are fuzzy, porous, shifting constructs on which rigid efforts to systematize comparative analysis—either through large-n statistical comparison or, more pointedly, through to more systematic qualitative comparison—will map uncomfortably and perhaps even perversely. On the other hand, these swirling complexities mean that to draw meaningful comparative insights about deliberative systems we also need to move beyond idiographic accounts produced in the thick descriptions of area studies specialists. Instead, we emphasise the value of two alternative, more marginal traditions in comparative political scholarship in making up for these limitations. The first is through the use of ‘family resemblances’ in comparative research design. The second is through post hoc comparisons which draw together eclectic affinities between systems, and in the process shed new light on important institutional, cultural and discursive dynamics. Both approaches, we hold, are sensitive to the contextual complexities and shifting, fuzzy nature of the systems conception. Both, in different ways, can tell us a great deal about why and how deliberative practices and institutions emerge, flourish, interact, shift, or fail, and why and how they enable, enhance or undermine the democratic and deliberative qualities of the system overall. We draw on promising examples of these two approaches in the nascent or foregrounding work in deliberative systems scholarship to emphasise their value in understanding deliberative systems in practice.

Key words

Deliberative systems; comparative political science; Lijphart; Anderson; area studies; family resemblance; eclectic affinities
Introduction

For the best part of the last 3 decades, the study of comparative democratization and the normative project of deliberative democracy have largely occupied different worlds. The democratization literature has been more and more drawn into the rigid strictures of comparative political science. Empirical work on deliberative democracy has been rather more bipolar—centring either on idiographic studies of scaled-down deliberation in practice or more hard-nosed experimental interventions. And, with a few notable exceptions (eg. Dryzek 2009), these two worlds have had little cause for interaction, with one gaze taking in the broader suite of key political institutions and the other focused in on the minute micro-politics of particular (and too often artificial or inconsequential) institutions. However, the recent emergence of a new orthodoxy in deliberative democratic theory—the so-called systemic turn—appears set to engender change. The systemic turn encourages empirical scholars of deliberative democracy to understand deliberative practices within the broader context of the complex variety of actually existing democratic institutions. It is a new language that speaks more directly to the concerns of comparative democratization scholars. Indeed, in important ways, the deliberative system shares affinities with pre-existing models of the democratic system. This raises the temptation to simply inject models with a new normative flavour—to include a few additional measures and interpret existing ones in slightly different ways, and make inferences about deliberative systems in practice. Efforts are already afoot to embark on an ambitious, rigorous new analysis of deliberative systems across comparative political contexts; the systematic study of deliberative systems.

We want to argue here that such efforts can only be of limited utility. Important aspects of deliberative systems cannot be studied systematically, at least in the sense that this term is generally used in comparative political science. The deliberative system is an inherently fuzzy concept. It is hard to pin down. It involves a vast array of overlapping and interacting sites and practices. These qualities are what make the deliberative system normatively attractive, and potentially useful as a yardstick to be applied empirically to a wide array of political contexts. But they are also qualities that render rigidly systematic comparative analysis insufficient. Deliberative systems need to also be studied richly in context and with a firm appreciation for the overlaps and interactions across sites and practices that enable and sustain, or undermine and challenge, the broader norms and goods we associate with deliberative democracy (see Ercan et al. 2015). Quite obviously such a stance places us at odds with the dominant quantitative approach to comparative democratization: we think little can be learned about the complex interactions and overlaps at the heart of the systemic account by reference to crude indicators and their parsimonious associations. But more importantly—and the point of divergence we focus on in the paper—we have little faith in the capacity of systematic qualitative research, as practiced in comparative political science, to reveal many important insights about deliberative systems. No two (or more) deliberative systems can usefully be laid out side by side with their points of divergence clearly identified and the impacts of these divergences measured. There is too much going on. The real danger of such an approach is for a rigid focus on differences in institutional design that fails to account for the contingencies that bleed across, underpin or condition deliberative sites and practices.
Yet we are not simply calling for scholars of deliberative systems to seek refuge in single-n case work, in which they can carefully unpack these confounding complexities. The problem that looms here is not so much one of overstating inferences about deliberative systems, but understating them. The analogy in comparative political studies is the long-standing alternative to systemic science: area studies. Like the dilemma facing many scholars of area studies, the risk is that such richly qualitative work is merely idiosyncratic—of significance to scholars with an interest in the specific or substantive area of focus but impenetrable or uninteresting to scholars of deliberative systems more broadly. There is a pressing need for accumulated insights across a variety of cases that can highlight how deliberative systems work in practice, and how they might be enhanced or improved.

In this paper we highlight two alternative approaches on the margins of comparative political studies that appear promising for the purposes of accumulating these broader insights into deliberative systems. The first is to design comparative projects according not to rigid institutional similarities and differences but instead out of appreciation of ‘family resemblances’, whereby institutions are seen as just one subset of practices of democratic governance. Collectively, these practices represent familiar ‘traits’ that come and go across different deliberative systems. The second, building on Benedict Anderson’s account of ‘surprising’ comparison, is to build on in-depth case research by identifying, and mapping out, ‘eclectic affinities’ with other deliberative systems. Both approaches, we argue, are ideally suited to unpacking the complex context specificity in ways that can speak to the broader interests and concerns of scholars working on deliberative systems in other political contexts.

The argument builds over four main sections. In the first, we introduce the key features of the deliberative system, foreshadowing the challenges and difficulties of empirical analysis in the dominant traditions of comparative political science. In the second, we background the two leading approaches, naturalist comparative political science and interpretive area studies. We do so in order to clarify their limitations in pursuit of broad and meaningful insights across deliberative systems. In the third, we emphasise two qualities essential to the empirical comparison of deliberative systems—reflexivity and liquidity—that neither is fully equipped to provide. In the final section, we turn instead to two alternative approaches in the study of comparative politics that can better realise these qualities. We go on to highlight promising examples of this sort of research in practice that are relevant for the comparative study of deliberative systems. The conclusion then pushes forward a new research agenda as a vital augmentation in the empirical response to the systemic turn in deliberative democratic theory.

**Deliberative systems and their empirical analysis**

The deliberative system has emerged over the last 5 to 10 years as the new orthodoxy in deliberative democratic theory (Mansbridge and Parkinson 2012). It has come about in large part as a reaction to the fixation on the micro-politics of the forum, especially via research experiments and governing innovations in deliberative democracy (see Chambers 2009). The deliberative system is an effort to reconnect deliberative democratic theory to its initial macro
ambitions – to enhance and understand democracy at the large scale. But, at least for most of its key proponents, the aim is to scale back up without entirely throwing away all those earlier insights (Hendriks 2006). Instead, the point is that micro-practices of deliberation are situated within a broader political context. The shift has been away from finding one ‘ideal speech situation’ and towards seeing different sort of sites as enacting different features of deliberative democracy. The key to the system is that they overlap and interconnect across political systems in ways that enable and sustain a more deliberative and democratic whole.

The normative appeal of this account is clear. It has the potential to make space for a range of apparently non-deliberative and non-democratic sites and practices that most deliberative democrats nevertheless see as vital to the functioning of a healthy democracy. It also has the potential to shift the gaze of democratic reformers away from designing ever-more sophisticated innovations and towards reimagining the practices of long-established institutions so that they can better enable deliberative democratic norms at the broader scale. And, though debate is brewing about the merits of the systems terminology (see Owen and Smith 2015), there is little opposition to the notion of broadening out among normative theorists of deliberative democracy.

Now, the greater challenge, and opportunity, lies in what these conceptual developments mean for empirical scholars of deliberative democracy. The Forum was a goldmine for empirical researchers. Its emergence coincided with the rise of experimental methods in political science, to which it seemed ideally suited. An academic industry developed around the apparently successful ‘treatment’ of deliberation in innovative social laboratories that approximated the ideal speech situation (see especially Fishkin 1992; 2009). But that boom now appears to be over. Different approaches and different tools are needed.

In this task, and further underlining the limitations of one-off experimental innovation, there is a particular need for comparative insights. The conceptual critique to the language of ‘systems’ makes this clear (Owen and Smith 2015). The risk these critics perceive, as with all systems accounts, is for a kind of functionalism that blunts the critical edge of deliberative theory (see also an attempt to pre-empt this critique in Mansbridge et al. 2012). In empirical analysis, then, every practice, no matter how undeliberative or undemocratic, might be seen as contributing to the function of the broader deliberative system. But the inverse is also true. As with any macro account that attempts to capture actually existing democracy, no system can possibly match up to the ideal. There is a risk of seeing nothing as good enough. The germane point, then, is that deliberative systems are closer or further away from the ideal in reality. It is only through comparison that we can begin to gain useful insights into what works better or worse in practice, and thus what sorts of features and interventions might help or hinder deliberative systems.

Two mainstream approaches to comparative politics research, long operating in the shadows of the experimental boom in the field of deliberative democracy, look set to now gather strength in this enterprise. One is through direct reference to the tools of systematic comparative political science, via especially the isolation of institutional variables and measurement of their apparent impact on deliberative practices. Two lies in ethnographic fieldwork of deliberative practices in isolated case research. This latter approach has clear affinities to the research tradition of area
studies, itself long-established as the alternative to scientific comparison in the field. In the
sections that follow, we draw out the limitations in following these two pre-existing models in the
study of deliberative systems. We do so in order to lay the groundwork for two alternatives, both
further from the margins of comparative political studies—family resemblances and eclectic
affinities—that we argue have greater utility for the task at hand.

The problem with systemacity: naturalist comparative political science and its limits

The main problem that deliberative democrats face when seeking to approximate approaches
from comparative political science relates not so much to data collection – the preference for
quantitative studies, for example – but rather to the particular commitment to a way of
operationalizing concepts. In simple terms, to answer questions like why some countries are
democratic and others are not, comparative political scientists have typically sought to precisely
define exactly what they mean by democracy. Typically, these definitions revolve around a version
of Dahl’s proceduralism: the presence of elections, elected bodies and so on. For example
Huntington’s famous conceptualisation of democratization as occurring in a series of waves
relied on an electoral definition of democracy. He would further note that “fuzzy norms do not
yield useful analysis” (1991: 9).

From the outset, this poses an obvious challenge for deliberative democrats who are committed
to a more expansive definition of democracy. But, we argue, the problem actually runs much
deeper than that because, even if we expand the definition so that it accords with deliberative
ideals, the naturalist approach common to mainstream comparative political science – the idea
that fuzzy norms do not yield useful analysis – cannot account for the nuanced ways in which
deliberative components and qualities wax and wane across systems. That is, we posit that the
approach to concept formation common to mainstream comparative political science is in fact
antithetical to the key tenants of deliberative systems.

To substantiate this point, we need to first briefly explain something of the history of comparative
political science. Typically, comparative political science is said to be an American pursuit
developed in service of Cold War objectives in particular. By contrast, the British and European
equivalent has tended to be Area Studies, an approach that we will discuss further below.
Defining and explaining democratization has always been central to this enterprise and there has
been considerable debate over the decades about exactly how this should proceed. For the most
part, however, this debate has taken place within a ‘naturalist’ paradigm: that is, the aims of
comparative political science are to develop law-like causal generalisations that explain the
presence of absence of particular phenomena. To do so, successive generations of scholars have
sought to classify countries and observe regularities across cases. And, most importantly, this
approach has been used to analyze both quantitate and qualitative data. Indeed, the idea that
comparative political scientists have a diverse range of tools but a shared set of standards has
become something of a mantra (see Brady and Collier 2004).
The key point about this naturalist approach is that at the heart of the endeavour is an attempt to solve the problem of conceptual ambiguity. Scholars recognise that democracy means different things in different contexts but this ambiguity is typically cast as a barrier to the types of comparisons they prize. That is, if specific practices and beliefs about democracy differ across contexts, then the whole process of comparison starts to break down. One alternative might be to collect data on different value systems or cultures and determine whether they are present or absent in different regimes (i.e. Almond and Verba 1963). But, again, from a deliberative democratic perspective this remains problematic: values are not out there waiting to be calculated. They must be constructed, and each process of construction must substantially involve the formation of new meanings and the changing of old values.

Typically, the answer to this conceptual problem in comparative political science is built on a version of Giovani Sartori’s approach and his famous “ladder of abstraction” in particular. Put simply, Sartori argued that the more particular the concept the less cases it could explain. The key is thus to have different levels of concepts with those at the top of the ladder relative open or minimalist and those at the bottom more specific. Take for example Arend Lijphart’s classic study *Democracies: Patterns of Majoritarian & Consensus Government in Twenty-One Countries* (1984; cf. 1999) which revolves around two concepts: proportional representation and majoritarian representation. By making this distinction between types of democracy Lijphart was able to classify countries and having done so argue that the former less likely to produce artificial majorities than the latter. In turn, he would argue that this made proportional systems more democratic. Subsequent work in this tradition has further nuanced this approach, with comparative political scientists working in the qualitative tradition adopting aspects of set theory (Ragin 1987) and Bayesian logic (Bennett 2008) in an attempt to both account for and control conceptual ambiguity. But, in all instances the logic underpinning the approach is the same: components of democratic systems are variables out there to be classified, measured and explained.

The Lijphartian approach to systematic qualitative comparison is not entirely foreign to empirical work in deliberative democracy. Indeed it has underpinned key contributions to the development of this field from beyond the laboratory. The most important and best known is the work on the deliberative qualities of different legislative systems. Drawing inspiration from Lijphart, Steiner et al. (2004) categorises legislatures according to key institutional rules to identify which characteristics are more likely to engender deliberative quality within legislative discourse. This body of work provides important insights that are relevant for our developing understanding of deliberative systems (we would argue much more so than the much larger body of work on minipublic deliberation). The temptation is to turn further to Lijphart’s approach to systematic qualitative comparison in the task of better teasing out the discrepancies between deliberative sites and systems, applying the tools developed by Steiner et al. to measure different components across broader systems. Such an approach certainly ensures that the core norms of deliberative democracy do not get lost in the analysis, as would seem likely in any attempt to inflect large-n work on comparative democratization with some deliberative flavour (eg. Bohmelt et al. forthcoming). Another key problem looms, however. That is the mismatch between the analysis of institutional types and rules, on the one hand, and the complex network of overlaps
and interconnections in the systems’ account that defy such rigid categorisation, on the other. The initial forays into measuring deliberative quality rigidly across systems exemplify these limitations (see e.g. Pedrini 2014). They can successfully map out basic discrepancies between institutions and across institutional architectures. This is fine, as far as it goes. But, on their own, these accounts fail to tell us much of what we want to actually know about deliberative systems; about what practices can connect or disrupt, enable or undermine systemic deliberation at the large scale. The broader limitations of a systematic approach to comparative democratization are exacerbated in their application to the inherently ‘fuzzy’ deliberative systems approach. The whole is rather lost in the inevitable focus on component parts.

The problem with idiography: area studies and its limits

As outlined, the main alternative to the American tradition of comparative political science has been the British-European tradition of area studies. Area studies has its roots in the colonial project and the need for administrators to understand how their new subjects saw the world. It is typically multi or interdisciplinary in nature, borrowing concepts and methods from anthropology, history, economics and political science. Deep immersion in local culture, language and tradition is often prized in this tradition. Or at least that is how area studies is commonly conceptualised today. Historically, disciplines like anthropology employed similar naturalist techniques to codify and compare cultures, for example. Such work has typically been overtaken, however. Context specificity rather than law-like generalisations is generally the goal.

The strengths of this approach correspond largely to the weaknesses of systematic comparative political science. Rather than attempting to impose rigid categories over inherently messy terrain in order to enable generalisability, such work typically places conceptual ambiguity at the centre of its analysis. The clearest example is the ethnographic work of Frederick Schaffer (1998). Schaffer starts from the observation that the democracy concept is so widely stretched that it rarely appears without a modifier: participatory, representative, or even deliberative. He therefore sets about asking how democracy was understood in ordinary language in Senegal and among Wolof speakers in particular. He finds that the common language use of “demokaraasi” revolved around patronage, community solidarity and expectations of material rewards from winning candidates. The point, Schaffer argues, is that differences in the way democracy is understood are likely to shape particular institutional outcomes.

The obvious trade-off associated with this quest to unpack the context-specific meaning of democratization in practice is a lack of broader relevance for those working in different regions and countries. Idiographic richness comes at the expense of broader applicability, let alone generalisability. A few highly skilled technicians are able to craft rich, context-specific stories that somehow resonate—Schaffer’s account outlined above is a good example, despite his own deep reservations about drawing any comparative relevance from intensive case work (see Schaffer 2015). But the influence of most is confined to their own area specialisms. And so naturalist comparative political science continues to dominate the contemporary study of democratization.
There are obvious similarities between area studies and the long-standing tradition of ethnographic case work in empirical studies of deliberation. Indeed, it is possible to draw a clear lineage of inspiration from area studies for deliberative democracy scholars who adopt this approach (the clearest crossing of paths being genuflection to celebrated anthropologist Clifford Geertz). The crux of both is an emphasis on rich storytelling and context specificity. So, given the conceptual shift to the deliberative system, the logical step for scholars who favour this approach is simply to apply the tools of ethnographic single-n scholarship to systematic concerns. And, perhaps due to the emphasis placed on induction and flexibility in this type of work (see Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012), these scholars have been quicker to react to the systemic turn in deliberative democracy than their more naturalist counterparts. Some have sought to track public deliberation on a topic through a wider range of settings across a deliberative system (see Parkinson 2006; Stevenson and Dryzek 2014), or to an especially crucial space of interconnection within it (see Hendriks 2016). Certainly, such an approach is well-placed to shed light on the nuances of how practices interact and overlap in deliberative systems—and the particular studies listed above do this very well, in ways that have resonated, or have the potential to resonate, broadly across scholars of deliberative practice. Yet the risk, as with area studies, is that such resonance appears to be a result of a rare, mysterious and unpredictable alchemy. The vast bulk of this rich and insightful work may not be made to travel to other political contexts. It may therefore fail to inform broader ideas and debates about deliberative systems in practice.

Towards comparing deliberative systems

As the discussion thus far might imply, our sympathies lie closer to the tradition of area studies than that of comparative political science. Yet we see neither, at least on their own, as being particularly useful in the task of comparing deliberative systems. The tools of naturalist comparative political science are poorly placed to provide meaningful purchase on deliberative systems; the tools of area studies are poorly placed to enable meaningful comparison. In this section, then, we highlight what we see as the two key concepts fundamental to meaningful comparison of deliberative systems; reflexivity and fluidity. We do so with two aims in mind. One is to clarify the limitations of the dominant traditions of comparative political science and area studies in this pursuit. Two is to foreshadow the potential of the two, more marginal approaches to comparison that we promote in this paper: family resemblances and eclectic affinities.

Reflexivity

Empirical researchers of deliberative democracy have long grappled with the fundamental purpose of their pursuit—as advocates in a normative movement or as agnostic testers of a falsifiable theory (see Mutz 2008; Thompson 2008). Most sit ambiguously in between. We concur with Bevir and Ansari (2012) that scholars who adopt a consciously interpretive approach are best positioned to reconcile the empirical and the normative. Indeed, it is no surprise that researchers of a consciously interpretive bent have been prime movers in the systemic turn (see especially Parkinson 2006; Hendriks 2011). The key enabler is a commitment to reflexivity.

The bulk of emphasis on reflexivity among interpretivists (nowhere more so than in area studies) has been to focus on the researcher’s positionality in the political field within which he or she
conducts research. The aim is to acknowledge privileges, challenges, biases and blindspots that drive motivation, impact material access and colour interpretation. In practice, this refrain to reflexivity typically serves as a way of signposting the experiences and beliefs of the researcher as they pertain to the political phenomenon in question.

In recent times, though, this notion of reflexivity has been augmented by growing appreciation of the researcher’s dual positionality within the academic field (see Hay 2011; Boswell and Corbett 2015). This is a move to acknowledge, and legitimate, the desire to make insights that resonate broadly. As we have said elsewhere, the point of publishing academic work is to ‘make an impression’ (Boswell and Corbett 2016). This side of reflexivity runs contra to the typical identity assumed by area studies specialists. It opens up the prospect of making broader ‘plausible conjectures’ (Rhodes 2015) that go beyond the tight confines of one’s particular research context.

Both sides of reflexivity, we hold, are essential to unpacking deliberative systems in practice. Acknowledging positionality within the political field enables the rich, nuanced, subtle insights into the nature of deliberative practice in context that are essential to the task of unpacking how deliberative systems operate. Acknowledging positionality within the academic field encourages researchers to advance bold claims about these insights that speak to the entire community of scholars and practitioners interested in deliberative systems.

Fluidity

The systemic turn entails a shift to an account where the qualities and components of deliberative democracy are spatially and temporally distributed (see especially Hendriks 2006; Goodin 2005). Indeed, underpinning the systemic turn has been a growing sense of dissatisfaction with the emphasis on isolated spaces of democratic deliberation at the expense of deliberative democracy in the macro sense (Chambers 2009). With the systemic turn, it is the whole that matters, not the component parts (or at least not in isolation). Once again, such a shift accords with a distinctively interpretive approach. Bevir and Ansari (2012) make the point that the interpretive commitment to ‘meaning holism’ makes it ideally suited to unpacking how deliberation is constructed in practice—something we might see as further reinforced by the systemic turn which implies a much more fluid conception of deliberation as well (Ercan et al. 2015). The qualities and components of deliberative democracy appear fluid in two senses. One is that they flow across the system. This is the corollary of distributing deliberative goods across space and time. The other is that their shape is inherently unstable. Because of their complex, ongoing interaction, they cannot manifest in exactly the same way in different contexts. But we should still be able to recognise these qualities and components when we see them.

As we have already intimated, the rigid categories imposed by the tools of naturalist comparative political science are ill-equipped to capture these dynamics. They can, as already conceded, provide some important insights into how different components and qualities of deliberative democracy move across the system (eg Pedrini 2014). But because naturalist approaches are founded on a need to reduce conceptual ambiguity, they are unable to account for fluidity of shape.
The tools associated with area studies might at first glance appear much better suited to the task. Analogous to the Schaffer example discussed above, deep attentiveness to context can help to unpack the ways in which deliberative democratic qualities emerge and unfold across different sites and over time within a confined debate. However, the commitment to context-specificity can also be limiting. It enables a rich appreciation of fluidity in one sense—tracking the flow of deliberation within a system. But it stifles it in the other, in that it presents a context-bound shape to deliberative qualities and norms. It risks asserting a singular interpretation (or more likely set of interpretations) that cannot transcend system boundaries.

The task of comparing deliberative systems, however, requires acknowledgment of fluidity in both senses. It requires an appreciation of how aspects of democratic deliberation move across sites and over time. But it also rests on the capacity to link conceptually, and actually compare, the shape and flow of these components in spite of their subtle differences and intangible qualities. It requires, in essence, something between rigid categories and ephemeral interpretations.

**From rigid variables to family resemblances**

One approach represents an interpretive spin on the Lijphartian categorisation of rigid institutional variables across systems. It entails a comparative design based on family resemblances. These are recurring ‘traits’ that come and go, to varying degrees, across units within the same broad family. Such traits might include institutional variants, but they entail a decentred, interpretive account of these institutions—one that sees them not as given, but as constructed and continually reproduced through social interaction. Traits also extend beyond institutions and institutional rules to encompass informal beliefs, customs and practices, too. A pioneer of this interpretive approach to comparative design is Rhodes et al.’s (2011) account of *Comparing Westminster*. *Comparing Westminster* treats the largest so-called Westminster systems as a broad family, associated with key traits (a unitary state, a strong executive, Parliamentary sovereignty, a neutral civil service, etc). No political system exhibits all of the traits but they recognisably recur across the family. Most do not recur in precisely the same way but they are recognisably similar enough to operate as a starting point for fruitful comparison. Their notion of family resemblance explicitly draws inspiration from Wittgenstein’s ‘language games’, without taking it to the extremes of area studies scholars like Schaffer who see all political action as bound within a contextual language web (one from which it is apparently impossible to extrapolate outwards meaningfully).

Adopting this approach to the design of comparative research on deliberative systems accords with the need for reflexivity. The approach acknowledges the researcher’s positionality in the political field. It requires some pre-ordained notion of the deliberative systems in focus and how they operate, while being flexible enough to admit of the prospect of surprise. But perhaps the particular strength of this approach is that it acknowledges positionality within the academic field. Adopting a family resemblance design signals from the outset an unwillingness to settle for
context-bound insights. It signals a desire to tell a story that impacts the way deliberative systems are understood more broadly.

Approaching comparative research design in this way also provides a means of capturing fluidity. The focus is not rigidly on components of deliberative systems with the holy grail of deciphering the impact of slightly different systemic architectures. The focus instead stretches across the traits of different deliberative systems to get a better sense of the features and qualities that these complex configurations enable and sustain overall. Tracing loose family resemblances accords better with the endeavour to uncover the ‘meaning holism’ essential to understanding and explaining deliberative practices in systemic terms. But it also provides a means of comparison. Traits remain flexible enough in their particular manifestation that patterns can be observed across systems. They keep their shape enough to enable meaningful comparison.

We can trace a family resemblance approach to comparison in earlier influential work on deliberative democracy in the micro sense. The best example is the pioneering work of Fung and Wright (2001) on Empowered Participatory Democracy. Indeed, it is instructive that they refer to the diverse practices in their account as ‘a family’. Fung and Wright’s focus is not on comparing or contrasting institutional rules within these practices or measures of political culture in the contexts surrounding them. Instead, their focus is on appreciation of a particular set of recurring resemblances across these practices. Their effort in doing so is not to point to or isolate a single (or even subset) of enabling conditions or characteristics for EPD. Instead, they point to conditions and characteristics that come and go to varying degrees across these cases, and the interaction of these features with each other and broader contextual factors. The result is an account that speaks to the broader debate on deliberative practices and innovations across sectors, local and central levels of government, and developing and developed countries.

Some work foregrounding the new zeal for comparing deliberative systems exhibits some of the characteristics of this approach as well. A good example is Parkinson’s (2012) book on the role of public space in democratic deliberation across polities. Though Parkinson makes some effort to justify his comparative design in naturalist terms, in fact we can detect a more unconventional design that relies on family resemblances. His analysis looks across a range of democratic spaces across different countries and zooms in on particular manifestations or variants that typify these spaces. The key is that the different countries do not exhibit stable variation in the nature of their spaces—there are broad features that recur more or less across them. His analysis takes into account these resemblances, but always with an eye to an holistic understanding of how these features interact with each other and broader contextual factors. The result is an account that sheds new light on a key but understudied feature of democratic practice that helps both further the systemic account conceptually and extend the empirical research agenda in this field.

**From idiosyncratic insights to eclectic affinities**

Given our closer sympathies for idiographic research in the tradition of area studies, we do not want to be interpreted as being in any way dismissive of the value of this work. Instead our point is that this worthy work might be allowed to reach a far greater audience through creative comparison with other systems. We draw here in particular on the late Benedict Anderson’s (2015) account of
comparative politics, and his preference for ‘surprising’ comparison. Anderson began his career as an ethnographer of rural Indonesian politics and saw a key part of his task as being to render this apparently deeply foreign context both intelligible and important to a broader audience of scholars in politics and beyond. He did so by drawing out the affinities between the contexts of his fieldwork and completely different contexts with which a broad readership might have more familiarity. The aim, and effect, was to ‘surprise’ readers, encouraging them to see both contexts in a new light. In the case of Anderson’s (1983) most celebrated work, *Imagined Communities*, this novel strategy had a profound impact on the field. Of course, the audacity of this approach represents a high risk, especially in a competitive funding and publishing environment that encourages a ‘small target’ approach to scholarly enquiry. But from this attention-grabbing comparative strategy we can deduce a crucial insight: very different sorts of deliberative systems—in different parts of the world, focused on different issues, with very different sites, practices and actors—might bear striking similarities that are worth parsing out.

Pursuing eclectic affinities in order to draw comparisons across deliberative systems requires reflexivity. Indeed, the most obvious strength of this approach is its capacity to respond inductively to in-depth engagement with empirical material: a sensitivity to one’s positionality within the political field. Deliberative systems are highly complex and apparent features or categories can melt away on closer inspection. Drawing inspiration from Anderson, however, suggests that comparison need not be designed in to the project to begin with. Instead, eclectic affinities between contexts can emerge through experience and analysis. Yet being willing to pursue these affinities requires reflexivity in the other sense we stress above. It entails acknowledging one’s own positionality within the academic field. Actually exploring and explaining the affinities across diverse cases involves consciously reaching beyond an audience interested in the substantive detail of the empirical material in an effort to provide vital new insights into deliberative systems more broadly.

Doing so also enables this form of research to capture fluidity in both senses discussed above. As discussed, the rich single-case work in the model of area studies—the work that necessarily underpins the pursuit of eclectic affinities—is very well placed to track deliberative qualities and components as they move across spaces and over time within the confines of that case. In searching to other cases for similarities and discrepancies, pursuing eclectic affinities also requires acknowledgment that such qualities and components have analogues elsewhere, including unlikely or surprising ones. The presumption underpinning any such attempt is that the qualities and components of deliberative democracy that emerge across deliberative systems over time can manifest in different forms in other cases without necessarily losing important analytical purchase.

Once more, we can turn to important foregrounding work in empirical studies of deliberative democracy to show the advantages of using this more marginal tradition of comparative research. A great example is Wedeen’s (2007) account of deliberative practices in Yemen. Wedeen asks a deceptively simply question: Given the fragility of the state, “what makes a Yemeni and Yemeni?” Using Yemeni qat chewing as an example, she highlights how in the absence of strong institutions political activism and critical debate nevertheless occurs during these gatherings. While not conforming to the typical definitions of democracy common to the comparative political science literature – free and fair elections and so on – they nevertheless display many of the precepts that deliberative democrats in particular consider to be ideal. Indeed, while largely focused on Yemen, Wedeen’s account stylistically invokes a comparison between qat chewing and Habermas’s Parisian
salons. The effect is to recall this famous account of the organic emergence of the public sphere, and to point to unlikely (and for that reason intriguing) affinities with developments in Yemen. The point of this subtle move, of course, is to bring her rich understanding of the Yemeni case into conversation with a much broader range of politics scholars well beyond the country or regional specialists who would typically read such work.

While Wedeen’s move here is reminiscent of Anderson’s ‘surprise’ strategy – and indeed she draws on Anderson throughout the text – there are less creatively demanding but equally valuable ways in which case study researchers might draw out eclectic affinities of interest and use to deliberative systems more broadly. Perhaps the most obvious is simply to draw out the affinities between different cases examined as part of different projects. Take Maarten Hajer’s (2009) account of Authoritative Governance in contemporary democracy as an interesting example. To be clear, Authoritative Governance only touches tangentially on deliberative democracy in broader, macro terms. As a template for doing comparison in a way that is sensitive to reflexivity and fluidity, though, it remains extremely useful for empirical researchers looking at deliberative systems. Hajer’s account links together seemingly disparate crises in contemporary democratic governance all occurring at different times, in different countries, with different institutions and actors involved—the aftermath of a political assassination, the wake of a food safety scare, and the rebuilding of the World Trade Centre towers. But from these disparate in-depth case studies he identifies eclectic affinities that allow him to build on a theory of democratic dramaturgy. Of course, this work has influenced recent ideas about deliberation (Hendriks 2009) and deliberative systems (see Parkinson 2012; Rummens 2011). But its greater value is as a model of how to potentially do work on something as complex and confounding as deliberative systems.

The alternative, and perhaps more immediately promising approach is for case study researchers in the field to collaborate, pooling their insights where appropriate and useful to draw out broader insights of value. This can engage many of the scholars already explicitly focused on deliberative systems in practice. Some of the emerging empirical research in this field adopts this strategy explicitly. Boswell et al.’s (forthcoming) recent analysis of transmission in deliberative systems is a good example. This paper draws together the three separate authors insights on their three distinct projects—one on honour killing in Britain and Germany, one an innovative institutional arrangement in New South Wales, and one the political debate on obesity in Australia and Britain. The point of the analysis is not to draw out rigid similarities and discrepancies but to identify a series of affinities that can shed light on this crucial but understudied and undertheorised aspect of deliberative systems. The pooling of insights in this way ensures that the findings speak beyond the immediate audiences on multiculturalism, institutional innovation and public health, respectively, and resonate with a broader range of scholars working on deliberative systems.

**Conclusion**

The message we have attempted to communicate in this paper is a simple but important one: the turn to compare deliberative systems in practice should avoid the risk of bifurcation, with scholars having to make a choice between either being too systematic, on the one hand, or too idiographic, on the other. This is important because as empirical researchers begin responding to
the systemic turn in deliberative democratic theory, comparison must be at the heart of their endeavour. We have shown that the dominant approaches to comparative democratization—naturalist comparative political science and interpretive area studies—are ill-equipped to provide much in the way of useful insights. The former cannot say much meaningful about deliberative systems. The latter cannot enable meaningful comparison. Neither approach alone, nor in combination, can shed sufficient light on deliberative systems in practice. And so we promote two alternatives from the interpretive margins of comparative political science that are better placed to make up for these limitations; designing for family resemblances and responding to eclectic affinities. Both approaches, we hold, are sensitive to the contextual complexities and shifting, fuzzy nature of the systems conception. Both, in different ways, can tell us a great deal about why and how deliberative practices and institutions emerge, flourish, interact, shift, or fail, and why and how they enable, enhance or undermine the democratic and deliberative qualities of the system overall.

The implications for the research agenda moving forward are two-fold. One is to resist efforts to entirely systematise the study of deliberative systems. What naturalist research can tell us about deliberative systems, it can tell us very robustly and precisely. The trouble is it cannot tell us all that much. Deliberative democracy remains a rare subfield of political science in its persistent tolerance for a plurality of empirical approaches. Our hope here is simply for this to be extended as the systemic turn takes hold. Two, in this vein, is not to discourage detailed case work about deliberative systems, but to take the steps we suggest in order to ensure its vital insights do not get lost. The pay-off will be a richer seam of empirical material on deliberative systems in practice. Such work is likely, in turn, to inform a more nuanced and detailed account of deliberative systems in theory.
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