Course title

A03 Comparative Research Designs

Instructor details

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Short Bio

Benoît Rihoux (Ph.D., political science) is Professor of political science at the Centre de science politique et de politique comparée of the Université catholique de Louvain (Belgium). His substantive research interests include political parties, new social movements, organizational studies, political change, and policy processes. He is manager of the COMPASSS international research group (http://www.compasss.org) on systematic comparative methods and plays a leading role in the development and refinement of these methods, bringing together scholars from Europe, North America and Japan in particular. He is also joint convener of international initiatives around methods more generally, especially through the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR). He has recently published Innovative Comparative Methods for Policy Analysis: Beyond the Quantitative–Qualitative Divide (Springer/Kluwer, ed., with Heike Grimm, 2006) and Configurational Comparative Methods: Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) and Related Techniques (Sage, ed., with Charles Ragin, 2009), and has published extensively on systematic comparative methods (QCA in particular) and their applications in diverse fields – especially policy- and management-related – with interdisciplinary teams. More through: http://www.uclouvain.be/en-331932.html.

Prerequisite knowledge

Note from the Academic Convenors to prospective participants: by registering to this course, you certify that you possess the prerequisite knowledge that is requested to be able to follow this course. The instructor will not teach again these prerequisite items. If you doubt whether you possess that...
knowledge to a sufficient extent, we suggest you contact the instructor before you proceed to your registration.

Little specific prior knowledge is expected. Any prior training in qualitative and/or quantitative methods is of course an asset, but by no means a requirement. The participants should simply be willing to reflect openly about their research design – one of the messages of the course being: “there is no ‘best’ or ‘one-size-fits-all’ research design”.

**Short course outline**

The purpose of this course is to provide training on all aspects that enable a researcher to conceive and conduct the most appropriate comparative research design – the latter broadly defined as any research enterprise that comprises at least two ‘cases’ or observations. On the one hand, the course will cover fundamental questions ‘upstream’ of practical and hands-on choices: what is comparison? Why compare; what is the added value of comparison? What should be the ‘mindset’ of a good comparative researcher? What is the link between a research puzzle and the choice for a comparative research design? What would be the alternative(s)? At which level(s) should the ‘cases’ be envisaged? Etc. On the other hand, the practicalities of different types of comparative research designs will be examined in detail, by following all the hands-on steps: (1) prior arbitrations and ‘casing’, i.e. the definition of the cases; (2) case selection, through more basic or more advanced strategies; (3) collecting and managing comparative data; (4) comparative data analysis. An introductory module on QCA (as part of a comparative research design), both as an approach and a set of techniques, is also provided. Lectures and interactive sessions alternate, with ample time for questions/answers, open discussions, and ‘solution-finding’ for the participants’ individual projects.

**Long course outline**

The purpose of this course is provide training on all aspects that enable a researcher to conceive and conduct the most appropriate comparative research design – the latter broadly defined as any research enterprise that comprises at least two ‘cases’ or observations.

On the one hand, the course will cover fundamental questions ‘upstream’ of practical and hands-on choices: what is comparison? Why compare; what is the added value of comparison? What are the logical underpinnings and mental operations behind comparison? What should be the ‘mind set’ of a good comparative researcher? What should be his/her goals? What is the link between a research puzzle and the choice for a comparative research design? What would be the alternative(s)? Does one conceive and does one perform comparison in the same way when the ‘cases’ are situated at the micro (i.e. individuals), meso (e.g. organizations) or macro (e.g. political or policy systems) levels? Etc.

On the other hand, the practicalities of different types of comparative research designs will be examined in detail, by following all the hands-on steps: (1) prior arbitrations and ‘casing’, i.e. the definition of the cases; (2) case selection, through more basic or more advanced strategies; (3) collecting and managing comparative data; (4) comparative data analysis. As explained below in detail, steps (1) and (2) will be examined in greater detail.

In concrete terms, the course will be organized in 5 sessions, each one of them allowing time for open discussions and interaction.

On Day 1, after an introduction on all the practical and organizational aspects of the course, the main topic will be to frame comparative research in the broader context of a comparative approach. This necessitates to consider some epistemological issues underpinning comparison as such. Starting from the discussion of comparison as a basic mental operation, we will progress to comparison in the social sciences then to political science more
specifically. One core focus will be laid on the different goals of comparison, with practical examples. Then we will locate comparative research designs vis-à-vis other research designs, i.e. within the whole range of possible designs. We will also present all the practical steps of a ‘good’ comparative research design, with a focus on the major arbitrations to be made. The session will be concluded by the discussion of a first series of participants’ projects, with a focus on the goals pursued (why go for a comparative research design?).

On Day 2, we will first examine therefore “step 1” operations that lie upstream of the case selection step. Indeed quite a few core arbitrations must be made upstream, such as the formulation of the research question(s) and hypotheses, the correct use of concepts for the purpose of comparison, the number of cases one will be able to manage, and the choice between cross-country or within-country case selection. These issues are all linked to the question of “what is a case” within a comparative research design. Then we’ll go through a systematically survey all the main options for the core “step 2” operation: case selection. We will first envisage rather basic or simple strategies of case selection, from very small N to very large N, and following different criteria. The second part of the session will consist in the discussion of a second series of participants’ projects, with a focus on “casing” and case selection.

On Day 3, following the survey of the “step 2” operation, we will turn to more advanced or refined strategies, in particular taking into consideration issues of time/sequence and of multilevel phenomena. The pros and cons of each strategy will also be discussed. Then we’ll move on to hands-on ‘tricks of the trade’ on how to collect and manage data in a comparative research (“step 3”) – including ways to trouble-shoot and to make adjustments in terms of case selection as the research develops. In connection with this each participant will propose one book-length published comparative research as a potential “reference piece” displaying good practices (and probably also limitations) with regards to the steps 1 to 3 discussed in the course from days 2 and 3. One core point will be the case selection steps. The second part of the session will consist in the discussion of a third series of participants’ projects, with a focus on case selection (following) as well as data collection and management.

On Day 4, we’ll start by browsing through different ways to engage in comparative data analysis, from more case-oriented (or ‘qualitative’) to statistical or formal tools, through some other tools (such as QCA) geared towards intermediate-N research designs. The pros and cons of each one of these tools will be discussed in short, as well as the potential and difficulties of triangulating, sequencing or ‘mixing’ different data analysis techniques. Then the largest part of that session will be interactive, in the form of a series of parallel workshops in sub-groups in which (1) each participant will raise one core problem/arbitration he/she faces in his/her research project; then (2) the group will debate and try to come up with an “informed solution” to each problem/arbitration; and finally (3) the instructor and teaching assistants will circulate among the groups and criticize/comment upon the proposed solutions.

Finally, on Day 5, we will focus on one particular strategy to conduct intermediate-N comparison, QCA (Qualitative Comparative Analysis), which will first be presented as an approach with specific goals and assumptions. We’ll also survey the different potential uses and types of data that can be processed through QCA. Then we’ll wrap up by “revisiting” some of the core points of the course – with a focus on the strengths of comparative research designs, but even more on main perils or caveats of comparison. The goal is that each participant will become more aware about the ways to “mis-compare” – and hopefully avoid this in his/her own research. This will be followed by an open interactive session, discussing points still to be clarified, points of debate or disagreements, remaining questions and answers about participants’ projects, etc.

In the afternoon of day 5 (optional, additional session), we’ll introduce more applied aspects of QCA, i.e. how to use QCA as a set of techniques, following a basic QCA protocol, with real-life data, from A to Z (including software use replicated by the participants on their laptops, and trouble-shooting), using the most straightforward technique, csQCA (crisp-set QCA). Based on this, we’ll discuss various potential refinements, as well as strengths and limitations of QCA.
Insofar as possible, each participant is encouraged to bring his/her own research questions & hypotheses, his/her first thoughts and difficulties (if any) in terms of case definition and case selection, and (if applicable) any data he/she has already compiled. The course is designed to help each individual participant make his/her most appropriate choices in terms of comparative research design. Each participant will be able to reflect and to work on his/her own project as we follow the sequence of more fundamental and then more applied steps. Insofar as possible, we’ll use some input from the participants’ own projects in each one of the 5 sessions (in the interactive parts).

Connections with other courses:

- This course can be taken as a stand-alone course, but it has been designed as an introductory course, particularly in the view of best preparing participants to different intermediate-level courses at the ECPR Summer School – in particular (non-limitative list) Methodologies of Case Studies, QCA and Fuzzy Sets and Mixed Methods Designs (labels may be subject to change).

- Note that this course is not a specialized course on QCA. Some of the main features of QCA (both as an approach and a set of operations incl. software) will be presented, but full training on QCA is to be followed in the 2014 two-week Summer School course.

- The course may also be of interest for participants engaged in ‘thick’ observational work (e.g. ethnography, participant observation, interviews, …) as well as participants interested in following more formalized or statistical approaches (large-N statistical techniques, experiments, …), especially if their populations and/or samples are not so obvious to circumscribe.

- This course has a more specific focus than the other introductory course on Research Design Fundamentals (Kropivnik).
Day-to-day schedule (Monday 17 February to Friday 21 February)

Each day = 3 contact hours (morning), split in two 90’ sessions – except day 5: one additional afternoon session: introductory QCA workshop (optional, for those interested)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Days</th>
<th>Topic(s)</th>
<th>Details [NB : incl. timing of lecture v/s lab or fieldwork etc. hours]</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Day 1</td>
<td>1. Overall introduction (30’)&lt;br&gt;2. Fundamentals : the comparative approach (60’)&lt;br&gt;3. Hands-on research comparative design, introduction (30’)</td>
<td>1. <strong>Overall introduction</strong>&lt;br&gt;Presentation of course, teaching team, course structure, practical organization, assignments, logistics etc.&lt;br&gt;2. <strong>Fundamentals : the comparative approach</strong>&lt;br&gt;- comparison as a mental operation&lt;br&gt;- comparison as the basis of experimental science&lt;br&gt;- comparison in the social sciences: ‘indirect experimentation’?&lt;br&gt;- Mill’s principles in a nutshell: the Method of Agreement, the Method of Difference and the Method of Concomitant Variation&lt;br&gt;- the goals of comparative research in political science: from single cases to modest generalization to broader generalization&lt;br&gt;- comparison as a ‘synthetic strategy’ between case-oriented and variable-oriented research, between Causal Process Observation (CPO) and Data Set Observation (DSO)?&lt;br&gt;- comparison, taxonomy and typology-building&lt;br&gt;- 3 contrasted goals: co-variational analysis v/s causal-process tracing v/s congruence analysis&lt;br&gt;- wrapping up: “why compare?”&lt;br&gt;3. <strong>Hands-on research comparative design, introduction</strong>&lt;br&gt;- locating comparative research design(s) vis-à-vis other research designs (typology of research designs)&lt;br&gt;- all practical steps of a ‘good’ comparative research design: the full sequence in a bird’s eye view&lt;br&gt;<strong>Interactive session (1) (60’)</strong>: discussing individual participants’ projects: “why go for comparison?”</td>
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<td>Day 2</td>
<td>4. Hands-on comparative research design, step 1 (upstream) (45’)&lt;br&gt;Hands-on comparative research design, step 2 (case selection – basic strategies) (45’)&lt;br&gt;Interactive session (2) (90’)</td>
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<td>4. <strong>Hands-on comparative research design, step 1 - upstream</strong>&lt;br&gt;- linking research questions to theories to hypotheses to potential ‘cases’&lt;br&gt;- assessing validity and plausibility; how to make concepts ‘travel’ across different contexts&lt;br&gt;- ‘what is a case?’ Choosing the appropriate level(s) of analysis (micro, meso, macro), defining the adequate units of analysis or ‘cases’&lt;br&gt;- arbitration: the depth v/s breadth trade-off – small-N, intermediate-N and larger-N designs&lt;br&gt;- arbitration: cross-country v/s within-country or within-system case selection&lt;br&gt;- dealing with the time dimension and processes&lt;br&gt;5. <strong>Hands-on comparative research design, step 2 - Case selection – basic strategies</strong>&lt;br&gt;- the single case study as a comparative research design? About counterfactuals&lt;br&gt;- binary comparison (most similar cases)&lt;br&gt;- binary comparison (most different or contrasted cases)&lt;br&gt;- “most similar systems” designs&lt;br&gt;- “most different systems” designs&lt;br&gt;- global (large-N) designs&lt;br&gt;<strong>Interactive session (2):</strong> discussing individual participants’ projects: “casing” and case selection</td>
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<td>5. <strong>Hands-on comparative research design, step 2’</strong>&lt;br&gt;- more flexible designs – leaving case selection ‘semi-open’&lt;br&gt;- sequencing “most similar” and “most different” systems designs (Levi-Faur)&lt;br&gt;- multilevel designs (Denk)&lt;br&gt;- “nested” designs (Lieberman)&lt;br&gt;- using MSDO/MDSO as a support tool&lt;br&gt;6. <strong>Hands-on comparative research design, step 3</strong>&lt;br&gt;- the challenge of collecting ‘comparable’ data across cases in cross-national research? How to gain ‘intimacy’ with the cases?&lt;br&gt;- how to compile and manage your data? Lessons from the experience (archival, directories, text files, generic data management software, specialized data management software)&lt;br&gt;- troubleshooting: what if the initial design appears too ambitious?&lt;br&gt;- a critical discussion of some “good examples” in political science literature (from steps 1 to 3)&lt;br&gt;<strong>Interactive session (3):</strong> discussing individual participants’ projects: case selection (following) and data collection/management&lt;br&gt;[timing of session: 90’ lecture, 90’ interaction]</td>
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<td>Day 3</td>
<td>6. <strong>Hands-on comparative research design, step 2’ – Case selection – more advanced strategies</strong>&lt;br&gt;- more flexible designs – leaving case selection ‘semi-open’&lt;br&gt;- sequencing “most similar” and “most different” systems designs (Levi-Faur)&lt;br&gt;- multilevel designs (Denk)&lt;br&gt;- “nested” designs (Lieberman)&lt;br&gt;- using MSDO/MDSO as a support tool&lt;br&gt;7. <strong>Hands-on comparative research design, step 3 - data collection &amp; management strategies and fine-tuning of case selection</strong>&lt;br&gt;- the challenge of collecting ‘comparable’ data across cases in cross-national research? How to gain ‘intimacy’ with the cases?&lt;br&gt;- how to compile and manage your data? Lessons from the experience (archival, directories, text files, generic data management software, specialized data management software)&lt;br&gt;- troubleshooting: what if the initial design appears too ambitious?&lt;br&gt;- a critical discussion of some “good examples” in political science literature (from steps 1 to 3)&lt;br&gt;<strong>Interactive session (3):</strong> discussing individual participants’ projects: case selection (following) and data collection/management&lt;br&gt;[timing of session: 90’ lecture, 90’ interaction]</td>
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Day 4

8. Hands-on comparative research design, step 4 (methodologies for comparative data analysis) (45’)

Interactive session (4) (135’)

8. Hands-on comparative research design, step 4 - Methodologies for comparative data analysis

- case-oriented tools
- *comparative methods* strictly defined: from ‘soft’ cross-case comparison to systematic cross-case analysis to variants of QCA (Qualitative Comparative Analysis) and Set-theoretic methods
- statistical tools
- comparing the strengths and weaknesses of each tool
- triangulating, sequencing or mixing data analysis techniques to improve comparison?

**Interactive session (4):** workshops in sub-groups: I core problem/arbitration per participant discussed in each sub-group so as to find “informed solutions”; then critique of these solutions by the instructor and teaching assistants
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Session Description</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Day 5</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>MORNING</strong></td>
<td>(compulsory)</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>Introduction to QCA in a comparative research design: QCA as an approach (90')</td>
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<td>10.</td>
<td>Conclusion : adding leverage through comparison – and reflecting on how one performs comparison (30')</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interactive</td>
<td>session (5) (60')</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>AFTERNOON</strong></td>
<td>(optional)</td>
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<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Introduction to QCA in a comparative research design: QCA as a set of techniques (ca. 120')</td>
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# Day-to-day reading list

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Readings (please list at least the compulsory reading for the scheduled day)</th>
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Day 4  


Day 5  


Among those readings, 2 recent books are particularly recommended for purchase:
- for participants looking for an overall introduction to QCA, including the basic applied protocols: Rihoux & Ragin (eds, 2009);
- for participants looking for an up-to-date discussion on strategies for comparative cross-case designs: Blatter & Haverland (2012).

### Software and hardware requirements

**Software programmes**

On days 1-4, no particular software will be used intensively throughout the course, apart from the usual suites (such as MS Office). The strengths & limitations of different software to compile, store & manage numerical and non-numerical data about a ‘certain’ number of cases
(from small-N to larger-N situations) will be discussed – primarily Excel, Access, SPSS & NVivo, but these software will not be used hands-on in lab.

On day 5, participant willing to replicate QCA analyses ‘live’ should bring a laptop and install two freeware programs: TOSMANA and fs/QCA, accessible through: http://www.compasss.org/software.htm.

**Hardware requirements**

Each participant willing to replicate QCA analyses on day 5 should come with a laptop (see previous point).

**Literature**

Further readings (recommended – not compulsory; various other readings will be mentioned during the course, depending on the participants’ projects and practical difficulties encountered):


**Lecture room requirement**

Seminar-type room, with chairs/tables that can be moved around (to enable interaction and small group work)

**Preferred time slots**

Morning. NB: need to also use the room on Friday afternoon.