

## **Advancing Comparative Political Communication Research: New Frameworks, Designs and Data**

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### **Outline**

For a long time comparative studies in the subfield of political communication have been rare. This is mainly due to a lack of interest in comparative methodology on the part of communication scholars and a lack of interest in mass communication on the part of comparative political scientists. Kindled by the recent works of Esser and Pfetsch (2004) and Hallin and Mancini (2004), however, comparative political communication studies are on the rise and are even becoming fashionable. A consensus is emerging that more cross-national comparative research is needed to fully understand the role of social, cultural and institutional differences in political communication. Just as the study of comparative politics has greatly enriched our understanding of politics in general, the growing 'system sensitivity' in political communication can enhance our understanding of communication flows in the political process. However, the growing interest in comparative political communication research has not been translated into real scientific progress as many theoretical and methodological problems have remained unresolved. This workshop plans to stimulate the scholarly debate about both theoretical and methodological aspects, and will discuss rigorous empirical research that will help advance this new subfield.

Progress in newly emerging fields depends on identifying well-defined concepts that can serve as a foundation for widely-shared **theoretical frameworks**. As Pippa Norris (2009) said, without a theoretical map or conceptual compass comparativists remain stranded in Babel. Although various studies have proposed middle range concepts for the comparative study of political communication, few others have taken them up, developed them further, or integrated them into larger frameworks. An ambitious exception is the classification of three media/politics models by Hallin & Mancini (2004). Although immensely useful, problems remain. There is a tendency among some scholars to unreflectively "apply" their typology to any country sample and topic without questioning its applicability, whereas other scholars criticize it for being too descriptive, western-centered and non-empirical. There are also **methodological uncertainties** related to this need to advance the conceptual foundation of comparative political communication research. How do we analyze case studies and two-country studies adequately? Should we focus on small-N or large-N studies, on *most similar* or *most different systems* designs? Shall we continue to improve our typologies or concentrate on explanatory research? These and other methodological questions will be addressed during this workshop – by way of either conceptual papers or empirical papers presented by the participants.

### **Objectives**

Thirty-five years ago Blumler and Gurevitch (1975) urged their colleagues in political communication to adopt the comparative method. After considerable hesitation this advice was followed. Today the question has rather become 'how' to conduct comparative research that is compatible with the realities of increasingly globalized and fragmented political communication systems. While this workshop is open to the topics and units of political communication being compared, we ask the participants to be explicit about their research goals and strategies, theoretical concepts and frameworks and the methods and measures of their study. We welcome sophisticated empirical

studies and conceptual essays that reflect on the progress of this subfield. The aim of the internal discussions (and a potential publication) will be to significantly advance both the level of theory and methods employed in political communication research. The workshop may also contribute to replacing the American-centric narrative prevalent in much of the earlier political communication literature by establishing and promoting new frameworks.

### **Participants**

We are convinced this proposal will be of interest to many scholars in the growing field of political communication. We also welcome scholars of comparative politics who incorporate media or communication processes into their studies. We expect papers submitted to this workshop to pay special attention to the comparison of political systems (or subsystems) or to address political communication processes that transcend the nation-state. The units of comparison can address all aspects of political communication ranging from communicators, message content, media structures, media-politics relationships, to communication use and effects. The "sites" of comparison may range from campaigns and issue debates to political processes and institutions. The presentation and discussion should focus in part on the pros and cons of the comparative design and on how to advance the subfield of comparative political communication research theoretically and methodologically.

### **Key References:**

- Blumler J and Gurevitch M (1975) 'Towards a comparative framework for political communication research'. In: Chaffee S H (ed.) *Political communication: Issues and strategies for research*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 165-193.
- Esser F and Pfetsch B (2004) *Comparing political communication. Theories, cases and challenges*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Hallin D C and Mancini P (2004) *Comparing media systems. Three models of media and politics*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Norris P (2009) 'Comparative political communications: common frameworks or Babelian confusion?'. *Government and Opposition*, 44(3): 321-340.