Central European University
MA Course, Fall Semester 2017

POLS 5121
Comparative Case Study Research

Instructor
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Classes
Tuesday 09.00-10.40 (room TBA) and Thursdays 09.00-10.40 (room TBA)

Office hours
Mondays 13.30-15.30 and Thursdays 11.00-13.00.

Credits
2 CEU credits, 4 ECTS credits.

Course description
The aim of this course is to familiarize students with some of the main approaches to doing case-based research, whether single case studies, paired comparisons, or qualitative comparisons with a small number of cases. It covers cross-case and within-case analysis, X-based and Y-based studies, case-oriented and variable-oriented research. While the focus is on how to draw descriptive and causal inference based on systematic, mostly qualitative, empirical evidence, the course also engages with questions of ontology and epistemology. The basic idea is that we can learn from the guidelines available in the literature as well as from best practice.
The course is organized around the number of cases available to the researcher, starting from $N=1$, a single case study, to $N=2$, a paired comparison, to small-$N$ comparisons. Each week, we examine both the advice of the methodological experts and the empirical research done by political scientists. The course starts in the second half of the fall term with two sessions per week.

**Course requirements**

No prior knowledge is assumed. Students are expected to be present at all seminars and to come prepared. If you are unable to attend class, you should notify the instructor via e-mail prior to the session.

**Assessment**

- Five “reflections” (10% each)
- One final paper (40%)
- Active seminar participation (10%)

The final 30 minutes of week 1 to 5 are reserved for a reflection by the students on what they have learned that week. This exercise is done in-class. With full access to the reading and their notes, students write down on paper what they see as the main lessons from that week. The “self-reflection on learning” will be returned before the first session of the following week with comments and a grade. For the student, this results in fast feedback on progress. For the instructor, the student self-reflections help in assessing student learning processes, allowing for timely assistance. Details about the format of the “reflections” will be provided in the first session.

For the final paper, students are asked to choose, in consultation with the instructor, a small $N$ research design and to discuss its merits. The word limit is 1,000, everything included. The due date will be determined in consultation with the class. Each paper should be organized as follows: 1) Introduction of the study; 2) Methodological strengths; 3) Methodological weaknesses; 4) What you would do differently.

Active class participation is expected and graded. Some tips: participate regularly, make informed contributions, focus on the main points, formulate clearly, respond to others in the discussion, and demonstrate critical engagement.

Please note that for all assessments, late submission and violation of the word limit will result in a lower grade. The final paper should be uploaded on Turnitin and will be checked for plagiarism.

**Use of laptops and other electronic devices**

To improve the collective learning environment, the use of laptops and other electronic devices in the classroom is not allowed.

**Reading material**

All the course material is available in electronic form. The syllabus only contains the required reading. Each week, suggestions for further reading will be discussed in class.
Learning outcomes

At the end of the course the student should be able to:

- Reflect critically on the promises and pitfalls of qualitative small N research in political science;
- Synthesize the information gathered from the readings;
- Make an informed choice of research design, appropriate to the research question;
- Summarize arguments, assess evidence, and formulate an opinion;

Course schedule

Week 1.

The introductory sessions situate current methodological debates within the classic literature on the comparative method in political science.

Reading:


Week 2. N=1: Case studies

What can you do with a single case?

Reading:


Week 3. N=2 Paired Comparisons

When does it take just two? In other words, what can researchers do with a paired comparison that they cannot do with a single case or with more than two?

Reading:

Skocpol, Theda and Margaret Somers (1980) The Uses of History in Macrosocial Inquiry, Comparative


Week 4. Small-N comparisons, part 1

This is the first of two weeks devoted to a closer look at the three main approaches to small-N research, starting with the theory of co-variational analysis and an example.

Reading:


Week 5. Small-N comparisons, part 2

This week, we continue our exploration of the main approaches to small-N research, looking at process-tracing and congruence analysis.

Reading:


Week 6.

The final week consists of two parts. In the first session, we see how political scientists have used a variety of approaches to study the same phenomenon: democratization. The second session is reserved for a wrap-up discussion.

Reading: