

Rational Choice Theory and the Comparative Method: An Emerging Synthesis?

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Robert H. Bates, Avner Greif, Margaret Levi, Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, and Barry R. Weingast, *Analytic Narratives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

John Bowen and Roger Petersen, eds., *Critical Comparisons in Politics and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

B. Guy Peters, *Comparative Politics: Theory and Methods* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

Leading rational choice theorists have become increasingly interested in grounding their studies in detailed evidence from particular cases. In their already influential *Analytic Narratives*, Robert Bates and collaborators explicitly state that they “are motivated by a desire to account for particular events and outcomes” (Bates et al. 1998: 3). They view their chapters as making a contribution to “the ideographic tradition” in that they offer “in-depth investigations of events that transpired in particular periods and settings” (p. 10). Likewise, a recent volume on *Critical Comparisons in Politics and Culture*, edited by John R. Bowen and Roger Petersen, stakes out similar ground by exploring the connections between rational choice theory and anthropology. The volume’s contributors are united by a “shared commitment to describing empirical richness and accounting for it” (Bowen and Petersen 1999: 2). A key goal is to explore how rational choice theory can borrow from anthropology and thereby “richly describe the world, showing its complexity and variability” (p. 1).

In adopting such emphases, rational choice theorists address issues that have long been part of the scholarly tradition associated with the comparative method, the subject matter of Guy Peters’ *Comparative Politics: Theory and Methods*. This can be seen, for example, in rational choice theorists’ call for small-*N* research designs in which a limited number of cases are systematically analyzed. These

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theorists argue that a small number of cases should be selected on the basis of empirical puzzles and substantive problems (Bates et al. 1998: 13), even if this means engaging in “dependent variable driven” research (Laitin 1999). Likewise, rational choice theorists stress the importance of carefully controlled comparisons of highly similar or highly different cases, and they highlight the value of analyzing processes and mechanisms that link variables together (Bowen and Peterson 1999: 3-4; Bates et al. 1998: 12). In conjunction with these various concerns, the new rational choice literature encourages investigators to immerse themselves in their cases, including through “reading documents, laboring through the archives, interviewing, and surveying the secondary literature” (Bates et al. 1998: 11).

Perhaps most notably, this literature systematically downplays the importance of deductive research, while significantly upgrading the importance of analytic induction. Thus, Bates and collaborators call for an interactive relationship between theory and evidence, in which analysts reformulate initial theories in light of the actual histories of their cases. In this way, “the theory [is] shaped by the case materials” (p. 16). Likewise, there is an emphasis on the real trade-offs between theoretical generality and empirical validity, and a call for much attention aimed at getting the empirical facts right (Levi 1999: 155).

The new directions of rational choice theory might be seen as representing a triumph for the comparative method and small-*N* analysis in the field of comparative politics. At a minimum, one can hardly avoid the conclusion that rational choice theorists have come to advocate certain research orientations that small-*N* analysts have long been employing in their work. These long-standing orientations include not only the focus on a small-*N* and the concern with explaining particular outcomes, but also the effort to employ both inductive and deductive research and to balance historical detail with theory development.

Yet, it would be wrong to suggest that the new rational choice literature wholeheartedly embraces the comparative method and the associated small-*N* research tradition. Rather, rational choice theorists remain concerned with explaining events through the use of models and formal reasoning. Although giving up on the standards of a perhaps unrealistic kind of universalistic theorizing, their mission is still to demonstrate how the social world can be modeled under the assumptions of rational choice theory. In this sense, they differentiate themselves from traditional advocates of the comparative method who do not necessarily embrace a commitment to rational choice modeling. Indeed, rational choice analysts see their approach as offering a new synthesis of formal theory and the comparative method—a kind of “best of both worlds” solution to timeless debates over issues such as nomothetic versus ideographic analysis, and deductive versus inductive reasoning.

In this essay, I argue that the recent engagement of rational choice theorists with the comparative method is a welcome development for the field of comparative politics. A well-known danger of rational choice theory—appreciated by both its advocates and its critics—is that scholars can become too narrowly concerned with developing models, such that they fail to tell us anything useful about actual political processes. Arguably, the field of American politics has experienced this problem in the form a sterile research agenda motivated by certain strands of rational choice theory. By contrast, rational choice scholars in comparative politics seek to

guard against such tendencies by employing the comparative method and thereby remaining focused on the substance of politics.

At the same time, I express reservations about the possibility of any easy “best of both worlds” synthesis between rational choice theory and the comparative method. Real tensions exist between the logic of the comparative method and the logic of rational choice theory, and these tensions should not be downplayed or ignored. At the extreme, rational choice theory can undermine key advantages of the comparative method by directing attention away from rigorous hypothesis testing and by posing obstacles to the effective use of inductive research. Yet, I conclude that the worst of these tensions will be eased in the future provided that rational choice theorists continue to place less emphasis on model development and devote more attention to the traditional concerns of the comparative method.

In this article, then, I will focus on certain issues in recent rational choice writings related to the comparative method. My concern is less with the specific empirical claims offered in these studies, not because the question of empirical adequacy is unimportant (it is extremely important), but because this issue has been addressed in debates about rational choice theory elsewhere (e.g., Green and Shapiro 1994; Friedman 1996; Elster 2000; Bates et al. 2000; see also Munck 2001).

The Comparative Method

A good place to begin thinking about the new rational choice literature is by revisiting the central elements of the comparative method. The comparative method is of course not new; its application to politics was discussed three decades ago by Lijphart (1971), and countless innovations have taken place since this time (Collier 1993; Mahoney 1999; Munck 1998). At base, however, the comparative method remains concerned with the systematic analysis of a small number of cases for the purpose of generating and testing theories about the causes of important outcomes in these cases. Although this approach can still usefully be contrasted with statistical, experimental, and case-study methods, it often intersects with these other methodologies in complex ways in actual research practice (Collier 1998).

In *Comparative Politics*, Peters considers a remarkably wide range of issues related to the comparative method. He includes sections on different comparative research designs, types of comparative studies, levels of analysis, case selection, measurement, concept formation and use, levels of explanation, theory employment, meta-analysis, events data, case study designs, and statistical tools. Though Peters' analysis is not without errors,¹ it is full of useful insights and illustrations from substantive studies of comparative politics. I was particularly impressed with the considerable attention given to concept formation and usage, a topic that is often ignored in methodological writings (see Collier and Mahon 1993; Collier and Levitsky 1997). In the following discussion, I focus on three issues of central importance to the integration of rational choice theory with the comparative method: methods of hypothesis testing, the potential trade-off between conceptual validity and generality, and the use of induction to develop new concepts and theories.

First, the comparative method offers a range of procedures for testing hypotheses, and thus should not be seen as limited to the realm of discovery and hypothesis generation. Peters discusses several of these procedures, including Mill's

methods of agreement and difference, Mill's method of concomitant variation, and Boolean algebra. Other important methods include various kinds of "within-case" analysis, such as pattern matching, process tracing, event structure analysis, and causal narrative (see Mahoney 2000), and recent innovations drawing on fuzzy set theory (Ragin 2000). Given that these methods define the current state of the art, all scholars who seek to systematically test their hypotheses about a small number of cases need to employ one or more of them.

A second issue concerns the relationship between conceptual validity (i.e., the extent to which our concepts adequately fit our observations) and generality (i.e., the domain of cases to which explanations can be applied). Analysts who work within the comparative method tradition often select their cases on the basis of an empirical puzzle with the understanding that their argument may be not be generalizable to large numbers of additional cases. These analysts are often willing to sacrifice generality in order to maximize conceptual validity, and to avoid problems that can arise with causal heterogeneity when highly diverse cases are compared. In their view, conceptual validity is often lost in the effort to extend concepts and hypotheses to a large number of cases (see Peters 1998: chap. 4). Thus, while the constraint on generality in small-*N* analysis is a significant limitation, it can often be balanced by the substantial conceptual gains derived from in depth knowledge of particular cases (Collier 1998; Przeworski and Tuene 1970).

Finally, the comparative method provides a powerful basis for the development of new concepts and explanations (Peters 1998: chaps 4-5). This conceptual and theoretical development depends in part on scholarly imagination; but it also depends on letting case materials speak to analysts without being filtered through the heavy blinders of preconceived categories and theoretical orientations. Thus, numerous scholars, including Peters, have underscored the importance of inductively-driven research in the comparative method tradition for the creation of new concepts, new explanations, and new general theoretical orientations (e.g., Lijphart 1971; George 1979).

The following sections consider how rational choice theorists have employed the comparative method across these three areas.

Methods of Hypothesis Testing

Rational choice theory does not embrace any particular method of testing hypotheses; rather, as a tool for generating hypotheses, rational choice theory in principle can be used in conjunction with many different methods of causal assessment. However, given that the rational choice theorists considered here select only a small number of cases for investigation, they rule out the use of almost all statistical methods of hypothesis testing, and must rely on one or more of the small-*N* methods mentioned above to test their hypotheses.²

Unfortunately, in my view, advocates of the new rational choice theory have still not said enough about their methods of hypothesis testing. Of the various rational choice articles in the *Analytic Narratives* and *Critical Comparisons* volumes, most offer no discussion of the use of comparison and methodology for testing hypotheses. Two partial exceptions are David Laitin's (1999) comparative analysis of ethnic violence and Barbara Geddes' (1999) analysis of civil service

reform in Latin America, which are among the very best studies in the volumes. However, even these two thoughtful analysts stop short of identifying their specific strategy of causal inference. Based on my reading, both authors appear to be using variants of Mill's methods of agreement and difference, though Geddes seems to select cases on the independent variable with these methods, while Laitin selects on the dependent variable. In any case, a more explicit statement about the method of hypothesis testing used in these chapters would have allowed readers to better evaluate the proposed explanations.

One danger of not being explicit about methods of hypothesis testing is that analysts may treat briefly or simply ignore alternative hypotheses. In the case of rational choice theory, the error is specifically to assume that supporting evidence for a hypothesis derived from rational choice theory obviates the need to assess other hypotheses that are not derived from rational choice models. This assumption is clearly not tenable, but scholars who are too concerned with illustrating their pet theoretical framework can lose sight of this basic point. Of the articles in the volumes considered here, for example, very little attention is given to rival hypotheses outside of the rational choice tradition in the studies by Avner Grief (1998), Roger Peterson (1999), and Robert Bates (1998). A lack of adequate consideration of rival hypotheses is not unique to rational choice theory, but the tradition's concern with model elaboration does make it especially vulnerable to this problem. In this regard, rational choice theorists (like all theorists) can benefit by reminding themselves of the following standard of the comparative method: the value of a hypothesis ultimately depends on its explanatory utility when tested against other competing hypotheses. A hypothesis derived from the assumptions of rational choice theory—no matter how sophisticated the formal model—is of little value if it does not withstand rigorous empirical testing.

Beyond this, questions can be raised about the way these rational choice studies approach the dependent variable of analysis. One problem concerns clearly defining the dependent variable, a requirement of all small-*N* methods that analysts sometimes fail to meet (Collier and Mahoney 1997). In the tradition of rational choice analysis, this problem is particularly salient because scholars often devote substantial time to their models before considering what specific outcome to explain. In the volumes under review, for instance, some authors specify the different values of their dependent variables only well into the analysis, leaving readers uncertain about what specific contrasts are to be explained. For example, the specific values on the dependent variable for the cases analyzed by Avner Grief (1998) and Margaret Levi (1998) emerge only gradually in the course of the analysis, making it difficult to assess the arguments for these cases.

A second concern derives from the practice of rational choice theorists to restrict their attention to only certain dependent variables: those that can be addressed with formal theory. For example, such a method-driven as opposed to problem-driven approach leads Miriam Golden (1999) to suggest that scholars should limit themselves to asking questions about "small events" because, at least with the framework of rational choice theory, they can be more adequately answered than questions about more important outcomes (see also Geddes 1991). From the perspective of the comparative method, however, a basic standard holds that research should first and foremost be driven by important empirical questions; a partial

answer to a big question can often be as useful or even more useful than a plausible answer to a relatively small question.

Perhaps because big questions are inherently interesting, several of the authors situate themselves in relationship to a major dependent variable, but then ultimately explain only a limited aspect of this variable that is more amenable to rational choice theory. For example, Jean-Laurent Rosenthal (1998) limits his dependent variable to differences in taxation between France and England after initially indicating that he is interested in broad political divergences between the countries. This practice can sometimes breed confusion over what constitutes the dependent variable. For example, the main dependent variable in Barry Weingast's chapter is neither the Civil War nor the southern secession, as is sometimes assumed (Weingast 1998: 149). Rather, from my reading, the main outcome appears to be the emergence of a "sectional political crisis" in the 1850s after several decades of relative stability. Thus, Weingast does not argue that the failure to maintain the "balance rule" in the Senate (i.e., the provisions in the Missouri Compromise in which slave and free states were admitted in pairs such that the North and South had an equal number of states) caused the Civil War or even the Southern succession. Instead, he argues that the breakdown of the Missouri Compromise merely helped trigger a political crisis. In this sense, after raising the specter of a major dependent variable, Weingast ultimately develops a modest and relatively conventional set of claims about a limited dependent variable.

This failure of rational choice theory to use key insights from the comparative method in a clear and effective manner should be put in context. Part of the appeal of rational choice theory is its logical elegance and ability to formally model social behavior. Reputations in this field have been built by developing elaborate models and/or generating new hypotheses from existing models. Fewer professional rewards have been associated with actually testing hypotheses and considering them in light of rival explanations. According to Margaret Levi (1999: 154-55), one of the more methodologically self-conscious rational choice analysts working today, "There has been more emphasis on the development of formal theory than on how to use formal theory in the service of explaining actual events and choices." Thus, the problems I have highlighted are signs less of inherent problems of rational choice theory than the incipient nature of the engagement of rational choice theorists with the comparative method.

Insofar as rational choice theorists continue to engage the comparative method, one can expect the professional rewards associated with model construction to give further ground to those derived from developing valid explanations in which the actual confrontation of theory and evidence holds a privileged place. Moreover, inasmuch as rational choice theorists embrace the comparative method, they will likely become less interested in explaining "small events" that are amenable to rational choice theory, and more interested in addressing big questions using whatever explanatory framework—rational choice-oriented or otherwise—that offers the most leverage. Though there is evidence that these changes are now beginning to take place, the jury is still out on exactly how far rational choice theorists will be willing to move toward such a synthesis with the comparative method.

Generalization, Validity, and Case Selection

Concerning the second theme—the relationship between conceptual validity and generality—recent rational choice theorists are often quite explicit about sacrificing generality in order to obtain explanatory adequacy in the analysis of particular cases. In fact, the universe of cases to which their explanations are intended to apply is often of just few countries (or sometimes only one). While some have argued that game theory models “define theoretically with great clarity the universe of cases within which predictions should be expected to occur” (Geddes 1999, 201), in the new literature this universe of cases is quite small, and it often appears to be defined in terms of temporal and spatial boundaries, rather than more abstract scope conditions.

As noted earlier, sacrificing some generality to achieve conceptual validity is a relatively common move in the comparative method tradition. However, rational choice theorists face difficulties in taking advantage of the positive side of this trade-off. To apply the formal apparatus of rational choice theory, scholars must identify the relevant actors and decisions at stake in a given social situation. Such a process of modeling often leads to substantial simplifications concerning the nature of these actors and the possible decisions available to them. In other words, the act of modeling can force analysts to adopt categories that are highly generalized abstractions lacking sensitivity to the contextual features of particular cases (see Levi 1997: 21). The use of highly general categories might not pose a problem for those modelers who claim to generate hypotheses that can be applied across all times and places, but in the new rational choice literature the models are explicitly intended to yield testable hypotheses with a limited generality. The danger, then, is that the new rational choice literature might combine the worst of both worlds: a lack of explanatory generality with overly-stylized, non-contextualized concepts.

The possibility of this scenario becoming a reality arises in several of the studies under consideration. In many of these works, the shift away from historical narratives to models is accompanied by a considerable loss in conceptual validity. For example, while Grief clearly has a nuanced understanding of late medieval Genoa, his models lead him to speak rather crudely in terms of two highly aggregated “clans” that are assumed to act as cohesive strategic actors. A similar point might be made about Rosenthal’s reduction of the main actors in England and France to the “elite” and the “crown.” In these studies, formal modeling seems to lock the analyst into a pre-configured game in which actors and decision options are static and a-contextualized. While analytic simplification is of course necessary in any study, one of the advantages of selecting a small-*N* is that the analyst knows enough about each case to capture the fluidity of ongoing political situations in which the key decision makers frequently change, and in which the key decisions to be made shift with the evolution of the situation. Rational choice theory may in principle be able to model some of these nuances, but in practice scholars have rarely been willing to sacrifice parsimony and logical simplicity to do so.

In some empirical settings, rational choice assumptions about relatively fixed actors with steady preferences may be appropriate for small-*N* analysis. This is particularly true in institutional settings in which the rules of the game are fixed and transparent (see Evans and Stephens 1988: 732). For example, Geddes’ study

of civil service reforms in Latin America is reasonably convincing at a conceptual level because her simplifying assumptions make sense in the context of democratic legislatures in which formal rules govern behavior and political survival depends on reelection.

Yet, many of the most interesting questions of comparative politics take place outside of formal institutions, occurring in domains where political action cannot be so easily modeled without sacrificing conceptual validity. Recognizing this point, some formal modelers might be inclined to advocate a kind of method-driven research in which questions are limited to domains in which the simplifying assumptions of rational choice are sustainable. By contrast, opponents of formal modeling might be inclined to argue that rational choice theory has little place in the field of comparative politics beyond a few stylized areas where its simplistic assumptions hold. In my judgment, however, neither of these extreme positions offers a useful basis for understanding how rational choice analysis will evolve in the future.

Rather, I believe that certain currents in the new rational choice literature suggest a more plausible and satisfying solution. Namely, authors can use rational choice assumptions as a heuristic guide to comparative research rather than as a highly formalized apparatus of model construction. Such a solution will allow researchers to capitalize on the inherent strengths of small-*N* analysis, while avoiding the difficult choice of either sacrificing conceptual validity or limiting research to a narrow class of questions. An example of how this solution can work in practice is David Laitin's (1999) analysis of contrasting patterns of violence in the Basque movement and Catalonia. By utilizing rational choice assumptions simply as a heuristic for formulating hypotheses, Laitin develops a micro-foundational explanation that does not sacrifice conceptual validity. Although most of his independent variables are not directly derived from rational choice theory, one important aspect of his argument does draw on formal theory, specifically on Schelling's "tipping model" game. Yet, in employing this model, Laitin clearly subordinates his concern with modeling to the more fundamental task of actually explaining the outcomes at hand. Thus, he introduces the tipping model only in relation to his specific problem, wasting no time and energy on introducing the model for its own sake. His straightforward two-page discussion (Laitin 1999: 34-35) of the relevance of the tipping model for patterns of ethnic violence is a striking contrast to many other studies that devote huge portions of the analysis to abstractly elaborating models that ultimately jeopardize conceptual validity.

The Development of New Concepts and Explanations

As an emerging branch of small-*N* analysis, the new rational choice literature is well-suited to contribute to the development of novel concepts and explanations in the field of comparative politics. In the works considered here, some scholars pursue this agenda by developing new models tailored to illuminate their particular cases. For example, the articles by Geddes (1999), Grief (1998), Rosenthal (1998), and Weingast (1998) make valuable conceptual and theoretical contributions to the rational choice tradition by providing new formal apparatuses for shedding light on cases as different as the civil service reform in Latin America and the

political crisis on the eve of the U.S. Civil War. However, it is essential to recognize that these models are merely tools that can be used to generate testable propositions; they do not themselves entail any specific propositions. In this sense, the immediate contribution of general model formulation is to offer new “meta-theories” that other scholars can use to generate novel hypotheses, rather than to actually provide other scholars with empirically testable hypotheses.

Rational choice scholars also clearly want to contribute concepts and propositions that facilitate new theory in the sense of directly testable explanations. Whether utilizing a new or old model, they recognize the importance of analytic induction to this process. For example, Bates et al. (1998: 16) describe the process of hypothesis formulation as one in which “we move back and forth between interpretation and case materials, modifying the explanation in light of the data, which itself is viewed in new ways, given our evolving understanding.” In several of the articles considered here, induction facilitates the creation of new and interesting concepts and hypotheses. For example, through an iterated matching of evidence with theory, Golden conceptualizes strikes against layoffs as activities primarily directed at defending trade union organizations. This conceptualization leads her to the interesting hypothesis that strikes over workforce reductions will occur primarily when specifically union activists are targeted for job elimination by employers.

The effective use of induction for the creation of new concepts and explanations requires that scholars keep an open mind about evidence; induction is less helpful when scholars are deeply committed to a specific explanation even before considering the evidence. For instance, in the past, many Marxist analysts and structural-functional theorists were unable to effectively use induction to generate novel ideas of broad interest because their theoretical commitments too strongly colored their interpretations of the data. To some degree, rational choice scholars may now face a similar problem in terms of failing to recognize that explanations not well-situated within the rational choice tradition sometimes offer the most convincing answers to important questions in comparative politics.

Rational choice theorists may be currently divided among themselves between those who are willing to look at detailed historical evidence only through the heavy blinders of rational choice theory and those who keep a more open mind by allowing the evidence to speak for itself on relatively neutral theoretical terms. There are good reasons to believe that, in the medium to long run, scholars of the latter type are the ones more likely to have an important impact in the field of comparative politics. The main reason why is that these scholars are apt to invent new concepts and explanations that appeal to a wide audience of scholars; by contrast, those analysts who consider evidence only from within the assumptions of rational choice theory may have trouble breaking out of narrow theoretical cliques.

Conclusion

The new directions of rational choice theory represent a welcome development for the field of comparative politics. In the past, methodological statements by rational choice analysts often emphasized the importance of abstract model construction, universalistic theory building, and the inherent advantages of deductive

research over inductive research. By contrast, many rational choice analysts now embrace traditional concerns of the comparative method, such as explaining particular cases, relying extensively on both induction and deduction, and employing detailed within-case information.

Although this new literature might be seen as a “best of both worlds” synthesis of formal theory and the comparative method, I have argued that there are important tensions between the two traditions. Indeed, in the least optimistic scenario, the new rational choice literature undermines its characteristic strengths without being able to capitalize on the advantages of the comparative method. Thus, rational choice theorists have backed away from earlier arguments about the possibility of universalistic theorizing and the sanctity of deductive research, even as they face difficulties in enjoying the strengths of the comparative method in terms of hypothesis testing, conceptual validity, and theory development.

Given the tensions between rational choice theory and the comparative method, strong incentives may exist for theorists to either abort their effort to embrace the comparative method or even more thoroughly turn toward the comparative method to guide their research. I believe the latter scenario is the more likely outcome in the future. Rational choice theorists were drawn toward the comparative method in the first place because of the limitations of what Gerardo Munck (2001) calls a “purist” approach to this kind of research—i.e., treating rational choice theory as capable of providing full explanations of all outcomes across all domains of research. In turning to the comparative method to solve some of the problems associated with this purist position, new problems and tensions have not surprisingly emerged. However, it is unlikely that analysts will respond to these new problems by retreating to the indefensible assumptions of the purist approach. Rather, the more probable scenario is that analysts will be led further down the path of the comparative method, in which case their work will become increasingly indistinguishable from that presently found in the comparative method tradition. If this takes place, a new generation of more pragmatic rational choice analysts will be well-positioned to maximize their contributions to the study of comparative politics.

Notes

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1. For example, there is no logical basis for Peters' claim (p. 69) that a most similar system design can more effectively test hypotheses than other small-*N* strategies of causal inference. Likewise, while Peters (1998: 38) attributes the strategy of “parallel demonstration of theory” to Timothy Wickham-Crowley, this strategy was in fact developed by Skocpol and Somers (1980). Many other examples of errors of this nature could be given; one can also find countless spelling and grammatical errors. However, the most basic limitation is Peters' over-reliance on an approach similar to that offered in King et al. (1994). As Munck (1998) has shown, this kind of approach has some important shortcomings when employed in comparative research.
2. However, to the extent that the small-*N* researchers (rational choice or otherwise) gather observations through within-case analysis, they may be positioned to employ statistical analysis.

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