

# Comparative Politics



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Research Note

## Comparison Misconceived

Common Nonsense in Comparative Politics

*E. Gene DeFelice*

### **Introduction: Comparing Political Systems**

Research contributing to a general science of politics requires the use of concepts that overcome the limitations of partial application. Some political scientists have therefore attempted to develop concepts that would permit comparison among the entire range of political systems. David Easton's systems approach to political phenomena, for example, specifies that the conversion of support and demands into authoritative allocations is a process that operates in all political systems—ranging from the most democratic to the most totalitarian. Both the Anglo-American and Sino-Soviet systems can be assessed in terms of, say, support. The conceptual framework represented by the systems approach is designed to explore more than simply one class of political systems.<sup>1</sup> This does not mean that the levels of support actually found in extremely different systems need to be similar. Quite the contrary: it may be that in one system there is high or positive support, in another only acquiescence, indifference, or apathy, and in a third an actual withdrawal of all support so that there is incipient hostility or open opposition.<sup>2</sup> The point is that a measure of support may be applied even to those systems lacking support, and so the use of support as a common or universal conceptual dimension allows us to compare all political systems in order to determine not only their similarities but also their differences.

Analogous to support, *political culture* has been proposed by Gabriel A.

Almond as a central concept to be used in comparative politics. And, like support, political culture is intended to serve as a common criterion to facilitate the systematic comparison of the major types of political systems in the world, namely, the modern Western (Anglo-American and continental European), and non-Western traditional or transitional, and totalitarian systems.<sup>3</sup> There is nothing new in this desire to develop a set of concepts that would be applicable to the entire range of political systems. After all, Aristotle sought to compare the recognized political systems of his day by using a classification scheme that characterized regimes that were as unlike as polities and tyrannies. What *is* new is that we are in effect being advised that universal comparison is nothing but a comparative fallacy.

Over a decade ago Arthur L. Kalleberg, in a well-known and oft-cited article on the logic of comparison, maintained that comparison cannot be undertaken until after classification has been completed.<sup>4</sup> Classification is necessary, the argument runs, so that we can eliminate consideration of some of the existing political systems and proceed to compare or measure only those that are of the same class—the class in which the given property is present. The rest, the ones with no indications of the property's presence at the time, are to be set aside for the purposes of the given comparison. Only those political systems that have, say, a consensual or homogeneous political culture may be compared. This is why, according to Kalleberg, Almond *cannot* compare the Anglo-American and the totalitarian systems. Although recognizing that Almond conceives of totalitarian political culture as consensual in the neutral sense of mere apathy, we are still told that the two types cannot be compared, because the totalitarian type "does not exhibit the same attributes" as the Anglo-American.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, this conclusion is supposedly dictated by the fundamentals of scientific concept formation set forth by Carl Hempel.

It is important to note that if the logic of comparison does indeed preclude the universal application of the concept of political culture, then it does the same for Easton's concept of support.<sup>6</sup> In fact, it does the same for any concept. But, as we shall see, neither Hempel nor logic dictates that Almond's concept of support be limited to only similar political systems. The logic of comparison allows us to identify the similarities and dissimilarities of political systems that are as different as possible in respect to dimensions such as political culture and support. We shall also see that the methodological misdirection that has gone unchallenged for over a decade has more recently reappeared, albeit in a starkly different guise, in Giovanni Sartori's article on concept formation in comparative politics.<sup>7</sup> He, like Kalleberg, in effect advises political scientists in the name of sound methodology to classify before quantifying in order to restrict the universe of political systems to which a given scientific measurement will be applied.

Both authors are thereby prescribing procedures that are in fact, even if not in intent, dysfunctional for a general science of politics. It is therefore essential to

reconsider the logic of comparison in general, and of comparative concepts in particular, in order to demonstrate that contrasting political systems can be validly compared, and at any level of concept formation. In short, the logic of comparison has been misconceived, thereby creating a good deal of methodological nonsense in comparative politics.

### Classification and Comparative Concepts

Kalleberg prefaces his interpretation of the logical requirements of comparison with a brief account of the recent methodological revolution in the study of comparative politics. The revolution represents a new school of thought, with a heightened consciousness of the requisites of scientific method, that seeks to replace the traditional country-by-country approach with a truly comparative method of analysis.<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that Kalleberg does not take issue with this scientifically oriented new approach; rather, he presents methodological prescriptions that students of comparative politics must presumably follow if their research is to be a contribution to a science of politics.

The specific prescription that concerns us requires that classification be undertaken before quantification. In Kalleberg's words, "The first step . . . that must be taken before comparison or measurement can be made is classification." By *comparison* he means here nonmetrical ordering or, simply, ordinal measurement: "Comparison is a matter of 'more or less.'" Why classify first? Because "two 'objects' being compared must already have been shown to be of the same class," and apparently this can be accomplished only by classification, which determines beforehand what objects do indeed share a common attribute. Hence the view that "comparison can only be made after classification has been completed."<sup>9</sup>

But if we accept this view, we must be prepared to reject Abraham Kaplan's account of measurement methodology. Kaplan maintains that we do *not* first identify some quality or measurable attribute and then go about devising some way of quantifying it: "A procedure of measurement not only determines an amount, but also fixes what it is an amount *of*. We do not first identify some magnitude, then go about devising some way to measure it."<sup>10</sup> In other words, any procedure of quantification simultaneously includes identification of the property being assessed.<sup>11</sup> According to Kalleberg, however, the methodological need to classify before quantifying is derived directly from well-established empirical principles set forth by Hempel. Does a contradiction within scientific methodology thereby stand revealed? Or has Hempel been misinterpreted? Even a cursory analysis shows that a misinterpretation, a very serious one, has indeed occurred.

In discussing the strict meaning of *comparative concept*, Hempel specifies that it includes the condition that any two elements of the domain of application

“must be comparable in regard to the attribute under consideration; i.e., they must either have it to the same extent, or one must have it to a lesser extent than the other.”<sup>12</sup> Here he is presenting an important part, though only a part, of the definition of an ordinal scale. He is saying that whenever there is a comparative concept, the requirement that every pair of elements must stand in the specified relation is logically satisfied, that is, satisfied by definition. *But Kalleberg erroneously takes this important part of the definiens and treats it as if it were an empirical precondition of the definiendum.*<sup>13</sup> He evidently thinks Hempel is saying that before there is a comparative concept, there must first be a domain of application in which any two elements can be compared—that, in other words, the latter can and should be established prior to the former. But in actuality Hempel simply means to say what Kaplan said, namely, “What is measured and how we measure it are determined jointly.”<sup>14</sup> It is hard to see how anyone who purports to be following Hempel’s exposition of concept formation in empirical science can maintain otherwise. If such unscientific views are to be forthcoming, we should expect them to come forth from someone critical of Hempel’s scientific stance.

### **Concept Formation and Quantification**

Giovanni Sartori has little patience with those he labels “over-conscious thinkers.” These aren’t thinkers who are overly concerned with logic; indeed, he expresses the view that few political scientists have training in even elementary logic. Instead, an overconscious thinker is anyone who takes his standards of method from the physical sciences, who thinks that if political study has to be scientific it must start with Newton and end with Hempel. When one thinks logically, goes the implicit argument, one will reject Hempel’s scientific position; for we would be plain wrong and the victims of poor logic if we accepted the view that class concepts are ill-suited for the study of quantities and relations.<sup>15</sup> It comes as no surprise, then, to find that Sartori calls Kalleberg an overconscious thinker.<sup>16</sup> The surprise comes later, when we realize that Sartori’s idea of a conscious thinker is one who believes the taxonomical requisites of comparability are currently neglected or disowned, and we realize that Sartori is offering precisely the same methodological prescription as Kalleberg.

Says Sartori, “The major premise is . . . that quantification enters the scene after, and only after, having formed the concept.” What this means is easily revealed; for a careful reading of his lengthy elaboration of the “concept misformation” thesis shows that quantification in effect includes ordinal, interval, and ratio scaling, leaving concept formation in this context to refer exclusively to nominal scaling or classification. Hence Sartori’s major premise boils down to Kalleberg’s major conclusion: classification must logically

precede quantification. Furthermore, we are told this is so because “the sign ‘same’ established by the logic of classification is the requisite condition of introducing the signs ‘plus-minus.’”<sup>17</sup> Sartori thus presents not only the same prescription as Kalleberg, but also the same rationale. Only the terms differ.

Then again, even the terms are at times identical—as, for instance, in the following statements of the underlying axiom that both authors share. The first consists of Kalleberg’s (mis)interpretation of Hempel’s definition of comparative concept:

In short, two items being compared must be of the same class—they must either have an attribute or not. If they have it, and only if they have it, may they be compared as to which has it more and which has it less.<sup>18</sup>

This statement is nearly indistinguishable from Sartori’s:

Two items being compared must belong first to the same class, and either have or not have an attribute; and only if they have it, the two items can be matched in terms of which has it more or less.<sup>19</sup>

Both Kalleberg and Sartori, it appears, have been led astray by the ambiguity of the word “comparable.” If two things are said to be comparable, this usually means they are being represented as similar; but often it may mean instead that they can be assessed for likenesses and differences. It is in the first sense that we are warned against comparing apples and oranges. But it is still a proper procedure to compare these fruits in the second sense—as long, of course, as we take care to use a concept that is applicable to each. And the test of a concept’s applicability depends not on the actual presence or absence of the relevant characteristic, but rather on the *capability* of the item in question to exhibit that characteristic.<sup>20</sup>

By ignoring or forgetting these fundamental points, Kalleberg and Sartori have not only restricted the meaning of comparison to the sense of representing items as similar, but also narrowed the test of similarity down to the actual instead of the possible presence of a common characteristic. These moves in turn have permitted both authors to limit comparison to quantification, that is, to exclude classification as itself a form of comparison, and thus to prescribe that classification should precede comparison.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

The logic of comparison, we have seen, does not require that the political systems being compared be restricted to only one class at a time. We are not limited to the class of political systems determined beforehand to possess the attribute to be measured. A comparison at any level of measurement, from

simple classification to the most sophisticated quantification, establishes the presence or absence of the characteristic in question when it is applied. All levels of measurement share this "either/or" function. And since quantitative concepts can express not only the degree of an attribute's presence but also the fact of its absence, it is possible for the full variety of political systems to be included in comparative theories informed by the scientific approach.<sup>22</sup>

In the case of Almond's conceptual framework—to return to our earlier example—political culture is able to function as a general comparative concept applicable to contemporary political systems.<sup>23</sup> True, in terms of his typology, the totalitarian type does not exhibit the same attributes as the Anglo-American system; but comparison does not require that the same attributes actually be exhibited in all the things being compared. Instead, to repeat, all that is necessary in this regard is that the things compared be capable of possessing the same attributes. Here is precisely the point that allows us to avoid representing unlike things as at all alike (calling them comparable) when in reality they are not.

In sum, the comparative concepts developed by Almond, Easton, and others to serve the purpose of formulating a truly comparative analysis of political systems have not been found to fall short of the genuine requirements of the logic of comparison.

#### NOTES

1. David Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* (New York, 1965), p. 478; cf. Easton's earlier statement regarding the usefulness of a systems approach for comparative study, *The Political System* (New York, 1953), pp. 319-20.

2. Easton, "An Approach to the Analysis of Political Systems," *World Politics*, 9 (April 1957), 393-95; *A Systems Analysis*, pp. 163-64.

3. Gabriel A. Almond, "Comparative Political Systems," *Journal of Politics*, 18 (August 1956), 391-93, 397; Almond, "A Functional Approach to Comparative Politics," in Almond and James S. Coleman, eds. *The Politics of the Developing Areas* (Princeton, 1960), pp. 9-12, 16, 17, 24; Almond and G. Bingham Powell, Jr., *Comparative Politics; A Developmental Approach* (Boston, 1966), pp. 258-59. Cf. Arend Lijphart, "Consociational Democracy," *World Politics*, 21 (January 1969), 207-11.

4. Arthur L. Kalleberg, "The Logic of Comparison: A Methodological Note on the Comparative Study of Political Systems," *World Politics*, 19 (October 1966), 68-82.

5. *Ibid.*, 77.

6. Cf. Alfred G. Meyer, "Comparative Politics and Its Discontent," in Lucian W. Pye, ed. *Political Science and Area Studies* (Bloomington, [Ind.], 1975), pp. 104-05, for a criticism of not only Almond but also Easton in regard to the application of their concepts to the Soviet and East European countries.

7. Giovanni Sartori, "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics," *American Political Science Review*, 64 (December 1970), 1033-53.

8. Kalleberg, 69-72.

9. *Ibid.*, 74-77, 81.

10. Abraham Kaplan, *The Conduct of Inquiry* (San Francisco, 1964), p. 177.

11. Indeed, Kaplan even goes so far as to warn against "the naive idea that magnitudes can be conceived quite independently of procedures for determining their measure in particular cases"

(*ibid.*). I emphasize Kaplan's statements in order to make clear that this is a recognized principle of scientific methodology, not merely my view of it.

12. Carl Hempel, *Fundamentals of Concept Formation in Empirical Science* (Chicago, 1952), pp. 59-60. For a very readable account relating Hempel's classificatory, comparative, and quantitative concepts to political science, see Alan C. Isaak, *Scope and Methods of Political Science* (Homewood, [Ill.], 1975, rev. ed.), pp. 76-80.

13. For a classic discussion of the fallacy of mistaking an "analytic" (or logical or definitional) proposition for a "synthetic" (or factual or empirical) one, see A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover Publication, n.d., with 1946 Introduction; originally published in 1936), pp. 9, 57-59, 78, 147-48. More recently, see Samuel Gorovitz and Ron G. Williams, *Philosophical Analysis* (New York, 1965), pp. 35-36, 72.

14. Kaplan, *The Conduct of Inquiry*, p. 177.

15. Sartori, "Concept Misformation," 1033, 1036, 1040.

16. *Ibid.*, 1049.

17. *Ibid.*, 1036, 1038-39. Alternatively stated, "Differences in degree obtain only after having established that two or more objects have the same attributes or properties, i.e., belong to the same species" (1044). Here Sartori says the objects must belong to the same species, but elsewhere he says they must belong to the same genus. This would imply that the two terms, species and genus, are interchangeable. Yet his argument sometimes equates a genus to a class concept, and species to variables; and this semantic move means that the classify-before-quantifying injunction gains considerable force from Sartori's aristotelian analogy of genus-before-species. So, unless the forceful analogy is to be abandoned, Sartori's precondition for quantification must be that the items belong to the same genus.

18. Kalleberg, "Logic of Comparison," 76 (italics omitted).

19. Sartori, "Concept Misformation," 1038 (italics omitted).

20. Again, this is not merely my view of scientific methodology; a comparative or quantitative concept provides for a gradual transition from instances where the property it represents is very marked, says Hempel, to others where it is "nearly or entirely absent" (p. 54). And so, when Hempel said that any two elements had to be comparable in respect to a given attribute, he plainly did not mean this to exclude those cases from consideration that lack the attribute. Only those cases that lack the capacity to possess it are excluded.

21. Moreover, the ordinary ambiguity of "comparison" contribute to the credibility of this recommendation. For the implicit underlying injunction to "compare only comparable items" seems unchallengeable; and so it is, if we use *either* the first or else the second meaning of compare/comparable. But not if we switch meanings in mid-sentence. Thus, both "liken only like items" and "similarly assess only similarly assessible items" are obviously true by definition, whereas "similarly assess only like items" is nothing but a verbal mirage.

22. In a section of Sartori's article not considered here, on illustrations of comparative fallacies, he expresses concern over what he sees as the *petitio principii* fallacy involved in making unlike things look alike by applying a common or equivalent measurement. "For instance, if 'mobilization' is applied to a democratic polity the suggestion is that democracies mobilize more or less as totalitarian regimes do. Conversely, if 'participation' is applied to a totalitarian system the suggestion is that democratic [*sic*] participation also occurs, to some extent at least, in nondemocratic settings" (1052). Now, Sartori immediately concedes that some mobilization may occur in democracies, and participation in nondemocracies, but he implicitly insists that this be empirically established before applying such concepts to such systems. Simply applying the concepts will not do. How some degree of occurrence of mobilization or participation can be established before making the measurement is, however, never answered. The lapse exists, I suspect, because it is the concept's application itself that establishes whether the characteristic is present to some degree, or completely absent. In any event, what really matters in determining whether a concept is applicable to a specific case is whether the case is capable of exhibiting the specified concept. And so, given Sartori's concession regarding the possibility of democratic mobilization and totalitarian participation, there is no question but that each of the two concepts may be applied to both contrasting systems.

23. Almond's fourfold classification roughly consists of the Anglo-American, the continental European, the preindustrial, or partially industrial, political systems outside the European-

American area, and the totalitarian political systems. Kalleberg finds fault with this typology on the ground that it fails to fulfill the logical requirements of classification in both a major and a minor way. The lesser defect involves only the third category: The term "partially" is, says Kalleberg, "a 'more or less' concept that should be used in comparison rather than the 'either/or' type of concept that is used in classification. At the classificatory stage in scientific analysis 'more or less' concepts have no place" (p. 74). This patently absurd proposition—no one questions the logic of Aristotle's classification by number of rulers or the current practice of classifying by height, age, income, etc.—reflects Kalleberg's misunderstanding of the definition of comparative concept. Hempel, following Rudolf Carnap, uses *comparative concept* in the stipulated sense of nonmetrical ordering. But Kalleberg has evidently assumed the existence of a logical connection between this stipulative meaning and the lexical meaning of "comparison" as the identification of similarities and differences among things. Furthermore it is this unwarranted association that underpins his assertion that "comparison is a matter of 'more or less'" and that "nonmetrical ranking . . . must necessarily underlie adequate comparison" (p. 81). The plain truth is, of course, that it is a comparative concept, not the process of comparison, that is a matter of "more or less"; and any form of measurement, not only nonmetrical ordering, may be used for comparison. So classificatory concepts do have a place in comparison, and comparative concepts do have a place in classification. Hence Almond's "partially industrial" category does not impair his conceptual framework. The other, major, alleged deficiency is also spurious. The criticism here is that the proposed classification fails to provide a mutually exclusive and exhaustive set of categories for the domain being considered (p. 74). It fails, for example, to provide a unique class for the logical possibility of an Anglo-American country that is totalitarian. But the criticism relies on an incomplete understanding of the logic of classification. Granted, one kind of classification satisfies the requirements of exclusiveness and exhaustiveness by definition; "of greater significance for empirical science, however, is the case where at least one of the conditions of exclusiveness and exhaustiveness is satisfied not simply as a logical consequence of the determining criteria but as a matter of empirical fact" (Hempel, p. 5). Even brief, introductory treatments of classification acknowledge the prevalence of this type of analytical schema. See, e.g., Richard Rudner's *Philosophy of Social Science* (Englewood Cliffs, [N.J.], 1966), pp. 32-34. In Almond the domain consists of the major kinds of "empirical systems operative in the world today" (p. 392); and therefore, as long as there are no actual instances of omitted types of countries, the "missing" category will not be missed. The existing categories will be sufficient to provide an exclusive and exhaustive classification—not by definition but in fact.

### Announcement

The International Social Science Council, in conjunction with the Conjunto Universitario Candido Mendes (Rio de Janeiro), is setting up a biannual prize in memory of Stein Rokkan. Beginning in 1981, the prize amounting to U.S. \$2,000 will be awarded every two years for a seminal contribution in comparative social science research written in English, French, or German. Four copies of manuscripts, typed double-spaced, or of printed works should be sent together with a formal application for the prize to the International Social Science Council before March 31, 1981.

For further information, please write:

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