Systematic Configurational Comparative Methods: their Added Value for Policy-oriented Research

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8-course menu

1. Introduction
2. Definitions and labels
3. SCCA: key features
4. « Policy-oriented research » ?
5. Recent advances in SCCA ⇐ ⇒ policy analysis
6. Remaining challenges (‘generic’, methodological)
7. Remaining challenges (specific, policy-linked)
8. (open Conclusion)
1. Introduction

- From where do I speak?
  - Comparative politics \(\rightarrow\) systematic comparative methods
  - « small N » network (COMPASSS)
  - Dissemination, training & methodological debates (ECPR SG; new ECPR SumSch, Ljubljana 7-18 Aug. 2006; …)

- In which context do I speak?
  - Growing interest in SCCA methods
  - Still large (unexploited) potential
  - After ESF exploratory workshop (Sept. 2004) \(\rightarrow\) forthcoming module (Rihoux & Grimm (eds) 2005)

- What am I going to speak about? Broad overview of issues around SCCA and the connection SCCA \(\leftrightarrow\) PA
2. Definitions and labels

• « SCCA » (QCA, MVQCA, FS, [+ MSDO/MDSO])
  – Systematic (formal treatment; systematic examination)
  – Configurational (conception of cases & causality)
  – Comparative (‘regularities’, & some level of generalization)

• NB : both an « approach » and a set of « methods »
  (techniques, with software : fs/QCA, TOSMANA [& MSDO/MDSO])
3. SCCA: key features

• Original ambition/goal (Ragin 1987): « synthetic strategy »: “integrate the best features of the case-oriented approach with the best features of the variable-oriented approach”

[here below: QCA mainly; could be discussed for MVQCA & FS]

• The « qualitative » features of SCCA
  – Holistic view of cases
  – Case-sensitivity
  – Causality: “multiple conjunctural causation” (…)
  – Enables processing of “qualitative” data
• The "quantitative" features of SCCA
  – Enables the analysis of "more than a few" cases
  – Analytic method (variables: "conditions" and "outcome")
  – Replicability
  – Parsimony
  – Also enables processing of "quantitative" data
• Specifically designed for "small N" (intermediate-N) situations
• ...so is this a 'middle way'?
  – Yes...
  – ...and no
4. « Policy-oriented research »?

• NB: diversity of research questions, but one crucial distinction (// policy cycle):
  – Focus on agenda-setting and policy formulation (…)
  – Focus on policy implementation and evaluation (…)

• In both cases: quite many compatibilities/proximities with ‘SCCA thinking’
5. Recent advances & rejoinders (SCCA \(\leftrightarrow\) PA)

- Applicability (concrete applications)
- Transparency
- Improvements in comparative research design (case selection & model specification)
- Reduction of complexity
- “(partly) distinct paths” leading to a similar outcome: useful for policy practitioners
- Tests with different operationalizations (QCA, MVQCA, FS), on different types of data
• Applications at different levels (from int’l to local)
• Infusion of ‘case-based knowledge’ in the analytic procedure
• + combinations and confrontations with other methods (e.g. stat.; SNA; …)
• Possibility to bring closer together ‘theory’ with policy-driven, real-world questions.
6. Remaining challenges (generic, methodological)

• NB:
  – there are no « miracle methods »
  – Any comparative endeavour : tough dilemmas

• Case selection (similarities… and variation)

• Model specification
  – Abundance of ‘theories’
  – How to keep the number of conditions under control ? (one possible avenue : “remote” v/s “proximate” conditions, in a ‘two-set’ analysis : Schneider & Wagemann)

• Operationalization and data processing (measurement, validity, dichotomization thresholds etc.)
• Confrontation/dialogue with other methods:
  – ‘conventional’ and less conventional stat. analysis
  – SNA
  – “thick” case studies
  – Inclusion of the time dimension (how to combine with “sequence analysis” methods? (…))
  – Etc…
7. Remaining challenges (specific, ← → PA)

- Measurement and coding: specific difficulties (transparency requires... good justifications!)
- Dichotomization threshold (can have direct implications on the results of the analysis, also policy-wise)
- Treatment of “logical contradictions” (...) [NB: good heuristic device to improve model specification!]
- The parsimony/complexity tension (to what extent may ‘simplifying assumptions’ be used?) [also important, e.g. in terms of policy advocacy]
• Develop a better dialogue between ‘academics’ and ‘decision-makers’ (policy community)
  – Bring more ‘theory’ back in: is theory-guided work compatible with pragmatic policy-making needs?
  – Cope with ‘real-life’ policy research dilemmas: political constraints v/s methodological ‘purity’? (e.g. case selection, time constraints, access to data, …)
  – Providing ‘readable’ and ‘easy-to-use’ conclusions (?)
8. Conclusion

...open to discussion