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

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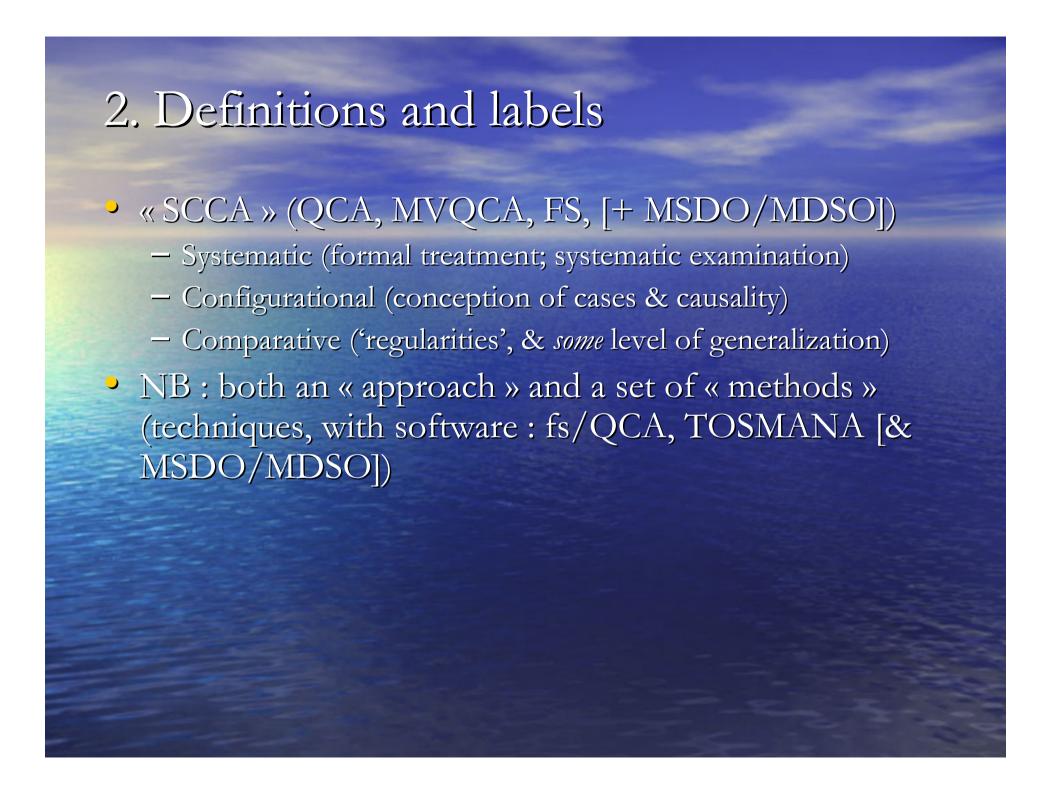
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1. Introduction

- From where do I speak?
 - Comparative politics → 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) → forthcoming module (Rihoux & Grimm (eds) 2005)
- What am I going to speak about ? Broad overview of issues around SCCA and the connection SCCA ← → PA



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

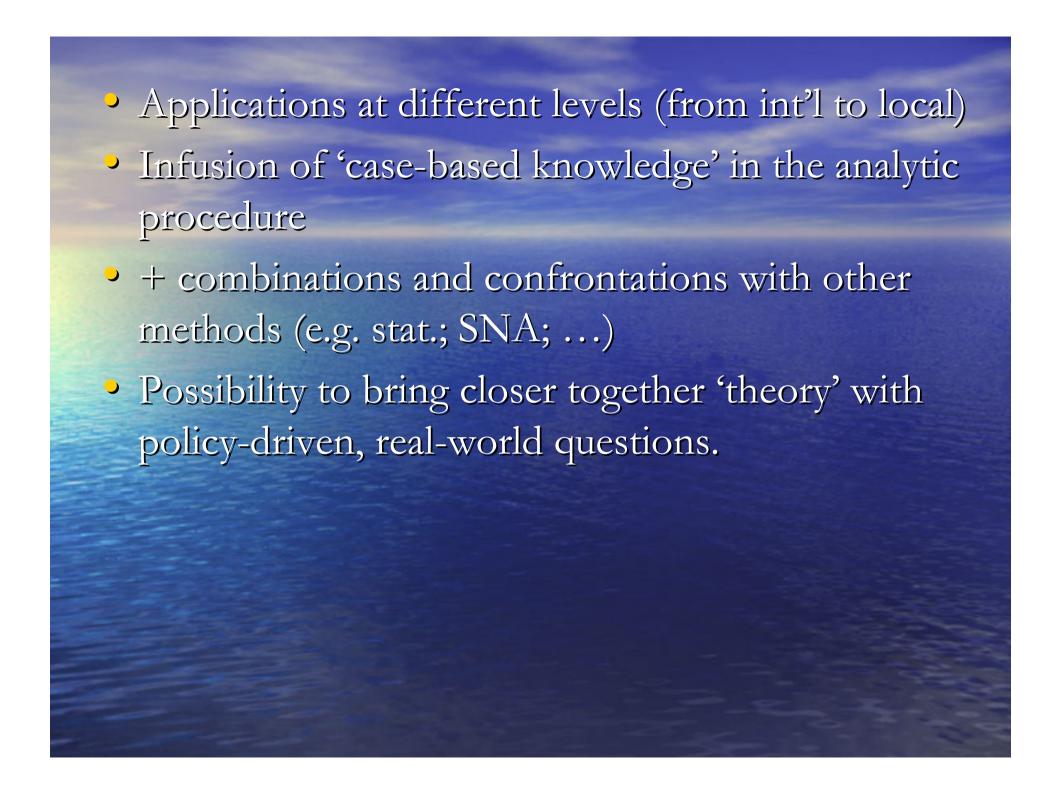
- The « quantitative » features of SCCA
 - Enables the analysis of « more than a few » cases
 - Analytic method (variables : « conditions » and « outcome »)
 - Replicability
 - Parsimony
 - Also enables processing of « quantitative » data
- Specifically designed for «small N » (intermediate-N) situations
- ...so is this a 'middle way'?
 - -Yes...
 - -...and no



- 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'

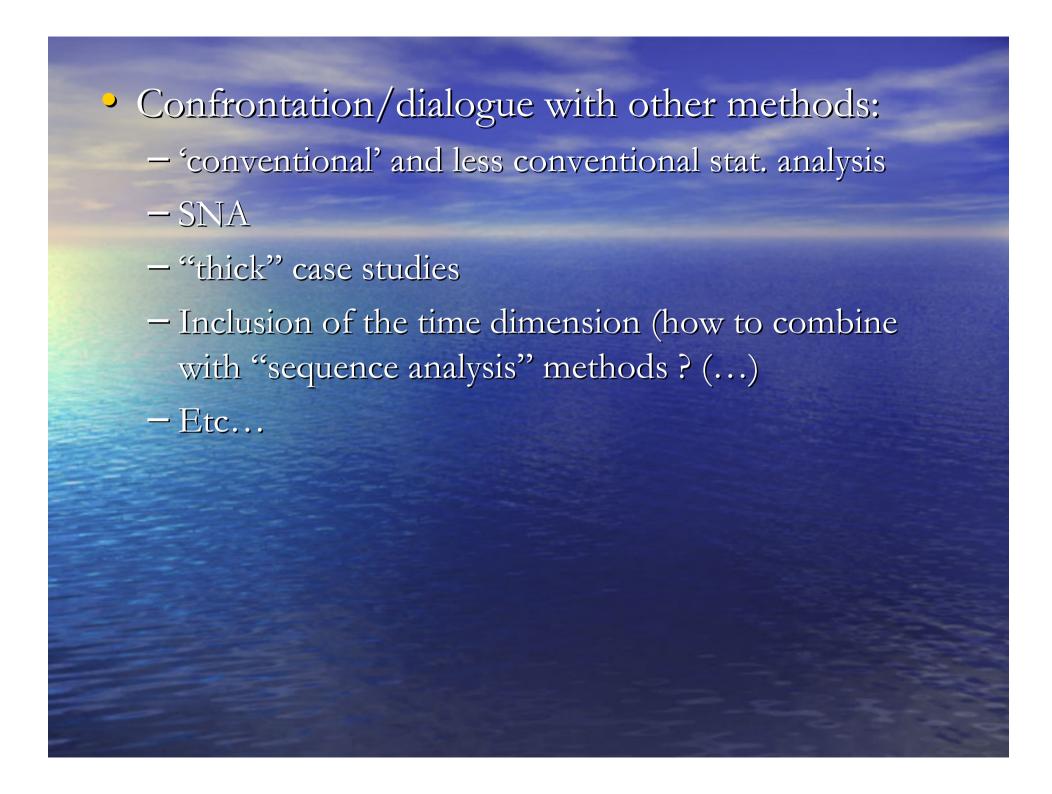
5. Recent advances & rejoinders (SCCA ← → PA)

- 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



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.)



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]



