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## Letter from the President **Data, Field Work and Extracting New Ideas at Close Range**

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At the annual meeting of the Comparative Politics Section Executive Committee in September 1998, the committee had an important discussion about problems of collecting and disseminating different types of data. This letter addresses some initiatives and concerns that grew out of our discussion.

The field of comparative politics has recently seen a wide-ranging debate on new approaches to theory and method. My comments below reflect the view, expressed by scholars coming to this debate from quite different perspectives, that these concerns with theory and method need to be reintegrated with a focus on the kind of inductive learning that can arise from deep engagement with data. I consider some questions about the academic infrastructure needed to support that reintegration, including the problem of encouraging the collection and dissemination of data sets, opportunities for publishing data-rich country studies, and issues of funding and training for field research. I also discuss the contribution of new ideas that can emerge from the close analysis of cases, and the choice between single-country and multi-country doctoral dissertations.

### ***Quantitative Data Sets***

The Comparative Politics Section has long had a strong interest in encouraging the development of publicly-available quantitative data sets as an essential foundation for cumulative research. Part of the background for this interest is the trajectory followed by the tradition of quantitative cross-national research. Notwithstanding a promising start in the 1960s, the initial payoff of this approach in terms of substantive findings was modest. This was due in part to shortcomings in the data sets then available, and also to the limited repertoire of statistical techniques conventionally employed at that time.

In the past 20 years, however, better data have become available,

new methodological tools have been developed, advanced training in quantitative techniques has become more common, and a rich body of work has emerged. Recent recognition for this work includes the award of the section's 1998 Luebbert Article Prize to Przeworski and Limongi's innovative study "Modernization: Theory and Facts" (*World Politics*, January 1997), which examines the emergence and persistence of democracy in 135 countries.

One of the problems in building a viable tradition of quantitative comparative work is that the enormous effort entailed in creating the requisite data sets is often not matched by corresponding professional rewards. Out of a concern with addressing one aspect of this problem of professional rewards, the Executive Committee has established a new Data Set Award, which complements the Section's book, article, and paper awards. The new award will be given annually for a publicly-available data set that has made a significant contribution to the comparative field. I have appointed a committee of Jennifer Widner (Chair), Barry Ames, and Peter Lange to make the initial award and to establish a framework for guiding future award committees.

#### ***Publishing Data-Rich Country Studies***

The executive committee also discussed opportunities for publishing single-country studies that present the richly-detailed qualitative data that are an indispensable foundation for comparative research. A central concern is that leading comparative politics lists, such as those of the Cambridge and Princeton University Presses, shy away from single-country studies, in part because the market for such books is considered too limited. As a consequence, the professional recognition that derives from being published with one of these prestigious presses is rarely bestowed upon what are potentially influential studies that are critical for the progress of our field.

What has now emerged is a new division of labor, in which a different set of presses has assumed a leading role in publishing high-quality country studies. In my own subfield – Latin American politics – this shift is exemplified by the list developed at the Pennsylvania State University Press by Sanford Thatcher. After two decades at Princeton Press, where Thatcher was well-established as one of the leading social science editors in the United States, he became director of the Penn State Press in 1989. In the past decade there, his approach to publishing books on Latin America has been based in part on the premise that, for quite a few countries, a strong market *does* still exist for single-nation studies. This market overlaps with, but is partly distinct from, the market for general books in comparative politics. Building on this premise, Thatcher has published an impressive collection of country studies focused on Latin American politics. These books are often immediately released in paperback, and in 1999 the list will include 12 new titles.

In this new division of labor, innovative country studies on Latin America that two decades ago might have been published by Princeton, California, Stanford or Johns Hopkins, are now often published by such presses as Penn State, Pittsburgh, North Carolina, Notre Dame, Westview or Lynne Rienner. In writing tenure evaluations for scholars who have published an initial book with presses like those in this second group, I have on more than one occasion felt it was appropriate to under-

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score the fact that these presses routinely publish excellent studies.

### **Financial Support for Field Research and Changes at SSRC**

A related observation should be made about the allocation of financial support by organizations such as the Social Science Research Council for the kind of research that produces these country studies. In 1996 SSRC carried out a reorganization in which the area studies committees that had long been jointly sponsored with the American Council of Learned Societies were replaced by a new system of Regional Advisory Panels. It has sometimes been assumed that this reorganization reflected an abandonment of a commitment to area studies on the part of SSRC and of the foundations that support its programs. However, SSRC continues to view area-based research as an indispensable component of internationally-oriented scholarship, as was strongly emphasized in the original statement describing the reorganization (SSRC *Items*, Nos. 2-3, 1996, p. 32). Compared to ten years ago, the level of annual support offered by SSRC for graduate student research based on field work has in fact been *higher* over the past few years – including support for language training, dissertation field research, and a major new program of predissertation training in preparation for field research. Moreover, in 1998 SSRC received a substantial increase in its core support from the Ford Foundation for these programs.

### **Training in Field Methods**

Given the essential role of field research and data-rich country studies as a foundation for broader comparative analysis, it is unfortunate that systematic training in field methods is not a more standard part

of the graduate curriculum in political science. In graduate teaching, we give an appreciative nod to Richard Fenno's idea of "soaking and poking," or to Daniel Lerner's classic discussion of field interviewing in his famous chapter on "The Grocer and the Chief." Yet systematic training in field methods is all too rare.

A welcome exception is a graduate course on qualitative methods at the University of Minnesota, initiated by Kathryn Sikkink, which includes units on participant and non-participant observation, elite and non-elite interviewing, archival research, and strategies for the inductive analysis of qualitative data. Several other political science graduate programs are considering expanding their training in these aspects of methodology. Another innovative effort to provide training in the diverse skills required for carrying out successful field research is the annual conference held for recipients of the SSRC International Predissertation Fellowships. Over the past several years, this conference has included sessions on archival research, focus groups, oral history, elite interviewing, ethnographic methods, the use of census data, issues of sampling and statistical analysis in small-N survey research, ethics and confidentiality in field work, and problems of research design in exploratory field work. With regard to textbooks and new methodological studies focused on these topics, Sage Publications has been a leading press, paralleling their prominent role in the field of quantitative methods. Sage's book series on "Applied Social Research Methods" and on "Qualitative Research Methods," as well as their *Qualitative Methods* catalog, are all listed on their web site and are useful starting points in looking for teaching materials.

### **Extracting New Ideas at Close Range**

I would also like to call attention to the role of data-rich country studies as a source of new ideas, hypotheses, and research agendas, and not just as a source of data for broader comparative research. The sociologist Alejandro Portes has underscored the special contribution of researchers who are experts at "extracting new ideas at close range." These scholars are deeply engaged both with theory and with the close analysis of cases, giving them an unusual capacity to see the general in the particular.

Examples from the Latin American field of classic country studies which are based on this kind of research, and which grew out of doctoral dissertations, would include Alfred Stepan's *The Military in Politics: Changing Patterns in Brazil* (1971), which established a broad intellectual agenda for studying the military in the Third World; and Philippe Schmitter's *Interest Conflict and Political Change in Brazil* (1971), which was a crucial step in the emergence of the comparative literature on corporatism. An example from another region and another generation of scholars is Frederic Schaffer's *Democracy in Translation: Understanding Politics in an Unfamiliar Culture* (1998), which explores the contrasting meanings of "democracy" in different political contexts, building on field work among Wolof-speakers in Senegal.

The ongoing contribution of a senior scholar, Guillermo O'Donnell, provides further examples of extracting new ideas at close range. Drawing on a deep knowledge of the Latin American region, and especially of Argentina and Brazil, O'Donnell has a remarkable history of producing conceptualizations and hypotheses that have opened new research agendas across the com-

parative politics field. His recent work includes an important critique of the concept of democratic consolidation, as well as a new conceptualization of executive dominance, which he characterizes as “delegative democracy,” and of its consequences for the institutionalization of regimes. He has also explored the issues posed for democratic theory by the sometimes problematic nature of citizenship and the legal system in Latin American democracies, and by “brown areas” in which the authority of the national state is severely attenuated.

It would be interesting to explore, for different world regions, the evolution of this kind of work based on a close, creative engagement with cases. Doubtless one would find variations in the role of different generations of scholars and in the substantive topics on which they focus. For present purposes, I would simply emphasize that the importance of extracting new ideas at close range is recognized not only by specialists in particular countries or regions, but also in new work on theoretical modeling in comparative politics and international relations. In the *Analytic Narratives* volume (1998), Bates, Greif, Levi, Rosenthal, and Weingast underscore the contribution to theory-building of “a close dialogue with case materials” (p. 3). They advocate an approach that “pays close attention to stories, accounts, and context,” that employs Geertz’s method of thick description, that is driven by a “fascination with particular cases,” and that “contributes to the idiographic tradition in the social sciences” (pp. 10, 13, 14). Robert Powell’s forthcoming Princeton Press book on formal modeling in international relations, *In the Shadow of Power*, expresses a similar idea. In exploring alternative sources of innovation in modeling, he observes that “new ideas, of

course, can also come from the empirical realm,” and he points to the importance of a “detailed historical knowledge and deep sense of the cases...” (chap. 1).

### *Implications for Single-Country Versus Multi-Country Dissertations*

These observations concerning data-rich studies and the inductive component of research point to a question about the recent trend toward multi-country doctoral dissertations in comparative politics. In my previous letter I observed that the intellectual success of old and new work in comparative-historical analysis has encouraged this trend, and up to a point that is certainly a positive development. For some areas, such as Western Europe, multi-country dissertations are relatively common, and they are greatly facilitated by the remarkably good monographic studies and statistical data available on countries in that region. More broadly, plausible models for multi-country projects can be drawn from the comparative-historical tradition, the comparative case-study tradition, and the quantitative cross-national tradition. Nonetheless, more than a few colleagues in the comparative field are convinced that the trend toward multi-country dissertations has gone too far.

One concern is that too many multi-country dissertations are analytically thin and data thin, and that others end up being hard to complete. I am told that among the multi-country dissertations funded in the past few years by SSRC, a significant proportion of the grant recipients encountered difficulties that eventually led them to reduce the number of cases, or to abandon multi-country comparison altogether in favor of a single-country study.

A second concern is that the idea of a “comparative dissertation”

should not be conflated with the idea of a “multi-country dissertation.” Systematic within-nation comparison, including a focus on change over time, also makes a dissertation “comparative,” and the resurgence of interest in federalism and in comparisons of sub-national political units reminds us that within-nation comparisons are indispensable for some topics. Further, dissertations focused primarily on one national case often succeed in placing that case in a strong comparative perspective, thereby combining intensive analysis of one country with broad comparison.

A third concern is with the intensive learning that graduate students can derive from immersion in the analysis of a single national unit. Due to personal and professional obligations that routinely arise later in a career which can make it difficult to arrange extended periods of residence abroad, the traditional 12 to 15 months spent “in the field” doing dissertation research often end up being the best opportunity that many scholars ever have to become deeply engaged in the intensive analysis of politics in another country – and often in building valuable personal contacts and language skills. From this perspective, a career sequence that moves from a single-country dissertation to multi-country research is not only a common one, but a logical one, and a large proportion of the scholars who have gone on in their careers to do significant work based on multi-country comparisons in fact began with single-country dissertations.

Finally, choices about the scope of comparison in dissertations are important not only for the individual scholar, but also for the comparative field more broadly. If the best students were to stop doing single-country dissertations, we would end up with a more limited supply of the well-crafted, theoretic ally-informed

country studies that constitute an essential building-block for comparative research. It would be a major setback to our field if young scholars did not produce outstanding country dissertations like those which led to the books of Stepan, Schmitter, and Schaffer noted above.

Three implications are suggested by these various concerns. First, if a multi-country dissertation is undertaken, a special burden is placed on the dissertation committee to ensure that the student has the appropriate combination of skills to carry it out, and that the research design effectively creates opportunities for coming up with new findings. One approach is to build into the research design opportunities for close analysis of data that may lend itself to extracting new ideas at close range. Second, it would be a mistake if scholars who write single-country dissertations are passed over for jobs simply because they have studied "only" one country. Instead, a more complex judgement must be made about the gains in knowledge that derive from their research. Also, given that entry-level hiring decisions necessarily depend on a conjecture about the future research trajectories of new Ph.D.s, one consideration in that

conjecture should be a recognition of the learning and research skills that can grow out of a single-country dissertation. Third, overall, striking a productive balance between single- and multi-country dissertations, in both graduate training and faculty recruitment, is an ongoing challenge for our field.



#### *A Field Built on Diverse Skills*

The themes explored above serve as a reminder that the intellectual vitality of comparative politics depends on the contribution of scholars with diverse skills. David Laitin, in one of his letters from the president in this *Newsletter* (Summer 1993), discussed alternative strategies for avoiding in comparative politics a narrowing of the intellectual agenda such as occurred in linguistics with the Chomsky revolution. The priorities I have emphasized here converge with the strategy advocated in Laitin's letter: by bringing together scholars with strong theoretical tools, good methodological skills, and a talent for creative engagement with cases that yields new research questions and hypotheses, comparative politics can successfully avoid this fate. ♦