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Controlled Comparison and Process Tracing: A “Behind the Scenes” Look

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Introduction

Case-based research remains a staple of political science. Yet when embarking on research projects, many users, including advanced undergraduates, graduate students, and even seasoned researchers, remain confused about its various types. Casual references to “in-depth case studies,” “process tracing,” and “comparative analysis” can overlook (or misuse) the multiple ways to analyze a case. In both the classroom and in the research review process, we have encountered students and peers who are unclear about these different approaches, as well as the advantages they offer and the challenges they pose.

This confusion in part reflects the lack of many transparent, first-hand accounts of how researchers select their research design and, in turn, their cases. Students, teachers, and researchers alike would benefit from greater explicit reflection on which methods and cases are chosen and why. In this note from the classroom, we therefore offer a “behind the scenes” look at the methodological choices made in our forthcoming article in *World Politics*, “Why States Do or Do Not Privatize: Cross-Class Coalitions in the Public Sector.” We lay out

the objectives of our study, why we opted for case analysis, and importantly, how we deliberated between two major (if too-often conflated) case-analytic approaches: controlled comparisons and process tracing. We then discuss which design we chose, why we selected the cases we did, and the challenges we faced in doing so. As our reflection suggests, research design and case selection often hinge on a variety of considerations, ranging from factors that are more theoretical to those that are more pragmatic and rooted in the researcher’s substantive knowledge. A list of questions for review and discussion is included at the end.

Which Design to Use? Staying on Track when Dealing with Complex Research Material

Our article investigates the following research question: Why do some states privatize public services, while others do not? Over the last five decades, wealthy democracies have increasingly outsourced public services to private actors. Scholars have studied this process in great depth, yet they have tended to focus on so-called “positive cases” —or instances in which countries have successfully privatized a given service. The lack of attention to “negative” cases— or instances where countries do not privatize a particular service —leave us without the necessary variation on the dependent variable to understand which conditions lead to privatization. In other words, without examining instances of non-privatization,

we simply cannot know what causes privatization to begin with (Mahoney and Goertz 2004). This empirical gap served as a good opportunity to test a theory developed by one author in the area of mental health provision (Perera, forthcoming). In brief, the theory posits that where public sector rank-and-file workers form coalitions with managers, governments can maintain or expand public services. When no such coalition emerges, services are vulnerable to cutbacks.

Because we were interested in testing and potentially establishing the relationship between two variables (i.e., worker-management coalitions and privatization), we needed a research design that offered us variation on the dependent variable. Process tracing, which is often used for inductive theory-building or identifying causal mechanisms, would not suffice, at least on its own (Bennett 2009; Collier 2011). This left us with a few design options, such as a controlled qualitative comparison of multiple cases, or some type of regression analysis.

As we reviewed our design options, a few other complications came into play. Because privatization is especially prevalent and studied in wealthy capitalist democracies (whose long histories of independent state formation help to generate large, relatively institutionalized public service infrastructures; but see MacLean 2011), and because both of us focus on such countries in our other research, our intervention would be most fruitful there. We were thus left with only 20 or so potential cases—too few units to generate the power for large-N statistical inference, at least on the subject of national privatization initiatives. Perhaps more importantly, the complex, macro-structural, and cross-temporal nature of several variables that are often associated with privatization required a deep case knowledge that is difficult to capture and analyze in regression techniques. Quantitative evidence can certainly be deployed in qualitative research; indeed, we ultimately used some ourselves. Yet attempts to summarize privatization patterns in a complex industry with only quantitative indicators would be incomplete, to conduct statistical analysis on them

would be infeasible, and to draw conclusions from them would be erroneous. As a result, a controlled comparison was necessary, turning us first to Mill's methods.

Mill's Methods and the Controlled Comparison: A Small-N Design to Identify Causal Variables

Although John Stuart Mill may be best known in political science for his contributions to nineteenth-century liberal thought, his contributions to the scientific method are also the logical underpinnings of contemporary controlled comparisons (Przeworski and Teune 1970, 32). In his classic treatise, *A System of Logic* (2012, originally published in 1843), Mill identified five patterns of inductive inference that ground causal empiricism: 1) the method of agreement, 2) the method of difference, 3) the joint method of agreement and difference, 4) the method of residues, and 5) the method of concomitant variation. Importantly, the patterns developed the logic of experimental design—now often celebrated as the gold standard for causal inference—before the advent of randomization in the late 1880s (Copi, Cohen, and Rodych 2019, 525). In this way, Mill's methods offer a unitary logic of causation for both observational and experimental research, rendering their tools “permanently useful” to the natural and social sciences (Copi, Cohen, and Rodych 2019, 525). These five patterns adopt a variable-based approach to inferring causation.

What Mill's methods can do, then, is guide research that aims to identify necessary or sufficient causal *variables* by comparing two or more cases.¹ Perhaps the most prominently used in political science is the “method of difference,” also known as the classic “most similar systems design” (Przeworski and Teune 1970). In Mill's own words:

If an instance in which the phenomenon under investigation occurs and an instance in which it does not occur, have every circumstance in

1 That these methods can do so does not mean that they always do. For guidance on how best to apply these methods, see for example Braumoeller and Goertz (2000); Dul, Vis, and Goertz (2019); Goertz (2006); Goertz and Starr (2002).

common save one, that one occurring only in the former, the circumstance in which alone the two instances differs, is the effect, or the cause, or an indispensable part of the cause, of the phenomenon (2012, 455).

Put another way, across cases with different outcomes, the presence or absence of a factor in one case but not others can explain the variation under consideration. If said factor exists or does not exist in all cases, it cannot explain the observed difference in outcomes. This method therefore matches cause and effect by “controlling for” shared circumstances, or ruling out potentially confounding factors. That the cause, effect, and shared circumstances are observable is a fundamental presupposition of this approach. Otherwise, the researcher cannot confidently claim to control their presence or absence. Contemporary empiricists typically view these observable circumstances as variables: measurable factors whose value (categorical or continuous) might change across cases.

To be sure, Mill’s methods have limitations (see for example, Przeworski and Teune 1970; Seawright 2021; Lieberman 1994). Each demands a high degree of control over case variation. As Lieberman (1994) outlines, the method of difference presupposes a deterministic relationship between cause and effect; assume that just one cause is present; and make interactive relationships difficult to identify. Moreover, as Seawright (2021, 34) argues, unlike those using experimental designs or even large-N statistical analyses, small-N researchers cannot claim that unobserved variation on potentially important covariates “balance out” either within or across units.

Nevertheless, such imperfections have not deterred the ample use of Mill’s logic in social science methodology, even in more “relaxed” forms (see Brady and Collier 2010, 337fn8; Przeworski and Teune 1970, Chapt. 2; Slater and Ziblatt 2013). Of particular note is Mill’s lasting importance to small-N research, or research that relies on just a few cases. Such studies address phenomena that occur in too few cases to gain sufficient statistical power for quantitative techniques (such as cross-sectional regressions), or at highly-aggregated levels where deep case knowledge is required (such

as restructuring patterns in a complex industry, an example we discuss below). When well-selected and carefully designed, case comparisons therefore can yield insights of significant generalizability. As Slater and Ziblatt (2013) argue, particularly when supplemented with some within-case analysis (as we include in our article), controlled comparisons remain “indispensable.”

The sheer necessity of small-N research in the social sciences requires that qualitative methodologists follow several guidelines for overcoming the limitations of Mill’s methods. Aware that analysts cannot command full control over their cases, for example, methodologists recommend focusing one’s efforts on controlling for the major alternative explanations (Slater and Ziblatt 2013). A challenge along the same vein is that of historical regress: At what point in time does the “cause” originate and, by extension, at what point in time should the analyst attempt to “control” the comparison? Scholars can attempt to address this problem by setting a “critical juncture” as the point of departure (Pierson 2004). Crucially, as Slater and Simmons (2010) have argued, establishing such a juncture requires that there are no “critical antecedents” —or pre-existing conditions— up the chain that help explain the outcome.

Both small-N controlled comparisons and much large-N research adopt positivist and deductive approaches to social inquiry, privilege identifying causal variables before mechanisms, and do so by manipulating or otherwise controlling for alternative variables and confounders across comparable units. This shared framework, though, does not render the former lesser or even redundant. On the contrary, and as previously noted, scholars have emphasized the “enduring indispensability” of the controlled comparison (Slater and Ziblatt 2013).

Process Tracing: A Small-N Within-Case Analysis to Identify Causal Mechanisms

Yet there is another prominent method of case research that we also considered: process tracing (Brady and Collier 2010; Bennett 2010). In this approach, the researcher selects one case and tracks how a particular process unfolds

within it to explain a given outcome. In contrast to Mill's method of difference, process tracing can identify, document, and assess the impact of the causal *mechanisms* that connect the variables in a particular sequence.² For many, this approach strives to do so by (1) building a strong case for the proposed hypotheses under investigation while (2) eliminating competing explanations with varied pieces of evidence.³

One of the core methodological advantages of process tracing is its ability to pin down causal mechanisms, or, in our view (again, definitions vary), how X leads to Y. Mechanisms are nonetheless notoriously difficult to observe; researchers instead rely on the traces they leave behind (Elster 1989, 3–10). Consider policy feedbacks. This mechanism shows how two measurable variables—the structure of a given public policy and the public's support for that policy—can be mutually reinforcing. But how does an investigator measure the feedback itself? The answer, according to process tracing methodologists, is to document the “fingerprints” or “causal process observations”—that is, the empirical observable implications of feedback (Beach and Pedersen 2013; Brady and Collier 2010). In other words, scholars must ask themselves: If policy feedback is present (and operated as hypothesized), what empirical residue would be left over to demonstrate that it occurred? For instance, in-depth interviews with policy beneficiaries, survey data, or analyses of group position statements could generate observable evidence demonstrating that recipients' views are subconsciously conditional on the policy structure. Meanwhile, “reading between the lines” of elites'

meeting deliberations or analyzing legislators' vote choices could help an investigator determine the intentions driving policy design (see e.g., Thurston 2018). Varying pieces of evidence would satisfy different evidentiary standards. For example, some methodologists have analogized different types of process tracing “tests” for alternative pieces of evidence, popularizing the use of the following:

- “doubly decisive,” necessary and sufficient to confirm a particular explanation;
- “smoking gun,” sufficient but not necessary for a given hypothesis;
- “hoop tests,” necessary but not sufficient;
- “straw-in-the-wind,” suggestive evidence in favor or against a hypothesis, but neither sufficient nor necessary.⁴

Although these are static tests, the methodologists who use them deploy them synthetically over the full length of the causal process.⁵ Done in this way, this research strategy can be well-suited to recover causal mechanisms and demonstrate over-time processes.

How We Decided Which Method to Use

Put simply, Mill's structured comparisons and process tracing are different types of qualitative case analysis, each with their own logic and objectives. The choice of which approach to pursue—a controlled comparison of two or more

2 Here we are employing definition of causal mechanism proposed by Falleti and Lynch (2009), though see that article, as well as Hedström and Ylikoski (2010), Beach and Pedersen (2018), and especially Mahoney (2001), for a collection of alternative definitions. For a more detailed discussion of mechanisms, particularly in the context of process tracing, see the “Symposium on Causal Mechanisms and Process Tracing” from the 2016 Spring/Fall issue of *Qualitative and Multi-Method Research*, edited by Alan Jacobs and Tim Büthe.

3 Methodologists writing for this journal and others debate whether and under what conditions process tracing succeeds at these aims, especially the second. See Jacobs and Büthe (2016); Gonzalez-Ocantos and Masullo (2024). Growing attention to Bayesian approaches, for example, has highlighted that scholars can increase their confidence in some hypothesis over others, but never completely eliminate an alternative explanation.

4 See, for example, Van Evera (1997) and Collier (2011, Table 1) for further elaboration on these tests. For alternative perspectives, see Beach and Pederson (2013, Chapt. 8) and Mahoney (2012).

5 Otherwise, scholars may fail to capture the temporal dynamism embedded in the very process they are attempting to observe. As Bateman and Teele (2020, 268–9) point out, a piece of evidence that fails to satisfy a “hoop test” at t^2 , for example, might have been pivotal at t^1 in facilitating the conditions that ultimately produce the outcome at t^2 .

units or within-case process tracing of a single unit— therefore depends on the researcher's analytic objectives. Our objective was to identify the variables that produced an outcome, so a Mill's-inspired controlled comparison is useful. As such, we relied on the frequently-used "most similar systems" approach. That approach would help us to establish that the relationship between X and Y is consistent across multiple cases.

Process tracing was less appropriate. Our analytic focus was not on mechanisms or theory building. Moreover, we were writing an article, not a book. Space constraints would prevent us from explicating the full path that produced Y, or attempt to recover the mechanisms that lead from X. We did still use some process tracing techniques, as these two methods are not mutually exclusive. Once a relationship between variables is established via Mill's method of difference, researchers often select a single case in which the causal variable is present to trace the mechanism that links those variables. Although we structured our research article as a controlled comparison, where possible we illustrated the "fingerprints" of the mechanisms that linked the variables of interest (Beach and Pedersen 2013).

Case Selection: Which Railway to Ride, and Why?

Once landing on our design, we next needed a procedure for selecting cases. At the outset, we reasoned that we needed at least three. While controlled comparison designs have successfully relied on just two cases, we worried that only examining two could leave us with spurious results. Examining three cases helped us increase the confidence that our findings were reliable. Given the practical space constraints of an article, we felt that three cases offered the right balance between mastery (that is, our ability to collect in-depth, variable-based evidence) and generalizability (bolstering confidence in our findings for other countries), relative to just two cases. While ideally we might include more, three cases also enabled us to stay in bounds of most journals' word limitations, an important consideration when conducting qualitative research.

As discussed above, we were first driven by the need for variation on our dependent variable. This meant we needed an industry that some countries had privatized and others had not. After some digging, passenger rail appeared to fit the bill. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, a number of countries privatized their passenger rail systems, while others kept it in public ownership (Kopicki and Thompson 1995). Passenger rail was a strong fit for other reasons. Not only had it been privatized in several countries, but the nature of the industry itself also helped us control for a potential confounding factor —patterns of consumer mobilization. While the service is popular in many countries, consumers are rarely a mobilized constituency for passenger rail. As an interest group, they thus likely did not condition the outcome.

Once landing on an industry, we proceeded to select a "negative" case —or a case where privatization was attempted but failed. We were attracted to the United States for a few reasons. First, both of us have strong knowledge of the country. (Indeed, both of us have used Amtrak, America's passenger rail, several times!) Moreover, we felt this case helped deepen our puzzle. Conventional wisdom holds that the United States is home to one of the most extremely "hands off" political economies in the world (Thelen 2014). Of all the countries that have privatized their railways, how had the seemingly anti-statist United States not done so?

Once we had a negative case, we proceeded to find those with "most similar" qualities. Here we needed to be careful to "match" our cases on otherwise potentially influential variables, or variables that could otherwise be present (or not) across several cases and explain our outcome. We started by holding our sample within the cluster of so-called liberal market economies (LMEs), the group of economies famously identified by Hall and Soskice's (2011) "varieties of capitalism" framework. Keeping our case selection within this group allowed us to select cases while confidently ruling out other potentially important factors (major alternative explanations, per Slater and Ziblatt 2013) that might otherwise be related to privatization. These include strong coordinating mechanisms that tend to facilitate labor-

management cooperation throughout the entire economy, not just the public sector.

Timing was also important. As several scholars have documented, the late 1970s through the 1990s mark a time when neoliberalism—or market fundamentalism—was prevalent (Mudge 2008). Consistent with this characterization, the Reagan Administration tried multiple times to privatize Amtrak. Ideally, then, we would find cases that tried to privatize when neoliberalism was prevalent in a given country.

Other political factors mattered. Scholars have demonstrated that whether the political Left or Right is in power can be influential (Obinger, Schmitt, and Zohlnhöfer 2014). In general, Right-leaning parties have tended to favor privatization efforts, while Left-leaning parties have favored national ownership. We thus sought cases where the Right was in power while passenger railway was in jeopardy. Political institutions are also important. Scholarship in the comparative political economy (CPE) tradition suggests that countries with proportional representation systems tend to empower the Left and ultimately result in more progressive redistributive policies, in contrast to majoritarian first-past-the-post systems, where Right-leaning parties tend to enjoy greater power due to their more efficient geographic distribution (Iversen and Soskice 2006).

We ultimately landed on two additional cases: the United Kingdom and New Zealand. Both countries are liberal market economies and, at the time of privatization, featured majoritarian, first-past-the-post electoral rules. Initiated under the Thatcher Government and pursued in earnest under the conservative Major Government, the United Kingdom privatized their passenger railway system in the early 1993. Similarly, the right-leaning New Zealand governments restructured their passenger system several times during the 1980s, culminating in a sale to a private purchaser in 1993. All three of our cases were marked by periods of neoliberal governance—known as “Reaganomics” in the United States, “Thatcherism” in the UK, and “Rogernomics” in New Zealand. Since politicians in several cases attempted but (crucially) did not all succeed at privatization, we were confident that there were no major “critical antecedents” further

up the causal chain that condition the outcome, following Slater and Simmons (2010).

Few, if any, observational designs can claim to “control for” or rule out all potential confounding factors simply through our research design. Ours was no different in this regard. Consider that the United States is marked by a uniquely high number of veto points, including an especially strong upper house (i.e., the Senate), relative to most other affluent democracies, including our comparison cases (Stepan and Linz 2011). While traditionally pointed to as a tool used by the wealthy to thwart progressive reforms aimed at arresting inequality (Enns et al. 2014), such veto points can also be used to gum up or stop conservative reforms.

As such, we proceeded by collecting evidence on such potential confounders as well as our key variables of interest. For example, we showed that US veto points played less of a role in passenger rail politics in this era than scholars might expect. A review of the U.S. Congressional record and spatial railway patterns offered strong evidence that the Senate’s comparatively unique power in policymaking could not fully explain the failure of the Reagan Administration to privatize Amtrak. Other potential confounders included the financial standing of the railway sectors; in each case, all were in financial disarray at the time of privatization attempt. We also examined the level of institutionalization of each railway. Theories rooted in policy feedback and path dependency might predict that more institutionalized railways are more likely to survive attacks (Pierson 1993; 2000). Yet as it turned out, the American Amtrak system was the youngest, least institutionalized, and as a result perhaps the most vulnerable to retrenchment. Lastly, we considered the level of trade union organization in all cases. Each railway boasted a high level of union organization—in each case, at least 75 percent of the workforce—suggesting that rank-and-file labor power alone could not account for our outcome.

Throughout the research process, we reviewed all relevant published accounts of rail politics and policy from just before, during, and after the efforts to privatize, including both peer-reviewed academic scholarship and gray literature (e.g., government and think tank reports). We also identified sources

to interview virtually, as the pandemic prevented us from doing so in person. For each case, we aimed to speak to all pertinent industry experts and government officials, as well as the primary representatives of public rail managers and public rail workers, respectively, when privatization efforts were underway. In total, we interviewed 22 individuals. Finally, we supplemented information gathered in steps one and two by reviewing newspaper coverage of rail restructuring during the dates of interest, including from the *Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, *New York Times*, the *New Zealand Herald*, and the *Washington Post*. We ultimately found strong evidence that the presence (and lack thereof) of a coalition between managers and workers shaped whether the railway industry was privatized. Our analysis also required some within-case analysis, not totally unlike process tracing, suggesting these two methods, while distinct, can serve as important compliments to one another (Slater and Ziblatt 2013).

Discussion Questions

1. Have you, or do you plan to, use either of these methods in your on-going research? Why or why not? What makes them appropriate, or not so useful?
2. The authors view their study as largely “variable-based.” What does this mean and how does it make it different from within-case process tracing?
3. According to the authors, what factors are similar across each case? What varies? Why is this important?
4. Could you imagine a study of railway privatization set up as a statistical analysis? If yes, how would you code each variable? If no, why?
5. Would a regression-based study be closer to Mill’s method of difference or process tracing? What advantages would it offer? What disadvantages would be present?
6. Imagine you wanted to use within-case process tracing to study the privatization of railways. What would be the analytic goal of doing so? Based on the authors’ suggestion, which case might you select and for what types of evidence would you search?

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