Lijphart, A. (1971). Comparative politics and the comparative method. American political science review, 65(3), 682-693.

Key Points

- Comparative Methods are one of several scientific methods. Author looks at its weaknesses and limitations as well as why it has its use.
- Comparative Methods have a high amount of variables, but only a small number of cases. Small N problem leads to disproportionate weighting of deviant cases.
- Fixes to comparative methods involve either attempting to increase the number of cases or reducing the number of variables by either collapsing characteristics into a broader variable or choosing to focus on key variables.

Summary

Lijphart's *Comparative Politics and Comparative Method* provides an overview of both the relative state of comparative politics as well as the use of the comparative method. It looks at the weaknesses and limitations of the comparative method, but also what aspects of it can make it a good approach to use. Starting off, Lijphart outlines key characteristics of the comparative method, stating that it is a method for uncovering and understanding empirical relationships between variables rather than a system of simple measurement. In essence, it is a method Further, the author establishes that it is one of several types of scientific methods that can be used. The other methods discussed in this article are the experimental and statistical methods, which all three of these methods have similar characteristics in their establishment of general empirical relationships between variables. Additionally, all three methods use the principle of Ceteris Paribus, which states that all other variables are controlled or held constant. With this in mind, the comparative method has many of the same features as the statistical method, but runs into a key problem in that since it primarily looks at things from the systems level of analysis, the number of cases tend to be small and therefore make it difficult to control. The small "N" problem is one of the main limitations of comparative research that Lijphart points out. As he describes, the principle problem with the comparative methods is that it often has many variables, but only a small number of cases. Stating that this can lead to a higher degree of weighted significance to things such as deviant cases. For example, if we were to look at something like democratization, there are many factors that could be attributed to a country's shift toward or away from democracy. However, how many cases can we look to as examples of democratization? This means that this limits the amount of cases for us to observe a very complex set of attributes and if one of those cases happens to be deviant, it could potentially lead to weighting too heavy of a significance to negative findings.

When looking at it in comparison to the experimental approach, you run into the problem of inadequate control. Therefore, Lijphart believes that the comparative method is not an equivalent method to the experimental method as well as an imperfect substitute. In a nutshell,

while there are limitations to its use, I believe that the comparative method is in certain circumstances it would be very difficult, if not unreasonable to use either the statistical or experimental approach and even if we found a way to make either of those methods work, they too have their limitations. While we could say that this is a significant limitation of the comparative method, Lijphart discusses why one would be inclined to use this approach. For starters, the scope of the lens through which the comparative method views the world, the level of analysis is much larger than the other methods and while using a statistical approach could avoid the small "N" problem, it leads to limitations in both time and resources. Therefore, while the comparative method has its limitations, the scope of things that it looks at makes for a more efficient and cost effective approach to researching at this level of analysis.

So if the comparative model is to be used, Lijphart gives suggestions on how to address some of its limitations. First, whenever possible, try and increase the number of cases, which helps introduce a greater degree of control. Second, if a larger number of cases is not possible, Lijphart says that one can reduce the number of variables by reducing the property-space of the analysis. Meaning, combine characteristics into a single variable. This lessens the complexity or scope of the variables being looked at. Third, focus on using comparable cases, which have similar characteristics, but are different in how those characteristics may relate to one another. Lastly, Lijphart says that you could focus on key variables. Meaning, draw from variables that are most important in your overall analysis.