

## Why Compare?

To be good comparativists, we need to know *why* we compare. In other words, what is the purpose of comparing? On this question, Giovanni Sartori (1994) offered us a very simple answer, namely, we compare to **control**. By control, Sartori means to say—albeit in a very loose way—that we use comparisons as a way to check (verify or falsify) whether our claims or assertions about certain phenomena are valid by controlling for, or holding constant, certain variables. Take the statements “poverty causes corruption” or, conversely, “corruption causes poverty”; “authoritarianism is more conducive to high levels of economic growth than democracy”; and “social revolutions are caused by relative deprivation.” How do we know, Sartori asked, whether any of these statements is true, false, or something else? “We know,” Sartori answered, “by looking around, that is, by *comparative checking*” (emphasis added; p. 16). It is important to understand that, in most comparative analyses, actual **control variables** are not used. This issue may not be very clear right now and, for our purposes, is not critical. The main point is this: different types of comparisons allow a researcher to treat a wide variety of similarities or differences as if they are control variables. In so

doing, the researcher can safely eliminate a whole range of potentially significant factors and, instead, concentrate on those variables he deems most important.

Unfortunately, comparative checking usually cannot (indeed, can almost never) provide definitive answers. This is true, in part, because comparative checking is an imperfect mode of analysis, at least when comparing real world cases. It is also true, in more substantive terms, because comparison—although one method of control—is not the best. There are much better methods of control, such as the **experimental method** and statistical control. “But,” as Sartori also noted, “the experimental method has limited applicability in the social sciences, and the statistical one requires many cases” (1994, p. 16), something that research in comparative politics generally lacks (this is referred to as the **small-N** problem). Like it or not, therefore, comparison often represents only a “second-best” method of control in the social sciences and comparative politics.

Despite its second-best status, comparing to control is an undeniably important purpose of comparative analysis. Yet many comparativists, especially those with a strong predisposition toward qualitative and historical analysis, are not always, or even

mostly, involved in “testing” hypotheses through their comparisons (Ragin 1987, p. 11). Instead, as Ragin noted, “[many comparativists] . . . *apply* theory to cases in order to interpret them” (emphasis in original; p. 11). We will see examples of this in subsequent chapters, but what Ragin meant, in part, is that comparativists recognize that countries or other types of macro-social units all, in important ways, have a unique story to tell. Ragin suggested, therefore, that some researchers are often most interested in using comparative analysis to get a better grasp of these individual “stories,” rather than primarily using them as a way to verify or falsify specific arguments. In other words, for these researchers, in-depth **understanding** is the goal of comparative analysis. Comparing to understand, to put it in slightly different terms, means that researchers use comparison to see what other cases can tell them about the specific case or country in which they have the most interest.

In a similar vein, some comparativists assume that the sheer complexity of real-world cases makes control a worthwhile but difficult, if not impossible, goal to achieve. Instead, they advocate a more pragmatic approach that attempts to build theoretical generalization—or **explanation**—through an accumulation of

case-based knowledge (this is sometimes referred to as **analytical induction**). In this view, it is understood that no case, by itself, or no comparison of a small number of cases is sufficient to test a theory or general claim. This is largely because the overwhelming complexity of any given case makes any test problematic and highly contingent. Instead, each case or each small-N comparison provides comparativists another piece (albeit often a very complicated piece in and of itself) to work into a much larger puzzle. I will come back to this issue—and specifically the issue of **complex causality**—below.

Even though the foregoing discussion may be a little confusing, the key point is simply that, although researchers use comparisons for different reasons doing comparative politics requires that you be aware of *your* reason and rationale for making a comparison. Figure 1.1 provides a summary of the three general purposes of comparing.

**Figure 1.7 Three Purposes of Comparing: A Summary**

	General Purpose		
	Comparing to <i>Control</i>	Comparing to <i>Understand</i>	Comparing to <i>Explain</i>
Basic strategy or purpose	Comparative checking	Interpretation	Analytical induction
Logic or approach to comparative analysis	Researcher uses a range of cases as a way to “test” (verify or falsify) a specific claim, hypothesis, or theory.	Researcher is primarily interested in a single case and uses different cases or general theories as a way to learn more about the case he/she is studying.	Researcher uses cases as a way to build a stronger theoretical explanation. Cases are used in a “step-by-step” manner, with each case contributing to the development of a general theory.
Basic example	(1) Begin with a claim: “A high level of gun ownership will lead to a high level of gun-related homicide.” (2) “Test” the claim: Researcher examines a range of countries in order to “control for” gun ownership; if countries with the highest rates of gun ownership have low rates of gun-related homicides (and vice versa), the claim is falsified and must be rejected.	(1) Begin with a case (and issue): The high level of homicides in South Africa. (2) Use existing theories and/or other cases to better understand case: Researcher uses a range of theories on gun violence to better understand why South Africa is the most violent country in the world. Researcher also uses other cases to see what those cases can tell her about South Africa.	(1) Begin with a general theory: “Structural theory of democratization.” (2) Use various cases to strengthen the theory: Researcher begins by looking at the democratization process in Mexico. This examination may lead researcher to “tweak” or revise elements of theory; he then looks at Taiwan, Poland, and Ukraine. Each case is used as a stepping-stone in developing or strengthening original theory.

