Rethinking Comparison

Qualitative comparative methods – and specifically controlled qualitative comparisons – are central to the study of politics. They are not the only kind of comparison, though, that can help us better understand political processes and outcomes. Yet there are few guides for how to conduct non-controlled comparative research. This volume brings together chapters from more than a dozen leading methods scholars from across the discipline of political science, including positivist and interpretivist scholars, qualitative methodologists, mixed-methods researchers, ethnographers, historians, and statisticians. Their work revolutionizes qualitative research design by diversifying the repertoire of comparative methods available to students of politics, offering readers clear suggestions for what kinds of comparisons might be possible, why they are useful, and how to execute them. By systematically thinking through how we engage in qualitative comparisons and the kinds of insights those comparisons produce, these collected essays create new possibilities to advance what we know about politics.

Erica S. Simmons is Associate Professor of Political Science and International Studies and holds the Department of Political Science Board of Visitors Professorship at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

Nicholas Rush Smith is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the City University of New York–City College and Senior Research Associate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Johannesburg.
Rethinking Comparison

Innovative Methods for Qualitative Political Inquiry

Edited by
ERICA S. SIMMONS
University of Wisconsin–Madison

NICHOLAS RUSH SMITH
City University of New York–City College
We dedicate this volume to the memory of Lee Ann Fujii and Kendra Koivu, both of whom were committed to helping us rethink how we see the world.
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Contributors


Mala Htun is Professor of Political Science, Co–Principal Investigator and Deputy Director of ADVANCE at UNM, and special advisor for inclusion and climate in the School of Engineering at the University of New Mexico. She works on women’s rights, social inequalities, and strategies to promote inclusion and diversity. Htun is the author of three books, most recently The Logics of Gender Justice: State Action on Women’s Rights around the World, coauthored with Laurel Weldon (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Francesca R. Jensenius is Professor of Political Science at the University of Oslo and Research Professor at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI). She specializes in comparative politics and comparative political economy, with a regional focus on India. She is the author of Social Justice through Inclusion: The Consequences of Electoral Quotas in India (Oxford University Press, 2017).

Jonathan Obert is Assistant Professor in Political Science at Amherst College. He is the author of The Six-Shooter State: Public and Private Violence in American Politics (Cambridge University Press, 2018) as well as numerous articles on violence, state formation, and American political development.

Sarah E. Parkinson is Aronson Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Studies at Johns Hopkins University. Grounded by social
network theory and ethnographic methodologies, her research examines organizational behavior and social change in war- and disaster-affected settings. Parkinson’s work focuses predominantly on the Middle East and North Africa; she has conducted extensive fieldwork in Lebanon and Iraq. She received her PhD and MA in political science from the University of Chicago and has held fellowships at Yale University, George Washington University, and the University of Minnesota. Parkinson is also a co-founder of the Advancing Research on Conflict (ARC) Consortium.

Benjamin L. Read is Professor of Politics at the University of California, Santa Cruz. His research has focused on local politics in China and Taiwan, and he also writes about issues and techniques in field research. He is the author of *Roots of the State: Neighborhood Organization and Social Networks in Beijing and Taipei* (Stanford University Press, 2012) and co-author of *Field Research in Political Science: Practices and Principles* (Cambridge University Press, 2015). He co-edits the Cambridge Elements series in East Asian Politics and Society. His articles have appeared in *Comparative Political Studies*, the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, the *China Journal*, the *China Quarterly*, and the *Washington Quarterly*, among other journals, and several edited books.

Thea Riofrancos is Associate Professor of Political Science at Providence College and an Andrew Carnegie Fellow (2020–2022). Her research focuses on resource extraction, renewable energy, climate change, green technology, social movements, and the left in Latin America. These themes are explored in her book *Resource Radicals: From Petro-Nationalism to Post-Extractivism in Ecuador* (Duke University Press, 2020) and her co-authored book *A Planet to Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal* (Verso Books, 2019).

Frederic Charles Schaffer is Professor of Political Science at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst. His area of specialization is comparative politics. Substantively, he studies the meaning of democracy, the practice of voting, and the administration of elections. What sets much of his work apart from other empirical research on democracy is a methodological focus on language. By investigating carefully the differing ways in which ordinary people around the world use terms such as “democracy,” “politics,” or “vote buying” – or their rough equivalents in other languages – he aims to arrive at a fuller appreciation of how they understand and make use of electoral institutions. Professor Schaffer’s publications include four books: *Elucidating Social Science Concepts: An Interpretivist Guide* (Routledge, 2016), *The Hidden Costs of Clean Election Reform* (Cornell University Press, 2008), *Elections for Sale: The Causes and Consequences of Vote Buying* (Lynee Riener Publishers, 2007), and *Democracy in Translation: Understanding Politics in an Unfamiliar Culture* (Cornell University Press, 1998).
List of Contributors

Jillian Schwedler is Professor of Political Science at the City University of New York’s Hunter College and the Graduate Center and is Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Crown Center at Brandeis University. She is a member of the editorial committee for Middle East Law and Governance (MELG) and was a member of the Board of Directors and the Editorial Committee of the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), publishers of the quarterly Middle East Report. She has served as a member of the Board of Directors of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) of North America and the governing Council of the American Political Science Association. During the spring 2020 semester, she was Visiting Professor and Senior Fulbright Scholar at the Center for Global and International Studies at the University of Salamanca, Spain. Dr. Schwedler's books include the award-winning Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen (Cambridge University Press, 2006) and (with Laleh Khalili) Policing and Prisons in the Middle East (Columbia University Press, 2010). Her articles have appeared in World Politics, Comparative Politics, Middle East Policy, Middle East Report, Middle East Critique, Journal of Democracy, and Social Movement Studies, among many others. She is currently finalizing a book manuscript titled Protesting Jordan: Geographies of Power and Dissent (Stanford University Press, forthcoming).

Jason Seawright is Professor of Political Science at Northwestern University. Professor Seawright's research interests include comparative politics, with an emphasis on comparative political parties and on political behavior as well as methodology, particularly involving multi-method research designs and issues of causal inference. He is the author of Party-System Collapse: The Roots of Crisis in Peru and Venezuela. His research has been published in Political Analysis, Perspectives on Politics, Comparative Political Studies, and a range of other journals and edited volumes.

Erica S. Simmons is Associate Professor of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where she holds the Political Science Department Board of Visitors Professorship. She is the author of Meaningful Resistance: Market Reforms and the Roots of Social Protest in Latin America (Cambridge University Press, 2016), which was awarded the 2017 Charles Tilly award for distinguished contribution to scholarship on collective behavior and social movements. She is also the author of numerous articles on contentious politics and qualitative methods. Her work has appeared in World Politics, Comparative Political Studies, Comparative Politics, PS: Political Science and Politics, and Theory and Society, among others.

Nicholas Rush Smith is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the City University of New York–City College and a Senior Research Associate in the
Department of Sociology at the University of Johannesburg. His primary research interests include democratic politics as seen through the lens of crime and policing in post-apartheid South Africa and on qualitative and ethnographic methods. He is the author of *Contradictions of Democracy: Vigilantism and Rights in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Oxford University Press, 2019). His work has been published in *African Affairs*, *American Journal of Sociology*, *Comparative Politics*, *Perspectives on Politics*, *Polity*, *PS: Political Science and Politics*, and *Qualitative and Multi-Method Research*.

**Joe Soss** is Cowles Chair for the Study of Public Service at the University of Minnesota, where he holds faculty positions in the Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs, the Department of Political Science, and the Department of Sociology. His research and teaching explore the interplay of democratic politics, social inequalities, and public policy. He is particularly interested in how practices of governance intersect with relations of domination, oppression, and predation in the United States.

**Lisa Wedeen** is Mary R. Morton Professor of Political Science and the Co-Director of the Chicago Center for Contemporary Theory at the University of Chicago. She is also Associate Faculty in Anthropology and Co-Editor of the University of Chicago Book Series Studies in Practices of Meaning. Her publications include three books: *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (University of Chicago Press, 1999; with a new preface, 2015); *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen* (University of Chicago Press, 2008); and *Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgment, and Mourning in Syria* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), which received the American Political Science Association’s Charles Taylor Book Award, sponsored by the Interpretative Methodologies and Methods group, and the APSA’s inaugural Middle East and North Africa Politics Section’s best book award. She is the recipient of the David Collier Mid-Career Achievement Award and also a fellowship from the National Science Foundation.
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The idea for this project was born during conversations between the editors near the end of our time in graduate school together and early in our careers as assistant professors at the University of Wisconsin–Madison (Simmons) and at the City University of New York–City College (Smith). We believed that while we had each benefited enormously from learning comparative methods rooted in the Millian paradigm, such methods often sat awkwardly against the political worlds we each confronted during our dissertation and book projects. How to practice comparison outside of controlled methods, though, was something about which we had little insight, even as it was something that we saw regularly in the social science “classics” we read during graduate school. We decided that developing a guide on one potential approach to performing such comparisons would be a useful service for the next generation of graduate students and that it might open the kinds of questions students would feel empowered to ask. We also hoped it might help our colleagues not only understand the methodological logics behind our own work but also encourage them to think differently about possibilities for their own research designs. To that end, we drafted a paper of some initial ideas rooted in our experience as ethnographers, thinking it would be a one-time exercise that might open a conversation within the discipline of political science about comparison beyond its controlled variants. Through our conversations, though, we realized that our own view was limited by the fact that we were trained primarily in ethnographic and comparative historical methods and that scholars outside of these paradigms would have insight on forms of comparison that went beyond our relatively narrow views. In other words, we realized we needed conspirators.

Our first major step in assembling this team was to hold a workshop at the City College of New York in the fall of 2017. Through generous funding supplied by the National Science Foundation (Award #1713769) and the Dean’s Office of the Colin Powell School for Civic and Global Leadership, then under the leadership of Dean Vince Boudreau and his chief of staff, Dee
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Dee Mozeleski, we were fortunate to bring an extraordinary set of scholars to City College’s campus to talk about comparison. We purposefully assembled scholars who saw the world differently from one another – some positivists, others interpretivists; some quantitatively oriented, others qualitatively driven; some comparativists, others Americanists; some theorists, others empiricists – all with the goal of pushing one another to think harder about why the claims we make about the world hold up. Over the course of two days, surprising lines of epistemological agreement emerged, methodological disagreements were clarified, and a sense of joint purpose was formed. We then published an early and abbreviated selection of the papers as part of a symposium on “Rethinking Comparisons” in *Qualitative and Multimethod Research*, while plotting how to expand the work begun at the workshop into the present volume.

Over the many years it has taken this book to come to fruition, we have been fortunate to have received support from a remarkable set of colleagues, some of whom were present at the initial workshop and some of whom offered comments or advice in its wake. The contributors to this volume deserve the first thanks for their seriousness, hard thinking, and patience over several years as we worked to publish this volume. Additionally, Jennifer Cyr, Daragh Grant, Annika Hinze, Murad Idris, Helen Kinsella, Samatha Majic, Zachariah Mampilly, Dipali Mukhopadhyay, Timothy Pachirat, Rachel Schwartz, Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, Dan Slater, Dvora Yanow, and Deborah Yashar all provided comments, shared insights, or presented papers at various points in both our individual research processes and our efforts to produce this volume that sharpened our thinking about comparative methods. Dan Slater and Lisa Wedeen deserve specific mention. Without the inspiration, support, and guidance they provided to both of us while we were graduate students at the University of Chicago, we never would have felt the freedom to question dominant approaches to comparative methods. Audiences at two panels featuring papers from this volume at the 2018 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association asked sharp questions that improved several of the papers while making clear the need for a volume like this. Without the hard work of Rachel Schwartz, the original workshop at City College never would have been possible. Coordinating schedules, meals, travel, and lodging for twenty scholars coming from all over the country is no small feat, and Rachel pulled it all off while also contributing a paper herself to the discussion. Without the hard work of Anna Meier, the final manuscript never would have come together. Anna not only copyedited and assembled the final volume but she also chased down contributors (including ourselves) for everything from missing citations to past-due chapters. Linda Benson also served as a superb copyeditor, making sure early on that the prose in our own chapters was intelligible and then joining us in the final stages of the project to copyedit the entire manuscript. Robert Dreesen at Cambridge University Press has been an unfailing advocate for this project since we first brought the idea to
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him. Comments from two anonymous reviewers with the press improved the manuscript immensely.

Yet, even as we have been fortunate to benefit from the engagement of remarkable scholars, we have also been profoundly saddened by the passing of two wonderful colleagues in the years it has taken to bring this project to light. Lee Ann Fujii and Kendra Koivu contributed remarkable papers, intellectual vitality, and warm spirits at our original workshop at the City College of New York. Their impact on each of us and on the discipline of political science went far beyond the workshop, as each worked to open the sometimes closed intellectual and social spaces of the discipline for us to see the world more fully. For that reason, we dedicate this volume to their memory.