

Doing Comparative Research on Local Politics: At a Crossroads Between Inertia and Innovation

*Kristof Steyvers**

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This article tries to build a case for more rigorous and systematic comparative research on local politics. Discussing the opportunities and obstacles often associated with this approach, it attempts to provide a state-of-the-art overview of the field. The article distinguishes between three phases: the first two can be summarised as addressing the challenge (institutionalism) and the third as theorising (with description and explanation embedded in “new” institutionalism). Each phase is illustrated by one or more cases representative of that stage of development and the underlying complexities. In addition, the article formulates some prospects for improvement within the field, specifically with regard to explanations, theories, designs, and measurement.

Keywords: local politics, local government systems, comparative method, institutionalism, urban regimes, urban governance

* Kristof Steyvers, Professor at the Faculty of Political and Social Science, Ghent University, Belgium (profesor Fakulteta političkih i društvenih znanosti, Sveučilište u Gentu, Belgija, e-mail: Kristof.Steyvers@UGent.be)

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4009-0050>

1. Introduction

The comparative method is at the heart of much scholarly endeavour. Generally speaking, comparison is nearly everywhere in the social sciences: “Virtually all empirical (...) research involves comparison of some sort (...). Comparison provides a basis for making statements about empirical regularities and for evaluating and interpreting cases relative to substantive and theoretical criteria. In this (...) sense, comparison is central to empirical social science as it is practiced today” (Ragin, 2014, p. 1).

This article focuses on the field of local politics and is specifically concerned with the comparison within place-bound governance, i.e., the actors, instruments, institutions, and processes pertaining to locally authoritative decision-making (Baldersheim & Wollmann, 2006).¹ The article aims to further develop a plea for a more rigorous and systematic application of the comparative method to the study of local politics (Lidström, 1999; Denters & Mossberger, 2006). An emphasis is placed on the comparison of local government systems across different countries in an effort to *replace the nation-state* label by an infrastructure of theoretically relevant and empirically observable variables (Sellers, 2005). Still, most insights equally affect other levels or forms of comparison.

The structure of the article is as follows: first, it tries to make a case for comparative research into local politics, discussing the opportunities as well as the obstacles often associated with this approach. Second, it provides a timely state of the art of the field. For analytical purposes, this will be subdivided into three phases (see below), of which the first two can be summarised as addressing the challenge of classification by means of the third phase: that of theorisation. Each phase will be illustrated by one or more cases representative of that stage overall, and of the underlying complexities. The article closes with a discussion and a conclusion, and formulates some prospects for improvement within this field.

2. Comparative Local Politics: Making a Case and Meeting the Obstacles

The main reason comparison matters is that it provides key methodological advantages to answering different types of research questions, which

¹ The choice of “politics” over “government” reflects the development in the literature whereby the process of public decision-making is no longer solely confined to traditional institutions and offices.

also applies to the study of local politics (Denters & Mossberger, 2006). First, comparison allows us to address descriptive (or *what*) questions. Fostering knowledge accumulation of phenomena in a variety of contexts can help to avoid parochialism and to discern tendencies and trends from the merely idiosyncratic (e.g. are office-holders we tend to call mayors functionally equivalent in different systems and is there a shift towards their direct election?).

Second, it helps to tackle explanatory (or *why*) questions, accounting for the occurrence of certain phenomena (e.g. does a directly elected mayor enhance the legitimacy of the political process via a substantial increase in turnout at the ballot box?). Apparent regularities may then lead to the development of theoretical propositions (e.g. the form of leadership matters). Alternatively, these might be tested, as the comparative design is often designated as quasi-experimental. It uses variation across systems to explain similarities and differences and thereby tries to exercise a form of control, keeping some features constant while letting others vary or probing the robustness of an empirical relationship in a wider range of cases (e.g. studying turnout in most similar systems with and without directly elected mayors).

Third, it informs those with pragmatic (or *what to do*) questions (should other countries and/or localities adopt a directly elected mayor and under which circumstances?). Policymakers and practitioners may learn from experiences and innovations elsewhere and try to identify conditions of failure or success (Schwab et al., 2017). The existence of such conditions already acknowledges that effects might be contingent, rendering diffusion less evident. Others have warned against the field to become too politicised or prone to end-time prophecy. When discussing the status of urban politics in the US, Judd (2005) deemed it estranged from mainstream political science due to its excessive rhetoric in describing the urban condition, the tendency to develop a project to “save” cities and a reflection of a specific reform tradition (rooted in the progressive era). Likewise, John (2009) has pointed to local politics as a field inclined to be overly value-laden (either discarding it as concerned with themes of minor interest or as the host of a range of desirable values such as democracy, effectiveness, efficiency, or freedom).

These qualifications already caution against overly optimistic preconceptions concerning the comparative method in local politics. Despite its omnipresence and apparent methodological advantages, some authors formulated rather pessimistic overall assessments of the field about a decade ago: “... urban research has not been very comparative. What often

stands for comparative analysis is comprised of separate chapters on a limited number of cities capped by an attempt to draw some unifying themes” (Kantor & Savitch, 2005, p. 135). Others have equally criticised the lack of rigour and systematisation seemingly present in many studies of that time: “... taken together as a body of work they lack coherence and generalizability. The whole is much less than the sum of its parts. Some ... works are in an explicit comparative framework, but much of it is simply parallel description of local government systems in different countries...” (Wolman, 2008, p. 87). Ten years on, the state of the field has gradually improved, as exemplified by current stocktaking that is much more integrated (e.g. Kerley et al., 2018). However, although the negative tone of the earlier accounts is not as pronounced anymore, this does not imply that the limitations they pointed to have ultimately disappeared.

These limitations have been ascribed to a number of common obstacles: some theoretical and others methodological. For one thing, a generally accepted theory (or dominant paradigm) is lacking in the field. Comparative local politics depends on theories of middle range that tend to be sensitive to their context, be it historical, cultural, or institutional. Despite the obvious advantages of such an approach (especially in the case of qualitative research questions), those theories often encounter difficulties traveling across nations or from the national level (where many were initially formulated) to the local level (Sellers, 2016). Meanwhile, recently edited volumes have attempted to integrate different theoretical perspectives, albeit more as an inspirational compendium of various schools and approaches than as a ready-made toolkit for empirical research (e.g. Davies & Imbroscio, 2009; Mossberger et al., 2012).

For another thing, scholars have struggled to strike an appropriate balance between several methodological trade-offs in doing research on comparative local politics (Kantor & Savitch, 2005): scope versus depth (seeking a sizeable number representing an adequate range or scrutinising the isolated conditions of a single case?); structural arrangements versus contextual understanding (confining oneself to configurations of factors and variables or connoting much of the circumstances?); conceptual accuracy versus parochialism (far-reaching or a tool to identify differences); and issues of data availability and integration (translating concepts into variables often with too little, too much, and/or inconsistent data). In the conclusion and discussion we will come back to some prospective improvements in theory, design, and method.

3. Comparative Local Politics: State of the Art

Evidently, these opportunities and obstacles reflect the overall developments in the literature on comparative local politics. Stoker (2006) provides an excellent overview thereof summarised in Table 1. In the remainder of this section, we will expand upon the first two phases (essentially tackling the challenge of classification) and subsequently the third phase (addressing the challenge of theorisation). For each phase we will discuss one or more studies chosen as an example representative of the main issues at stake.

Table 1. *Development of comparative local politics*²

	Old institutionalism [Formal institutions]		New institutionalism [Informal institutions]
	Phase 1 [Descriptive]	Phase 2 [Explanatory]	Phase 3 [Combination]
Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Describing practices in a range of countries – Making comparative observations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Trying to explain differences – Identifying new trends 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Informal construction and maintenance of institutions – Effect of institutions on actors and processes of decision-making
Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Basis for comparison (past or present; single or multiple) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – From continuity to change (path dependency or (uneven) shift to local governance) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – From analytical framework to theory (structural, cultural, rational choice, or integrated)
Limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Superficial – Reductionist – Under-explanatory – Westernised 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Effect of institutional variety in practice – Good governance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Parochialism versus concept stretching – Misclassification versus degreeism

Source: Author based on Stoker, 2006

² The distinction between “old” and “new” institutionalism in this article is based on Stoker (2006, pp. 495–496). The author defines the first as “formal organizations that set the rules and create the context for collective decision-making”, whereas the second examines „how systems of governance are constructed through a complex interplay between formal and informal institutional forces”. As the arrow in the scheme indicates, both are actually poles of a continuum upon which each of the subsequent phases implies a move gradually emphasizing the pertinence of informal factors (without entirely neglecting formal ones). Thus the explanatory phase represents a shift of balance (where formal and informal blend). These forms of institutionalism help to organise the scheme and provide a blueprint to describe the evolution of the field. Evidently, in contemporary institutionalist literature different variants of the new mould can be discerned (i.e. historical, rational choice, sociological, or discursive, see Lowndes & Roberts, 2013).

3.1. The Challenge of Classification

From the end of the 1980s onwards, a number of classifications emerged in the comparative literature on local politics (Norton, 1994). Commonly aiming to go beyond mere description of similarities and differences in local government observable across countries, some were concerned with specific aspects, whilst others provided whole-system characterisations based on single or multiple dimensions. The classics mainly focused on intergovernmental relations, ultimately producing typologies with geographical labels. More contemporary developments broadened their outlook and/or refined their empirical assessments. We will discuss each in turn below.

Critically Assessing the Classics: Beyond North Versus South. The study of Page & Goldsmith (1987a) is representative of these phases. Scrutinising vertical power relations, the authors discerned three dimensions to characterise the position of the local level *vis-a-vis* its central counterpart: functions (the importance of local government as a provider of public services), discretion (the statutory and policy-domain specific autonomy from legal or other forms of regulation from the centre), and access (the frequency and nature of contact between both levels). Their empirical research determined a Northern and Southern European model. In the former, local government rendered an extensive range of services, operated under statutory regulation, and had indirect access to the centre by corporate representation through umbrella organisations. In the latter, the pattern was the opposite (with limited service provision and administrative regulation compensated for by direct access under the form of dual mandate-holding, party political networks, or localised careers). To explain the differences between the two models, Page & Goldsmith (1987b) mainly referred to divergences in history. For the South, this was the accumulation of feudalism (characterised by clientelism and patronage), Catholicism (with corporatism and subsidiarity central to its state theory), the Napoleonic era (with its centralism and supervision), and the subsequent introduction and less extensive localisation of the redistributive functions of the welfare state (Page, 1991; Goldsmith, 1992).

The typology developed by Page & Goldsmith figured prominently in comparative local government research well into the 21st century. Many saw it as having clear advantages (John, 2001): their classification included multiple and crucial dimensions of central–local relations, subsequently characterising local government systems in full and providing criteria for assigning specific countries therein. Their approach was also explan-

atory in that it *explained*; i.e., it accounted for the emergence of various state traditions.

At the same time, it has also been criticised for exemplifying wider issues and the limitations of these phases (Wolman, 2008). First, this was because of the range of their sample, which only covered a limited number of formerly unitary states. Second, their typology has been said to be reductionist, the dichotomy particularly underestimating variation within Northern Europe. Based on the constitutional status of local government, its discretion, and functional or political profile, Hesse and Sharpe (1991) have, for instance, divided this category into an Anglo-Saxon and North-and-Middle-European type³ (with their Franco-type resembling the Southern European tradition). Regarding the latter, others still (Loughlin, 2004) distinguished the Nordic core from its Rhinelandic periphery.⁴ Ultimately, authors have identified as many as ten categories or more barely able to effectively replace the nation-state.

Third, and referring to a broader shift mentioned in the table, is a concern with the institutional inertia implicit in many of the anterior classifications. These tend to emphasize that state traditions (i.e., historically embedded arrangements) possess persistent relevance and to a certain extent also determine contemporary practices. Meanwhile, scholars have discerned waves of reform in local government in the 1990s (Kersting & Vetter, 2003; Kersting et al., 2009) and in the first decade of the 21st century (Kuhlmann & Bouckaert, 2016). Here, the comparative contributions of scholars in the nexus between public administration or policy and politics are equally pertinent, e.g., focusing on trends and tendencies in local public service delivery (Wollmann et al., 2016; Koprić et al., 2018) or place-bound territorial and functional arrangements (Hlepas et al., 2018; Teles & Swianiewicz, 2018).

Whereas some have thus concentrated on discussing the causes and manifestations of various specific political and administrative transformations

³ Whereas in both the Anglo-Saxon and the North-and-Middle-European group discretion is gauged to be high, the types differ in terms of constitutional status (respectively *low*, referring to local government as a creature of the state operating along the *ultra vires* principle versus *high*, as an autonomous layer of place-bound self-governance) as well as in terms of rationale (primarily in the functional role of service provider versus in a mix with a more political role).

⁴ The difference here concerns the local welfare state with a central role of the government in the production and provision of public services versus a more peripheral one with third-sector organisations assuming a substantial part of the associated policy implementation.

and transitions away from traditions, others have distinguished a more profound and encompassing (albeit comparatively uneven) shift towards local governance (Denters & Rose, 2005; Denters, 2011). Therefore, it cannot come as a surprise that when they reassessed central–local relations more than two decades after their initial research, Goldsmith & Page (2010, p. 260) came to rather divergent conclusions: “...*what we can now see in Europe is greater diversity in intergovernmental relations (...). Old practices persist, reflecting path dependency, but new ones are emerging (...) giving rise to a greater range of relationships between and across different levels of government (...). This multilevel governance is perhaps the biggest change (...).*”

Fourth, these classifications tend to be un-explanatory in terms of *explaining* other aspects of the local government system. Whereas they may provide an appropriate guide to understanding institutional variation (as a dependent variable), they do not often explicitly state its effect (in terms of scope or mode) regarding actors, institutions, and processes in broader place-bound authoritative decision-making (as an independent variable).

Contemporary Developments: From Discrete Measurement to Expanding Scope. Meanwhile, a number of contemporary evolutions may be observed regarding the challenge of classification that underlies the first two phases in the field. Some refer to a sharper focus within the predominant vista, others to broader focus (either geographically or substantially).

The first is a shift from categorical types to discrete measures in the inter-governmental perspective. Despite differences in their identification and the operationalisation of relevant dimensions, in the former approach the authors assign cases to mutually exclusive categories on the basis of an informed and intersubjective assessment of well-marked criteria. In the latter, more quantitatively inspired and gradual approaches are added. The relevant dimensions are concretised in terms of discrete indicators aiming to grasp the variation in local government systems in a more refined and objective way through numbers and/or scales and for an increasingly large set of cases.

Evidently, both approaches come with (dis)advantages and require careful pondering (Heinelt et al., 2018a). Essentially, typologies are systems of classification by which entities (such as countries) are divided into groups with common sets of attributes (such as aspects or wholes of local government systems). Typologies help to reduce the complexities of a shaded empirical world. They allow broad assumptions upon which a more detailed case focus can be built to develop or test theories. However, apart from the difficulties innate to determining the proper characteristics and crite-

ria for classification, each type must be sufficiently distinct from another so as to emphasize *between*-group over *within*-group variation (an exercise sensitive to the method of clustering and/or cut-off points between types). Equally, indicators or indexes are compound measures, often integrating a number of variables. They are well-regarded by policymakers (usually for their ranking and benchmark potential) and social scientists alike (predominantly for their suitability for more enhanced empirical analysis). Apart from the need to be theoretically valid, their quality is influenced by the way in which their components are measured and combined into the summative construct. This requires deliberation on dimensionality (see e.g. the distinction between formative or reflective indexes) and the aggregation of the underlying variables into a (standardised) summary one (for a more thorough methodological discussion applied to the field of comparative local politics see Ladner & Keuffer, 2018).⁵

The work of Sellers & Lidström (2007) exemplifies the evolution described. The authors capture the capacity (i.e. governmental ability) and supervision (i.e. scrutiny and control) of local government in about twenty advanced democracies in a number of indicators. Capacity is thereby the mean of scores on a fiscal dimension (share of public expenditures by local government and of public income from local taxes) and a politico-administrative dimension (constitutional protection of local autonomy, corporate interest representation of local government, and share of public employment in local government). Equally, supervision has a fiscal component (share of funds/grants in local income, local tax autonomy, and supra-local scrutiny on borrowing) and a politico-administrative one (presence of tutelage on local government, supra-local nomination of the local executive, supra-local control over the local form of government, and a trans-local administration). The authors relate these to the historical development of varieties in the welfare state (with local autonomy highest in the social-democratic type).

A recent comparative research project (Ladner et al., 2016) has in turn led to the development of a local autonomy index (LAI) for about 40 countries (including all EU-member states) for the period 1990–2014. The index describes (substantial changes in) the extent of place-bound discretion through 11 aspects: institutional depth, policy scope, effective

⁵ It should be noted that the difference between both approaches is not absolute, however. Often, the values assigned are, in fact, the result of a combination of objective data and expert judgements. Also, the scores on the associated measures ultimately lead to classifications, i.e., the regrouping of cases into designated types.

policy discretion, fiscal autonomy, financial transfer system, financial self-reliance, borrowing autonomy, organisational autonomy, legal protection, administrative supervision, and central or regional access.⁶ Country experts assessed each of those aspects based on a standardised coding scheme and justified their assessment with additional reliability checks. This ultimately led to the development of additional measures for self-rule, interactive rule, and overall autonomy. The authors observed an increase in local autonomy and a homogenisation since their measurement had begun (stalling shortly after the turn of the century and/or mainly constrained to Central and Eastern Europe). Nevertheless, substantial differences between (groups of) countries remain and the changes are not equally pronounced everywhere and/or in each of the aspects above. A forthcoming work (Ladner et al., 2018) probes more deeply into the description of each of those aspects, examines their underlying dimensionality, and scrutinises the explanatory effect of variation in local autonomy on issues of place-bound effectiveness and efficiency or democracy.

The second development is a growing concern with the world beyond the Western Hemisphere and particularly the characterisation of countries in Central and Eastern Europe (Baldersheim et al., 1996; 2003). Comparative literature on local politics has often treated these as either *terra incognita* or a single homogenous group of post-communist local democracies. The latter refers to the conversion from local state government (with its undemocratic elections, real decision-making power concentrated in the hands of the central party bureaucracy, the ideology of democratic centralism, and economic structures superseding territorial communities) to local self-government (often swiftly introduced and bestowed with great expectations as an antidote to the former centralist era). However, several authors have asserted that similarities in the principles emerging in

⁶ These aspects stand for (in the order in which they are listed in the text): the extent to which local governments are formally autonomous and can choose the tasks they want to perform; the range of functions where local government is effectively involved in the delivery of services; the extent to which local government has real influence over these functions; the extent to which local government can independently tax its population; the ratio of unconditional financial transfers to total financial transfers received by the local government; the proportion of local government revenues derived from own/local sources; the extent to which local governments can borrow; the extent to which local governments are free to decide on their own organisation and electoral systems; the existence of constitutional or legal means to assert local autonomy; unobtrusive administrative supervision of local government and the extent to which local authorities are called upon to influence higher-level governments' policy-making.

the era of transformation and transition soon entailed differences in the accretion of associated practices (Coulson & Campbell, 2008).

For Swianiewicz (2014), the diversity of local government systems in the area therefore necessitates a distinction between several subtypes. Acknowledging shared features such as the idea of decentralisation, the weakness of the meso (regional) level, or the spreading of managerial trends, the author also emphasizes substantial differences in the actual scope of functional decentralisation, the level of territorial fragmentation versus consolidation, the role of (national) political parties, local electoral systems, and the position of the mayor. This explains his endeavour to develop a typology for about 20 countries in the region, combining measures of horizontal and vertical power relations through inductive cluster analysis. Swianiewicz eventually discerned five subtypes: champions of decentralisation, the relatively decentralised, the Balkans, countries with a high level of territorial consolidation, and those with strong centralisation and territorial fragmentation. Comparing these with the rest of Europe, he concludes that none of the subtypes come close to the Scandinavian model. At the same time, no country in the west of the continent is as centralised as his last subtype. Meanwhile, the first two types resemble the Northern and Middle European model, whilst the third aligns with the Southern European tradition.

The third evolution (in part already interwoven with the second) is a move away from the intergovernmental perspective over its intragovernmental counterpart, towards a more integrated approach.

The former is concerned with horizontal power relations between key actors within the central institutions of local government, focusing on either elected politicians and/or public administrators. The typology of Mouritzen & Svava (2002) is a case in point. The authors depart from the relationship between laymen, leaders, and professionals. Laymen rule stems from reconciling popular sovereignty with democratisation in representative democracy. The council (as the legislative assembly) thereby embodies the ultimate decision-making power held by the peers of (and from) the people. Leaders (as the political executive) add issues to and/or take them off the political agenda, provide vision, mobilise means/people into coalitions, and negotiate or bargain compromises. Professionals (the administrative executive) then bring long term expertise and specialisation based on merit, rules, and procedures.

The authors argue that the way in which leadership is positioned *vis-a-vis* laymen and professionals plays a particular role in determining the type

of horizontal power relations.⁷ They distinguish between the strong mayor (a directly elected and singular leader responsible for all executive functions and appointing other top positions), the collective (a leader elected from the council, with executive functions held by a collective deciding in a collegiate manner), the committee-leader (where only the council is elected, with executive functions shared by a general committee – whose chair is the equivalent of the mayor and sectoral committees), and the council-manager (here, also, only the council is elected, equally providing leadership, (de)selecting the manager, and holding general authority with all executive functions concentrated in a (non-elected) manager and a merely ceremonial mayor). Their typology has been central in two recent waves of empirical studies comparing mayoral leadership in cities across a range of European countries (Bäck et al., 2006; Heinelt et al., 2018b).

The integrated approach stands for a broader outlook on democratic culture. It is more comprehensive in terms of taking into consideration both the vertical and the horizontal power relations mentioned above, simultaneously including less formalised actors and arrangements (i.e., the electoral, party, and interest group system). This also integrates democratic values, norms, and practices beyond the legal anchorage of specific instruments. The work of Hendriks (2010) provides an example. The author differentiates between modes of local democracy through two dimensions. The first relates to the way in which popular sovereignty is brought about and distinguishes between an indirect (representation) and a direct (self-determination) variant. The second mode is concerned with who decides and how this is done a majority by means of the winner-takes-it-all principle (aggregation) or all stakeholders by means of consensus and compromise in process and outcome (integration)?

Cultural notions of democracy have subsequent institutional expressions. In the indirect variant, this juxtaposes a pendulum with consensus democracy.⁸ The latter is characterised by proportional representation with at-large elections, a multiparty system (with more than one party in gov-

⁷ The authors also provide an alternative typology for the relationship between politicians and administrators, taking hierarchy (political dominance versus balanced power relations) and role differentiation (overlap versus separation) into consideration, mainly contrasting the responsive with the autonomous administrator. In addition, Kuhlmann & Wollmann (2014) compare administrative systems, discerning between the following six types: a continental European Napoleonic and Federal, Nordic, Anglo-Saxon, Central and South Eastern European type.

⁸ On the other hand, in its direct counterpart the voter is opposed to participatory democracy.

ernment and the opposition), executive power-sharing (in multiparty coalitions), balanced and dualistic relations between the local council and the executive, a corporatist interest group system (with negotiation and coordination), the dispersal of regulatory powers (with a strong need for horizontal policy coordination), decentralised and quasi-federal local government (multi-tier and multi-unit), institutionalised interdependency (with co-responsibility and co-governance), extensive legal-administrative supervision (with preventive and repressive oversight), and independent financial-economic auditing. These features comprise an ideal-typical configuration and are then used to describe (deviations by and/or evolutions in) specific empirical country(-group) cases (Loughlin et al., 2011).

3.2. The Challenge of Theorisation

The contemporary developments discussed in the previous section already hint at the neo-institutionalist turn in comparative (local) politics, underlying the phase in which the challenge moves from classification to theorisation. Herein, scholars are concerned with the informal construction and maintenance of institutions, as well as with their actual effect on the actors, arrangements, and processes of place-bound decision-making. Several variants have been developed and applied to local politics (Di Gaetano & Strom, 2003): structural (e.g. political economy or regulation theory), cultural (e.g. new political culture), or rational (e.g. public choice).⁹ The case (or perhaps better said line of thinking) we will refer to below as representative of this phase combines insights from the first and the third variant. Drawing on political economy and rational choice, regime analysis has become an influential (but also contested) strand in the study of (comparative) local politics. Having originated as a single case study in a specific context, the framework began to travel across the (Western) world, soon evoking a broader discussion concerning the problems that come with such a cross-national endeavour with theoretical aspirations.

⁹ Structural approaches consider the social and economic fabric as determinative for political power relations. Their cultural counterparts emphasize the importance of meaning and interpretation in political life and the subsequent role of norms and values. Finally, rational choice focuses upon the maximisation of self-interest in collective action. Whereas none of these approaches is limited to one type of design and method, for each a certain tendency can be discerned, such as the historical (comparative case) method (the structural approach), discourse analysis or elite interviewing (the cultural approach), or formal (mathematical) methods (the rational choice approach).

Regime Analysis: From Mould of Governing to Mode of Governance. Through a singular account of politics in postwar Atlanta, Stone (1989) developed the concept of an urban regime as a set of governing arrangements based on collaboration across institutional boundaries beyond the formal apparatus of government. Transcending the specificities of the case narrative, regimes share four central features: a governing coalition as an informal but stable group with access to institutional resources, which has an agenda of shared objectives, operates via social production through empowerment (“power to” as opposed to “power over”) and provides selective incentives and/or small opportunities to overcome problems of collective action and forge or maintain collaboration beyond the core group and the general direction of the agenda. In the case of Atlanta, the white downtown business elite aligned with the black middle-class civil-rights organisations and elected officials in a biracial coalition around an agenda of downtown redevelopment and desegregation (embodied in the phrase of “the city too busy to hate”).

Soon a debate emerged around the theoretical capacities of this single case study, rooted in its appeal, both factual (i.e., the economic outlook in an era of new public management and spatial re-scaling) and academic (i.e., the conditions for development or potential variation in regimes). In the natural context of the United States, the discussion turned to the identification of regimes beyond development (i.e., the dominance of business and growth) and of a more progressive nature (Stone, 1993). Regime analysis has also found its way elsewhere. Applications in the European context have uncovered the potential as well as the pitfalls of studying regimes cross-nationally. The analysis emphasizes the role of informal networks and relations in the contemporary governing of urban settings beyond traditional institutional boundaries, in which regard European regimes resemble their American counterparts. At the same time, research has noted substantial differences. For one thing, even if development is high on the agenda of many European local polities, it often requires vertical coordination among multiple tiers and competes with other issues on the political agenda. For another, institutional differences remain between both contexts. In Europe, the predominance of the business world is less noticeable to the advantage of intergovernmental and partisan arenas (Harding, 1997; Mossberger, 2009).

These travelling problems reveal part of the underlying difficulties of adopting regime analysis for cross-national purposes. They refer to some of the classic issues in comparative politics (and are thus also relevant for the problems in this phase of the field). First, there is a risk of parochi-

alism, as new terms are invented for existing concepts or these concepts are used in an unintended way. This has been the case when divergent arrangements were denoted as regimes, preceded by an array of descriptive labels, or when business was excluded from the coalition. Second, there is concept-stretching, when aspects of the original meaning are removed to accommodate a greater number of cases, such as in the argumentation that not each regime has all of the core features mentioned above. Third comes misclassification, when important differences are ignored and, unlike phenomena, are clustered together under the assumption that all localities have (or all coalitions are) regimes. Finally, there is degreeism, which assumes that all differences are quantitative. Consequently, qualitative criteria to determine certain empirical instances as regimes are lacking (Stoker & Mossberger, 1994; Mossberger & Stoker, 2001).

To deal with these challenges, two strategies have emerged in the literature. The first mainly attempts to improve extant regime analysis for comparative purposes. This is a particularly useful avenue if the study of specific cases aims to contribute to the formation of anterior regime theory through inferences and generalisations. It implies a combination of guiding principles: it does not ignore the core dimensions of regimes but makes comparisons along these dimensions to examine the impact of differences therein and develops coping strategies in terms of conceiving a set of minimal defining criteria that allow some flexibility in application (Mossberger, 2009). The second strategy is more fundamental in revising the whole regime concept. In his later work, Stone (2005; 2015) reformulated regimes in the direction of an analytical framework with less confined features. Regimes are said to have an agenda (to address a set of problems), a coalition (around that agenda, including both governmental as well as non-governmental actors), resources (to achieve the agenda and held by the members of the coalition), and a scheme of cooperation (in the absence of command and control). For some, this increasing abstraction has provoked the conclusion that regimes may just be one mode of urban governance rather than a separate mould of governing (Pierre, 2014).

Governance: From Concept to Consequences. This brings us (back) to the oft-quoted shift from government to governance that has gained ground as the dominant paradigm in the field of comparative local politics (Pierre & Peters, 2012). Seeing it come into fashion in the 1990s, Denters (2011, p. 313) notes that the term "... is now generally accepted as a convenient ... tool to characterize contemporary patterns of collective decision-making and ... action in the local public domain". The author argues this is a

result of a stepwise development in the literature. In the first phase, emphasis is placed on conceptual issues towards a common understanding of place-bound governance as a “more or less polycentric system in which a variety of actors are engaged in local public decision-making”. Therefore, policy materialises out of the variegated interactions of a multitude of relatively autonomous players coming from different levels of government and sectors of society (Leach & Percy-Smith, 2001; John, 2001).

The second phase tried to determine whether evolutions in the practice of place-bound policy could be placed under the banner of local governance and how these could be accounted for. Most studies have indeed confirmed the increasing importance of multi-agency networks cutting across jurisdictional and/or sectoral boundaries for timely decision-making in a range of national contexts. At the same time and pertinent to the comparative approach, the speed with or the extent to which this occurs, as well as the shape it takes, differs in accordance with pre-existing vertical or horizontal arrangements of local government (Denters & Rose, 2005). Reviewing evidence from six countries, Denters (2011, pp. 316–325) e.g. highlights the effect of the capacity, freedom of supervision, and size of local government on the measure and mode of place-bound governance. Whereas the picture for some of the Western European countries is rather similar in focus, it is much more diffuse for Central and Eastern European ones. Thus the confirmation of local governance is conditional and contingent from a comparative perspective.

Recently, in the third phase, the focus has moved towards the consequences of place-bound governance. The polycentric mode allegedly impacts on the traditional democratic and functional perspective of local government. On the one hand, its decisional fragmentation is said to put a strain on the electoral chain of command (in which voters elect the legislative, in turn steering the political and administrative executive), the classic forms of participation (such as voting or membership of a political party or associated organisations), and the overall primacy of politics. On the other hand, the associated functional differentiation is potentially at odds with the conception of a multi-purpose and territorially integrated local government. Hence scholars are probing into the theoretical and empirical implications of place-bound governance networks for representation, accountability, and responsiveness in decision-making processes, as well as for the effectiveness and efficiency of public service provision (Sørensen & Torfing, 2007).

With the apparent narrowing of the democratic and functional scope of local government in place-bound governance, more fundamental issues have also come to the fore in a recent comparative strand in the literature

(Klijn, 2008). These pertain to the position of the elected authority as a whole in a networked environment. Whereas some authors hold the more pessimistic view that local government is becoming increasingly sidelined by higher levels of government and/or non-governmental actors (captured in the catch-phrase of “governance without government”) in place-bound authoritative decision-making, others have more optimistic conceptions and see local government both as a pivotal nexus and an impartial umpire in the contemporary fragmented mode of regulation and coordination (Stoker, 2011). For this third phase, a genuine comparative perspective is just emerging (Sørensen & Torfing, 2018).

4. Conclusion and Discussion: Prospects for Comparative Local Politics

Given the obstacles discussed in the second section of this contribution and the evolving state of the art in the third, how is the field of comparative local politics to be furthered? Formulated a decade ago, the building blocks provided by Denters and Mossberger (2006) remain foundational, even if some of the concomitant construction work has evidently progressed (as demonstrated by the previous section as well). The authors see room for improvement in four domains: explanations, theories, design, and measurement.

First of all, most research into local politics and policies scrutinises the behaviour and attitudes of individual or composite actors and the results stemming from their interactions. Thus, the *explanandum* (or dependent variable) is often at the micro level. Whereas to some extent this can be accounted for by other actor-traits, in many cases part of the *explanans* (independent variables) is also to be found at the meso (social context) or macro (political setting) level. A plea is hence made to include multiple levels for better explanations, which „... requires a comparative analytical approach that focuses on differences among social systems and examines the impact of these differences on some other social phenomena with these systems ... and allows for inferences about interactions between two, three, or more levels of analysis” (Denters and Mossberger, 2006: 554). Incorporating the governance paradigm, levels may be institutionally defined (i.e., tiers of government) as well as functionally determined (i.e., networks of place-bound decision-making). For the field central to this contribution, John (2006, p. 75) designated the locality as the primary focus: “what the comparative method allows is for some clustering of observations within the

nation states to observe differences between localities and then compare causes and effects across nations”. Thus the inclusion of other levels should aim to further the elaboration of the explanation at the local level.

Second, refining theories requires a more rigorous application of a number of steps already coming into sight in the third phase of comparative local politics: systematically developing the empirical implications of theory, making propositions allowing inter-level transition and intra-level action in a multilevel theoretical model, replacing countries and/or localities by theoretically meaningful variables, and testing the corroborative potential of theory through deduction or induction (Ward, 2008; Sellers, 2016).

Third comes the enhancement of study design and methods. Because a common set of features can be identified at different political levels, those viable elsewhere may travel to local government as well. Still, this level has some specific characteristics which allow for the additional application of uncommon forms of analysis and techniques – and greater advantage should be taken of this. John (2009) captures these under the headings of *propinquity* and *numerosity*.

Propinquity relates to the closeness of actors, institutions, and processes in local politics, taking decisions with observable consequences. This fosters the potential for “soaking and poking”, i.e., becoming attuned to the experiences and intentions of relevant stakeholders. It thereby often builds on small N in-depth case analysis with semi-structured interviews to explore or inform a theoretical framework. Such an analysis might be singular or comparative. Single case studies render thick description and exploratory theory formation but are logically less suited to scrutinising multilevel explanations. The latter require comparative case studies, whose selection is based on theoretical grounds. Combining context-sensitivity with analytical rigour, in focused comparisons cases vary on key explanatory factors, whilst trying to keep others under control (Denters & Mossberger, 2006). Traditionally, this has been achieved by applying a so-called most similar systems design (in which cases differ with regard to the central variables but not on other features). Recently, qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) has appeared as a (mixed methods) alternative. In QCA, outcomes are the result of configurations of necessary and/or sufficient conditions each case is calibrated for (Rihoux & Ragin, 2009). The focused comparison has long been (and perhaps still is) the default design in cross-national comparative local politics. Often, in the looser form of an edited volume with country experts centred around a common theme, instances of the more stringent mode are also becoming more common (Sellers, 2002; Clarke, 2012).

Numerosity pertains to the multiple occurrence of local polities within a nation state. In many instances, local government is big N, especially when compared to other levels of government. This holds the potential for inferences towards generalisations, strengthening the formation and adaptation of theory. These may be based on conventional as well as more innovative forms of statistical analysis. With regard to the former, regression analysis now routinely occurs in local government studies, often with dependent variables at an interval level and permitting the associated assumptions and standard parametric tests. With regard to the latter, multilevel analysis is on the rise. This captures the statistical properties of spatially distributed and nested cases (such as specific local politicians in designated municipalities and concomitant local government systems). Whatever the specific analytical technique, the quantitative approach draws on the measurement of a limited set of theoretically important variables across a large number (i.e. covering an adequate range) of cases. It is concerned with scrutinising the direction, significance, and strength of relations. Multivariate approaches thereby offer a way to test and control for rival explanations. For a long time, quantitative cross-national comparative research in local politics was rarely or never carried out due to organisational difficulties (i.e., problems of collective action and coordination) and data (i.e., systematic collection and consistent measurement) in multinational teams. Given the internationalisation of research problems and networks, this area has recently seen advances (Denters et al., 2014; Heinelt et al., 2018a).

The fourth and final point suggests that refinements in the quality of measurement are needed. Here, issues of equivalence are particularly pressing from a comparative local politics perspective. Denters and Mossberger (2006) argue two strategies should be followed. On the one hand, rather than aiming for mechanical identity or similarity, scholars of local politics should skilfully select functional equivalents using auxiliary information. On the other hand, they should rely on the strategies often adopted when facing traveling problems in comparative politics at large: the use of classifications and typologies, family resemblances or radial categories (based on a related set or hierarchy of features respectively), ideal-types or rising on the ladder of abstraction. Contemporary developments in the second phase are particularly concerned with trying to formulate more adequate measures for comparative local politics research.

If these improvements are incorporated, comparative local politics may yet flourish as it transitions from inertia to innovation.

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DOING COMPARATIVE RESEARCH ON LOCAL POLITICS: AT A CROSSROADS BETWEEN INERTIA AND INNOVATION

Summary

This article tries to build a case for more rigorous and systematic comparative research on local politics, i.e., on the actors, instruments, institutions, and processes of place-bound governance. It discusses the opportunities (i.e. the methodological advantages in tackling descriptive, explanatory, and pragmatic questions) as well as the obstacles often associated with this approach (i.e. the existence of multiple middle-level theories and a number of methodological trade-offs innate to the comparative method). The article attempts to provide a timely state of the art of the field, and in doing so discerns three phases. The first two can be summarised as addressing the challenge of classification (with a more descriptive and a more explanatory variant rooted in old institutionalism) while the third may be said to address theorisation (where description and explanation are embedded in new institutionalism). Each phase is illustrated by one or more cases representative of that stage of development and the underlying complexities. In terms of classification, the article tries to demonstrate how the classic categorical approach to intergovernmental relations, focused on the West, gives way to a more discrete outlook, including cases from the rest of Europe. Equally, the intragovernmental perspective has gradually entered the picture (sometimes in combination with its earlier counterpart in more integrated modes of local democracy). With regard to theorisation, the (comparative) evolution of regime analysis from a mould of governing to a mode of governance is taken as a case in point. For the nowadays dominant concept of governance, contemporary assessments are increasingly considering the consequences of the empirically established albeit contingent shift away from government. In addition, the article formulates some prospects for improvement within the field in terms of explanations (i.e., multi-tiered with a primary focus on the local), theories (i.e., developing and testing empirical implications or propositions viable across and within levels), designs (i.e., maximising the added values of propinquity and numerosity), and measurement (i.e., addressing issues of equivalence).

Keywords: local politics, local government systems, comparative method, institutionalism, urban regimes, urban governance

KOMPARATIVNA ISTRAŽIVANJA LOKALNE POLITIKE: NA RAZMEĐI INERCIJE I INOVACIJE

Sažetak

Zagovara se potreba strožeg i sustavnijeg pristupa komparativnim istraživanjima lokalne politike, tj. istraživanjima koja se bave akterima, instrumentima, institucijama i procesima u lokalnom sustavu upravljanja. Navode se prednosti takvog pristupa (prisutne kad se metodologija istraživanja bavi deskriptivnim, eksplanativnim i pragmatičkim pitanjima) kao i njegovi nedostaci (mnogobrojne teorije srednjeg dometa i kompromisi nužno prisutni u metodologiji komparativnih istraživanja). Rad nudi pregled komparativnih istraživanja lokalne politike te specificira tri razvojne faze. Prve dvije faze se bave izazovom klasifikacije (gdje postoje deskriptivnija i eksplanativnija varijanta, a obje imaju temelje u starom institucionalizmu), dok se treća faza bavi teorijskim razvojem (i opis i objašnjenje imaju temelj u novom institucionalizmu). Za svaku se fazu navodi jedan ili više reprezentativnih slučajeva kako bi se predočila složenost i dostignuća svake faze. Što se tiče klasifikacije, u radu se nastoji prikazati kako klasični kategorijski pristup usmjeren na zapadne zemlje polako postaje raznovrsniji i uključuje slučajeve iz ostalih dijelova Europe. Istodobno postupno jača prisutnost unutarupravne perspektive, ponekad u kombinaciji s njenim ranijim ekvivalentom u integriranim oblicima lokalne demokracije. Što se tiče teorijskog razvoja, dolazi do prijelaza s koncepta vladanja (governing) i njegovih varijanti na governance koncept te se suvremene analize sve se više bave posljedicama empirijski dokazanog udaljavanja od koncepta vladanja. Rad također nudi nekoliko prijedloga za poboljšanje istraživanja, posebno u pogledu tumačenja (primjerice višerazinsko s fokusom na lokalno upravljanje), teorija (predlaže se razvoj i provjera empirijskih implikacija ili prijedloga koji će biti održivi na više razina i unutar razina), oblikovanja (predlaže se iskoristiti dodanu vrijednost brojnosti i blizine predmeta istraživanja) i mjerenja (bavljenje pitanjima ekvivalencije).

Ključne riječi: lokalna politika, sustavi lokalne samouprave, komparativna metoda, institucionalizam, urbani režimi, gradsko upravljanje