

# mapping political methodology: reflections on a european perspective

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## Abstract

This article surveys two concomitant developments in European political methodology. First, we point to a recent methodological convergence across Europe and the Atlantic. Second, we note a broadening methodological divide between explanatory and interpretive approaches to political phenomena. This survey provides a backdrop for introducing a new ECPR Standing Group in Political Methodology as an outlet for new methodological techniques and a venue for exchange across Europe's broad methodological spectrum.

**Keywords** ECPR; European; methodology; standing group

In recent years, and across several fronts, we have witnessed a number of significant developments in the realm of political methodology. In the United States, one can see the beginnings of a broad methodological backlash against the sort of narrowly constructed (and conceived) empirical studies that have tended to dominate the American sector of the profession. In Europe, recent research has drawn increasingly from a more varied pool of methods and methodologies. To the extent that this depiction is accurate and generalisable, it

is possible to speak of a narrowing of the gap that once separated the methodological camps of American and European political research.<sup>1</sup>

This trend, in itself, is encouraging. Yet we worry about the pace of developments in Europe – such rapid advancement is making it difficult for many European political scientists to keep abreast. This worry is exacerbated by the realisation that many of the most important recent methodological developments draw on collaborations across what was once perceived as an unbridgeable divide (of the

large-N, small-N sort). Spanning such methodological distances introduces a number of unique problems. To minimise these difficulties, while encouraging more of this sort of collaboration, European political scientists need a common organisational venue for sharing discoveries and impressions across both methodological/methods (see the distinction, below) and cultural/language divides.

In this article, we provide a rough map of a rapidly changing landscape. We do this with an eye to presenting a new ECPR Standing Group in Political Methodology as a common venue for disseminating and sharing methodological news, opinion and reflection. It is our hope that a new organisational forum for methodological discussion will help European political researchers build on their traditional strengths while developing and incorporating new approaches.

## ON METHODOLOGY

We can begin by clarifying what we mean by 'methodology'. This is no simple task, if only because the term is employed in a remarkably large number of different ways corresponding to different research traditions and strategic objectives. For many, 'methodology' is simply a highfalutin way of saying 'method'. For others (and literally), it is the study of research methods. For others still, the term 'methodology' has been hijacked by those with a flair for statistical analyses (King, 1989).

In the spirit of European political research<sup>2</sup> – which we hold to be open, expansive, and embracing – we understand methodology in broad terms. Like Colin Hay (2002: 63), we see methodology as a wide-ranging framework for choosing analytical strategies and research designs that underpin substantive research (see also Blaikie, 1993: 7). As such, the concept of methodology incorporates epistemological and ontological

*'For many, 'methodology' is simply a highfalutin way of saying 'method'.'*

concerns; but it also concerns wrestling with specific questions about the appropriateness of a given method.

This depiction overlaps with Kenneth Waltz's, where methodology is seen as a larger conceptual framework that (implicitly) includes ontological and epistemological beliefs. As such, he is worried that students:

*have been much concerned with methods and little concerned with the logic of their use. This reverses the proper priority of concern, for once a methodology is adopted, the choice of methods becomes merely a tactical matter. It makes no sense to start the journey that is to bring us to an understanding of phenomena without asking which methodological routes might possibly lead there (Waltz, 1979: 13).*

One way to consider this relationship is to think of methods as tools, and methodologies as toolboxes.<sup>3</sup> Thus, methods can be understood as problem-specific approaches (given a particular view of the world) and also as data-specific approaches (as each particular view of the world most often leads one to seek a particular type of data, e.g., 'observational/participatory' versus 'qualitative' versus 'quantitative' data).<sup>4</sup> Understood in this way, we might expand on the toolbox analogy. For example, we expect electricians to view the world differently from carpenters (i.e., they aim to resolve different types of problems): an electrician might enter a new construction site and see nothing but work at the same time as a carpenter leaves the site having, from his/her point of view, completed his/her job. Consequently, each

tradesperson relies on a different mixture of tools or approaches for solving the problems he/she encounters.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, we should not be surprised to find the electrician's toolbox filled with a different set of tools than those filling the carpenter's. (Alternatively, we should not be surprised to find that the two tradespeople sometimes use the same tools.)

Perhaps the toolbox analogy is a bit too clumsy. After all, the ontological differences separating carpenters and electricians may not be very large. Instead, we might consider two different approaches to human health: one 'scientific', the other 'homeopathic'. Without pretending to know all the differences that separate these two approaches, we can recognise that they imply different ways of understanding (and hence promoting) human health. Given these different approaches, we might expect a minor crisis should the medical bags of the scientific and homeopathic healers be inadvertently switched. Having said that, of course, there may be some tools that both healers share – yet the tools are used in different ways and for different purposes.

Either way, we think that it is useful to consider methodology and its relationship to methods in these (rather vague) terms as they allow us to embrace a wider population of studies in political research.

## STATE OF AFFAIRS

When conceived in this way, what – if anything – is unique about European methodological approaches to political research? In the introductory section, we hinted that European approaches were becoming more like their American counterparts. To be frank (and honest), the jury remains out on that verdict. To date, we are unaware of any systematic attempt to measure the degree of methodological commonalities/differences in European and American political research. There are probably several rea-

sons for this. One reason is the lack of any clear typology of methodological approaches. Another is the remarkable lack of institutional dialogue between American and European political scientists. Last, but not least, is the fact that Europe lacks a common organisational edifice for collecting and sharing news about methodological developments among political researchers.

In the absence of any firm empirical measures of methodological overlap, we can turn to more subjective evaluations of the methodological content of European political science. In general, and in contrast to David McKay (1991), Arend Lijphart (1997) tends to emphasise the similarities more than the differences among American and European political scientists. However, when Lijphart does notice a difference between the two traditions, he points to the role and influence of comparative methods. For Lijphart (1997: 10), European political scientists (as reflected in the content of our flagship journal, the *EJPR*) rely more heavily on comparative approaches.

To emphasise the degree of common territory shared by American and European political scientists, Lijphart refers to Goodin and Klingemann's (1996) influential *New Handbook of Political Science*. In particular, Lijphart points to the nationality of the authors who make up this edited anthology. In this (narrow) respect, Lijphart's contention is not controversial: about half of the chapters are by Americans and the rest are mainly European. But a closer examination of the methodological contributions (and the way in which methodology is employed) reveals another pattern. The overview chapter on methodology is written by John E. Jackson (1996) – from the University of Michigan – and describes recent methodological developments in terms of the importation of econometric (read statistical) methods. In contrast, the following chapter – on the political meth-

odology of qualitative methods (*comparative*, 'macro-qualitative' methods, actually) – is co-authored by two European scholars.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Pippa Norris (1997: 26–27) notes that one of the most striking differences between American and European political science is the different methodological approaches of articles in their respective flagship journals over the 1970–1990 period. In Norris' empirical survey, *EJPR* articles were generally divided between those favouring a broadly behaviouralist approach and those adopting a more institutional, descriptive or qualitative approach. *APSR* articles, by contrast, tended to employ more systematic empirical (read statistical) analyses that test theories using survey or aggregate data. More recently, an increasing number of *APSR* articles utilise deductive logic and even more sophisticated empirical (mainly statistical) techniques.<sup>7</sup>

Norris (1997: 27) concludes this comparison by noting a growing difference in approaches:

*Therefore during the last decade the methodological rift between European and American political science, always strong, may have grown stronger. A glance through current issues of both journals shows how far we are literally speaking a different language, which reflects alternative assumptions about the nature of political science. The danger is also that, like the discipline of economics, American political science may have become more technically sophisticated, but as a result unintelligible to a wider public readership.*

This difference has recently been pointed out even more explicitly by Marsh and Savigny (2004: 155): '... [P]olitical science, particularly US political science, is still dominated by a positivist epistemology and, particularly, by behavioura-

*'...APSR articles, by contrast, tended to employ more systematic empirical (read statistical) analyses that test theories using survey or aggregate data.'*

list and rational choice approaches that are underpinned by that positivism.'

Although these authors make a very important point about the different epistemological and methodological signals being sent by the respective flagship journals, we doubt that these differences are indicative of a stronger methodological rift between European and American political science. Rather, these differences might be better explained by the publishing strategies of European scholars.

In particular, there are three aspects of European publishing strategies that could explain why *EJPR* articles tend to be less concerned with theory testing and formal analysis (than articles in its American counterpart). First, given that American journals rank highest in citation indices, and given that publication in high-ranking journals became more and more important for individual advancement during the period being analysed, European scholars acquired a strong incentive to tailor and submit their work to the American journals. Secondly, once journals start to publish a particular kind of analysis, they quickly develop a self-reinforcing reputation for those particular approaches and substantive areas. Since the American journals already have a reputation for being strong in theory-testing and formal analysis, European political scientists working in these areas tend to submit to these journals. (In contrast, the *EJPR* has a reputation for a 'low-tech' comparative perspective,

thereby attracting more of that sort of work.) Thirdly, and as a consequence of the last strategy, European political scientists who use formal analyses prefer to submit to other journals, like the *European Journal of Political Economy* or *Public Choice*.

## **A SIMPLE MAP OF THE METHODOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE**

In contrast to Norris' depiction of a growing gap between American and European approaches to political research, we think that recent developments signal a convergence in approaches. In the United States, small-N research programmes are enjoying a veritable renaissance, albeit at the price of a considerable schism within American political science (as exemplified by the recent foundation of a separate section on qualitative methods in the American Political Science Association alongside the mainly quantitatively-oriented section on political methodology). Concomitantly, in Europe, large-N and medium-N studies have become increasingly common. We think that the result indicates a drawing together of various approaches to political research – both across the Atlantic and within Europe.

This impression was cemented when the three of us co-chaired a session on 'Methodological Advances in Comparative Research: Concepts, Techniques, Applications' at the Marburg ECPR General Conference in September 2003. While the session was hardly representative of the field as a whole, it did provide us with an opportunity to survey some of the most recent methods and methodological developments in European political research. From this vantage point, and drawing from our own individual experiences as both consumers and producers of European political research, we conclude that the differences separating

American and European political research methodologies are shrinking. We see this in light of the distance that has traditionally separated the approaches on each continent. In short, we can talk about a convergence of approaches, from two relatively isolated positions. With these differences and unique trajectories in mind, we can outline our impressions and concerns about the state of European methodology in political research.

To depict and comment on this state of affairs, we need somehow to simplify the vast methodological diversity that exists in both European and American political research traditions. To do this, we begin by characterising European political methodology in terms of a landscape that includes three dominant features: large-N research; a growing middle ground of medium-N research; and the traditional foundation of European political science, small-N research. Depicting European political research in this way is problematic in at least one important regard: it tends to assume that all contemporary political research shares common ontological and epistemological foundations (a problem to which we shall return below). Nevertheless, we find the depiction useful if only because it helps to provide a little more nuance than does the customary qualitative/quantitative dichotomy. We do this in order to illustrate the degree to which small-N research projects increasingly follow the logic of quantitative research, and how large-N projects have begun to realise the narrative potential that resides in statistical studies. Indeed, both small-N and large-N projects may, to a certain extent, exploit both qualitative *and* quantitative data (although, admittedly, this is still not the case in most projects).

### **LARGE-N TERRAIN**

At one end of Europe's methodological territory, we find the increased use of

sophisticated large-N statistical techniques. While these methods have traditionally been employed in more behaviouralist studies of voting in Europe, we see adapted variants now making significant headway into the heartland of European political science: comparative politics. For a variety of reasons, new PhD students are becoming more knowledgeable about statistical techniques. Several initiatives in graduate quantitative training, most prominently the Essex Summer School in Social Science Data Analysis and Collection (now in its thirty-seventh year!), have increased familiarity with quantitative methods and contributed to building a European network of quantitatively oriented scholars. In addition, methodology and methods are gradually being given more room in undergraduate curricula, although at very different speeds across Europe. Needless to say, imitation-effects and incentives to publish in high-ranking journals should not be underestimated as motives for using quantitative methods for cross-country comparisons. While these new developments are encouraging, and represent the most important opportunity for a rapprochement with the American methodological tradition, they conceal two, somewhat paradoxical, characteristics of the European wing of the discipline.

First, and in contrast to the interest generated by meetings of APSA's political methodology section, few European scholars are preoccupied with solving the technical problems of estimation techniques. Rather, most European scholars have a more consummative and applied relationship to estimation techniques; their primary concern is with problems of operationalisation and concept validity. To depict the difference in the form of stereotyped caricatures: the American enthusiastically estimates a highly sophisticated statistical model on very rough data, while the European fiddles around with a very simple statistical

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model, while expressing concern for the quality of the data employed. Moreover, as evidenced by recent PhD dissertations (hardly a representative sample, we admit), few European contributions rely solely on quantitative analyses and most reveal little confidence in their quantitative findings. Hence, the spread of quantitative analysis in Europe occurs with much hesitance and reluctance among its practitioners. We suspect that a driving force behind the increased use of quantitative methods is less a conviction that this is the correct way of doing research and more the belief that showing proficiency in such methods can improve career opportunities. This impression is exacerbated by the observation that the current boom in quantitative comparative research projects has led to a desperate but vain search for research assistants fully confident in their tasks. Thus, the picture we wish to paint is one of Europe's increased reliance on quantitative methods, but also of her reluctance, and implicit critique of these methods.

On the other hand, we fear that Europe's rapid adoption of quantitative comparative analyses taxes the existing capacity of European journals to review critically the standards of application. This concern is based on three (related) observations. First, enthusiasm for quantitative research is more widespread among younger political scientists. Secondly, the statistical capacities of their older peers are often less than stellar. Thirdly, peer review tends to be carried out by members of the older generation

by reason of their established positions in the field. The unfortunate consequence is that reviews often tend to be more benign than is necessary for a critical assessment of the methodology and methods used. In short, leading European journals seem willing to accept manuscripts that would not pass muster in high-ranking American journals.

In other words, we are encouraged by the enhanced methodological sophistication of European political research, but we are worried that the process of adjustment is developing too rapidly and without adequate quality control. This is a shame, if only because the very pace of developments has made it difficult to incorporate some of the strengths of European methodological reflection in the application of new techniques.

More fundamentally however, the theory-testing capacity of statistical analyses, in particular of methods used in macro-comparative research, has recently been seriously challenged, both by philosophers of science and by econometricians (McKim and Turner, 1997; Cartwright, 1999; Mäki, 2002). These debates have shaken an unquestioned assumption underlying the usual approaches to quantitative research: 'Econometrics is not about measuring covering laws. It is about observing non-obvious regularities' (Hoover, 2002: 173). Hence, contrary to the assumption made by those who argue that quantitative approaches offer a template for all social scientific enquiry (King *et al*, 1994), theory-testing is difficult not only in the lower realms of small-N analysis, but it is also difficult to manage in the thin air of large-N statistical analysis. Thus, a more modest approach to quantitative research may offer more promise. For example, such an approach could use estimated parameters to explore the historical development of associations between variables in the sense of 'statistical narratives', not in a strict theory-testing framework based on un-

warranted assumptions, like sample representativeness or coefficient stability (see, e.g., Kittel, 1999: 238–242; Kittel and Obinger, 2003: 32–36).

## **THE MIDDLE GROUND**

In the middle ground of Europe's methodological terrain, we find a remarkably vibrant and expanding research environment that deals with a 'limited' number of cases. This territory is often referred to as 'small-N', but it is more appropriately labelled 'medium-N' or 'intermediate-N', as it tends to deal with anything between five and sixty cases. Since the early 1990s, European political research has witnessed significant methodological reflection and the development and exploitation of specific comparative *methods* tailored for just this type of medium-N design.

The starting point for this trend is the 'agenda-setting' volume by Charles C. Ragin (1987). Although Ragin is an American political scientist, he is very familiar with the European context, having revisited (for example) the 'classical' studies of Stein Rokkan. To put it (a bit too) briefly, Ragin's methodological ambition is to develop a distinctive strategy based on a 'synthesis' of small-N (mainly qualitative and case-oriented) and large-N (mainly statistical and 'analytical', i.e. variable-oriented) strategies. While Ragin today defines his methodology as 'comparative-configurational' (Ragin, 2003),<sup>8</sup> most researchers in this field (at least in political science) would accept the broader label 'comparative historical methodology', defined as 'the use of systematic comparison and the analysis of processes over time to explain large-scale outcomes' (Mahoney, 2004: 81). At the level of methods, Ragin has made significant inroads by developing a specific tool (software) for formal comparative analysis (based on Boolean logic),

called qualitative comparative analysis (QCA).

In recent years, it has been possible to distinguish four promising developments in this field. While these developments have been occurring in both the US and European contexts, the European effort is not at all negligible. First, an increasing number of students are using QCA – especially more junior researchers and PhD students – not only in ‘mainstream’ comparative politics (i.e. the comparative analysis of macro- or meso-level phenomena such as conflicts, states, collective actors) but also in some specific subfields such as comparative policy analysis.<sup>9</sup>

Secondly, two new tools have recently been developed in this field. Multi-value QCA (MVQCA) was created to allow analysts to pursue the QCA logic while using ‘richer’ (i.e. not only dichotomous) data (Cronqvist, 2004). MVQCA analyses can be performed using the TOSMANA (*Tool for Small-N Analysis*) software (<http://www.tosmana.org/>), developed by a team based in Marburg, Germany. Similarly, Charles Ragin has pushed his methodological endeavour further by developing and introducing ‘Fuzzy Sets’ (with the fs/QCA software) (Ragin, 2000) and, more recently, by suggesting bridges between the ‘fuzzy’ and ‘crisp’ (i.e. dichotomous) analyses (Ragin, 2004).

Thirdly, the researchers who are developing – and applying – these methods are increasingly connected and engaged in common venues and research projects. For example, the COMPASSS (COMParative methods for the Advancement of Systematic Cross-case analysis and Small-N Studies) resource website (<http://www.compass.org>) was developed to give some substance to this growing network. As a result, an increasing number of scholars from neighbouring social scientific disciplines are joining this network and more advanced students and junior researchers, coming from both the

‘small-N’ and the ‘large-N’ worlds, have taken advantage of the opportunity to receive training in these new methods.

Last but not least, the methodological (and methods) discussion in the realm of medium-N research is quite lively (see, e.g., Berg-Schlosser, 2001; Mahoney, 2004; Ragin, 2003; Rihoux, 2003). All four of these works provide encouragement about the state and vitality of European political methodology.

We conclude this section by identifying four unresolved challenges to this middle ground. First, medium-N researchers need to develop a fruitful dialogue *among* proponents of the different methods and approaches within the field. For instance, a range of specific methods can be used to test hypotheses about necessary and sufficient conditions (Mahoney, 2004). One of these methods, MSDO/MDSO (Berg-Schlosser and De Meur, 1997), might precede a QCA-type analysis in a given research sequence. A whole range of other specific methods could allow one to analyse complex temporal processes in a medium-N, comparative setting (Mahoney, 2004). Thus, a key challenge facing this middle-ground group of scholars will be to articulate – possibly as a sequence in the research process – these approaches using set-theoretic (Boolean or Fuzzy) methods (Rihoux, 2003; De Meur and Rihoux, 2002).

The second challenge is common to all three levels of research in European political science: to pursue – or, in some cases, to initiate – debates at the ontological and/or epistemological levels. This dialogue is not only necessary among medium-N comparativists themselves, but also with (and among) more mainstream small-N and large-N scholars. One of the key issues at stake here is causality, which remains a hotly debated topic.

The third challenge is to refrain from creating new barriers between methodological communities. A strong network of followers devoted to a particular approach

can easily develop into a 'sect-like' community. Luckily, there is great potential for expanding the medium-N field so that it might serve as a bridge between small-N and large-N communities.

Finally, younger medium-N scholars have found it difficult to publish their work in highly-ranked journals. It would seem that the publishing 'niche' for such medium-N works is, at this point, rather narrow. The reasons for this are surely many (some of which we discussed in the previous section), but we should not discount the possibility that reputable journals have not (yet?) gathered a sufficient 'reservoir' of qualified peer reviewers for the articles being submitted.

### **SMALL-N TERRAIN**

In the small-N terrain, we find what might be understood as the traditional methodological ballast of European political research. Two recent publications illustrate the strength and continued utility of these small-N comparative approaches: Dirk Berg-Schlosser and Jeremy Mitchell's (2000) – and Fritz Scharpf and Vivien Schmidt's two-volume collection (2000a, b). At the same time, influential new textbooks from across the seas, such as King *et al*'s (1994) have brought a welcome degree of methodological reflection and rigour to this sub-set of the discipline. As Andrew Bennett (2003) notes with respect to developments in American political science: there has been a veritable renaissance in the production of books on qualitative methods and their philosophical underpinnings.<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that this renaissance draws on deep traditions in Europe. European researchers are particularly well positioned to take full advantage of these new developments – but they must first keep abreast of them.

As part of this renaissance, new techniques and concepts are being developed

*'No longer do small-N researchers need to apologise for their lack of additional observations.'*

and employed to better study unique political phenomena. No longer do small-N researchers need to apologise for their lack of additional observations. In both the small-N and medium-N worlds, the use of careful comparative designs, even with very few cases, is allowing us to produce 'modest', middle-range generalisations (De Meur and Rihoux, 2002: 42-43; Ragin, 1987: 31). The bottom line is disarmingly simple: by gaining a deep understanding of (a limited number of) cases, we can learn more in terms of general knowledge. The 'medium N' techniques mentioned above offer one way to tackle such phenomena, as they are indeed concerned with understanding 'thick', complex, cases (Ragin, 2003). Traditional small-N studies have long prided themselves on their ability to exploit 'thick' case-study techniques.

We are also hopeful that there may be a renewed interest in the deeper ontological underpinnings of modern political analyses. As noted recently by Peter Hall:

*Many important theories in the field are now based on ontological views that see political outcomes as the result of causal processes in which distant events, sequencing, and complex interaction effects play important roles. However, the most prominent methodologies in the field are still based on a standard regression model that was more appropriate to the ontologies of thirty years ago, when many theories implied that political phenomena are caused by a few powerful actors operating independently of context and with roughly similar force everywhere (Hall, 2003: 398).*

Small-N studies are well situated to exploit these new methodological sites. But the discipline's focus on large-N and more 'scientific' approaches – even in Europe – has led the community of political researchers away from alternative methodological endeavours (broadly defined). However, the kind of empirical information that has been labelled 'causal process observations' (Collier *et al*, 2004) cannot be handled in the matrix format used by both the statistical and the qualitative comparative approach without a crippling loss of information. Therefore, we think that much more of our discipline's R&D effort should be directed towards methods suited for small-N analysis.

Let us be direct: our depiction thus far is one of a profession that is enjoying the benefits of increased integration and methodological development. It is a depiction that minimises the traditional divide that is often said to separate qualitative and quantitative researchers. In short, it is a picture of a discipline at peace: growing together and learning from its constituent parts scattered across the methodological spectrum.

We fear, however, that this harmony of interests may be illusive and short-lived. The most significant methodological divide in modern political research is probably the one that separates what might be called explanatory versus interpretive approaches. On both sides of the Atlantic, the profession is witnessing a blossoming of new interpretive approaches, including techniques designed to elucidate the symbolic dimensions of human behaviour (e.g., discourse analysis, semiotics, hermeneutics, psychoanalysis, cultural analysis).

Unfortunately, many of these developments are occurring outside traditional venues of methodological discussion. For example, in responding to King *et al*'s (1994) streamlining project, American representatives of the qualitative persua-

sion have been remarkably silent on epistemological and ontological issues. According to Collier *et al* (2004), the difference separating quantitative and qualitative research is merely a difference in the level of measurement, the number of cases, the use of statistical tests, and the focus on 'thick' versus 'thin' analysis. In short, even critics tend to accept the basic propositions of nomological and deductive reasoning that underlie King *et al*'s position (see, however, Ragin, 2003). From the interpretive perspective, however, this position amounts to fighting the war on the terrain chosen by the adversary (see, e.g., Smith, 2000). Dvora Yanow (2003) has recently argued: 'For some methodologists, the problem of contesting approaches is resolved by the use of both positivist-informed and interpretive methods in a single research context, each one informing the other. My own view on this question is that given their contradictory ontological and epistemological holdings, the two approaches are incompatible.' And Marsh and Savigny (2004: 165) add: 'Our point is that you cannot move simply towards a rapprochement between different approaches to political science that are rooted in alternate ontological and epistemological positions; we insist that an epistemology is a skin, not a sweater.' Just to mention a few points of disagreement, issues like the theory-testing status of empirical work, the higher status of causal inference in comparison to description, the weight of variable-centred analysis, or the rules of case selection are much more ambivalent from an interpretive perspective than is suggested in the ongoing 'mainstream qualitative' American discussion.

This new – actually very old – methodological divide may, in part, be a result of the concern of interpretive scholars not to be associated with the methodology of 'science'. It may also be an artefact of the rather narrow way in which the term 'methodology' has been traditionally used

to describe 'scientific' methods in the study of politics. But we fear that the gap may be a result of both the unwillingness of mainstream researchers to extend a hand in partnership or to share in methodological discovery and the unwillingness of many interpretive scholars even to accept a discussion about the foundation of possible interlocution. At the same time, we are witnessing an increasing shrillness of tone on both sides of the divide, a development which we utterly deplore. As we celebrate the complexity of political behaviour, it seems only reasonable that the tent<sup>11</sup> of European political methodology should be broad enough to shelter even the most disparate approaches.

Unfortunately, this sort of discussion and this broad tent are difficult to discern in Europe's sundry national political science communities. Here it is possible to speak of national biases in favour of one methodological tradition or another. As a result, many scholars (be they senior or junior) – and, consequently, many students – are simply not *aware* of the sort of methodological debates we are discussing here.

## **BRIDGING THE HIGHPOINTS**

We can now see European political research methodologies developing along several fronts simultaneously. We have described a methodological maturity in European political science that can be attributed to a growing willingness to share methodological lessons across the qualitative/quantitative divide. As teachers of the social sciences, and as producers of political and macrosociological research, it behoves us all to try to keep abreast of these developments.

At the same time, we have noted with concern the growing divide between explanatory and interpretive approaches to political phenomena and the tendency

toward national ghettos of political research along different methodological lines. It is our hope that a more inclusive conception of methodology will allow the discipline to embrace a broader span of researchers and encourage more dialogue among them.

In order to facilitate this kind of exchange, we have taken the initiative of launching an ECPR Standing Group on Political Methodology (SGPM). This standing group can function as an outlet for new techniques and a venue for exchange across the broad methodological spectrum.

In order for the standing group to work, however, we need the active involvement of Europe's sundry political research communities. No Steering Committee or Advisory Board, no matter how broad, can capture the range of methods, methodologies, languages and other national differences that are the pride of European political research. But a properly designed and responsive Standing Group can provide a common roof – one large enough to shelter even the most marginal groups – under which different traditions can introduce and market their ideas.

In particular, we hope to use the new SGPM to meet three specific goals. First, as a new group, we will be actively seeking members and to spread awareness of our existence. Towards that end, we are setting up a web page (<http://www.ecpr-sgpm.nl>). We hope to issue circulars to interested members about relevant events and developments. We can also use the site to distribute papers or research documents of interest to members.

Secondly, as our group develops, we intend to sponsor a number of meetings and conferences. For now, we envision two types of meetings. First, the success of our original session at Marburg has encouraged us to think about organising more sessions at future ECPR gatherings. Indeed, we would like to support and

sponsor a variety of initiatives that can be hosted within the framework of the main ECPR events (especially the Joint Sessions of Workshops, the General Conferences, and the Research Sessions). In addition, we envisage joint meetings with similar organisations in other parts of the world (e.g., the various methodological sections of APSA), or with organisations in related fields such as sociology and economics.

Thirdly, we hope that the Standing Group can offer special PhD workshops and vocational conferences on practical research problems. This would allow us to build on the success of the Essex Summer School, as students who have completed their methods training in Essex might be channelled into more specialised work-

shop settings. This will give young European political scientists an opportunity to discuss with fellow students and experienced methodologists the methodological problems that arise in the course of their PhD work. It is our impression that the demand for extensive methodological exchange is large and untapped, especially in Southern, Central and Eastern Europe. Since the Standing Group aspires to represent the community of European political science methodologists, it should be able to offer the sort of expertise, background, and organisation needed to meet that demand.

In short, we invite the readers of *EPS* to join us in creating a European political methodology community that is worthy of its name and legacy.

## Notes

1 We are not completely unaware of developments in Asian and/or African political science and are somewhat embarrassed by the 'Americano-centrism' of this paper. Our only defence is that the field itself is dominated by the American hegemon, and that all the regional variants – to a certain extent – model themselves after her.

2 We note that Lijphart (1997: 6) originally proposed to name the (then new) flagship journal of European political science the *European Journal of Political Research* (not the *European Journal of Political Science*), because he felt that the term 'political research' implied a more open and interdisciplinary character than did 'political science'.

3 It has been said that this depiction should be attributed to the economist Joan Robinson, but we are not aware of any direct reference.

4 At least among 'empirical' views of the world, which imply the collection and analysis of some data to grasp real-life phenomena.

5 It should go without saying that a tradesperson can do great damage to the object of study (and/or its surrounding context) when he/she uses inappropriate tools.

6 Ragin *et al* (1996). While Charles Ragin resides in the US, Dirk Berg-Schlosser is Professor of Political Science at Phillips University in Marburg, Germany, and Gisèle de Meur is Professor of Mathematics for the Social Sciences at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium.

7 Norris also considered articles in the UK Political Studies Association's journal. *Political Studies* had the highest proportion of articles involving philosophical discussion of normative theory, historical studies and interpretive textual analysis.

8 There are other labels, such as 'systematic macro-qualitative comparative analysis' (Ragin *et al*, 1996), and 'systematic comparative case analysis' (Marx and Rihoux, 2004).

9 Currently, about 300 QCA applications have been published (or circulated in various ways), mostly in political science and sociology. See the regularly updated international database on the COMPASS resource site at <http://www.compass.org>.

10 For a list of key books and articles in this area, see the syllabi at <http://www.asu.edu/clas/polisci/cqrm/syllabi.html>.

11 Given the apparent depth of the cleavage, we prefer this more prosaic image, with its suggestion of possible rapprochement, to the 'Church' metaphor invoked by Marsh and Savigny (2004).

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