

Political Science Methodology: Opening Windows Across Europe . . . and the Atlantic

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In the following essay, Benoît Rihoux, Bernhard Kittel and Jonathon W. Moses outline the recent developments in European political methodology and highlight their own work in developing a number of projects with the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) that include establishing a Standing Group in Political Methodology, the ECPR Summer School in Methods and Techniques and the forthcoming ECPR/Palgrave Macmillan Research Methods Book Series.

Introduction: On the Need to Open up Windows for Methodological Debates

In an article published in *European Political Science* (EPS) (Moses, Rihoux, and Kittel 2005), we discussed recent evolutions of the discipline with regards to methodology broadly defined. One of our key aims was to survey some convergences between evolutions in Europe and North America, but also some persisting differences.

In the mid-1990s, Pippa Norris, followed by Marsh and Savigny a few years later, identified a profound methodological rift between European and American political science. In short, American political science was portrayed as heavily dominated by high-tech methodologies, mostly quantitative (read: statistical), and also relying on elaborate mathematical modeling, while European political science was portrayed as more low-tech, giving more room to qualitative approaches, and to more case-oriented comparative methods.

In our article, we nuanced this analysis. We did detect signals of some convergences: for instance the renaissance of more small-N research approaches in the U.S.; the growth of more large-N (and statistics-based) and formalized analyses in Europe; and a common growing interest in medium-N comparative approaches.

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However we did find some enduring differences. For instance, on the large-N side of the spectrum, the way statistics are mobilized is still quite contrasted—we depicted it as the following caricature: “the American enthusiastically estimates a highly sophisticated statistical model on very rough data, while the European fiddles around with a very simple statistical model, while expressing concern for the quality of the data employed.” Another difference is that more interpretive approaches tend to gain more ground in Europe, as well as more descriptive, institutional work not necessarily geared towards the scientific exercise of formulating and testing empirically hypotheses. There also seems to be a more pragmatic, less dogmatic (possibly less positivist, in the narrow sense), more pluralist approach to methodology in Europe—sometimes at the expense of technical correctness.

In our conclusion, we noted that many crucial cross-cutting methodological issues simply did not have arenas where they could be discussed, where different methodological perspectives could be confronted. For instance, in the U.S. especially, very few publications (typically journals) are open to both quantitative and qualitative scholarly work. The training venues are also mostly segregated between quantitative and qualitative places; so are many networks in the profession—once again especially in the U.S., whereas in Europe cleavages are often fuzzier. Anyhow, on both sides of the Atlantic, there are very few places where political scientists from different methodological backgrounds and “faiths” can meet and debate about issues of common interest for the further consolidation of the discipline.

This was the key reason why we established (some four years ago) the ECPR Standing Group (Organized Section) in Political Methodology as a place where upcoming methodologies would be discussed, and also as venue for exchange across the broad methodological spectrum—a “broad house” with windows wide open to the neighboring disciplines.

Here below, we outline some of the main initiatives which we have launched during the last few years, with the key

support of the ECPR, and quite often also involving some U.S.-based colleagues. In conclusion, we discuss in short some of the prospects of these initiatives and their potential usefulness for the discipline—hopefully with as much transatlantic exchanges as possible.

The ECPR Standing Group on Political Methodology

In 2004 we established, under the auspices of the European Consortium for Political Research, a new Standing Group on Political Methodology. The initiative to create this Standing Group was encouraged by the success, both in terms of content and attendance, of a methodology section at the 2003 ECPR General Conference in Marburg, Germany (see below). After the Marburg experience, we were under the impression that European political science was maturing quickly in terms of methodological rigor and variety, and that it was useful to establish a common venue for sharing methodological concerns and interests.

We each stemmed from different methodological traditions and from the outset chose to be all-encompassing and not to limit ourselves to one specific, and to place emphasis on methodological pluralism in political science. We opted for a very broad definition of methodology, so as to encompass a broad variety of concerns: from more fundamental ones (ontology, epistemology) to more practical ones (methods, techniques).

We defined three, inter-related objectives that we still pursue today: (1) to spread information about new tools and approaches to studying political phenomena. Indeed, it seemed to us that methodological innovations often remain restricted to small groups and closed networks, and that ‘cross-fertilization’ is too rare across methodological traditions; (2) to promote and facilitate cooperation on various methodological issues, broadly defined; and (3) to provide an organizational basis for supporting new initiatives in political methodology. Thus we defined our group as a platform to launch various initiatives.

Our goal was (and still is) to encourage dialogue among different subgroups of the discipline on important and common methodological concerns. In doing so, we aim to encourage discussion about methods and methodologies that are common to a broad swath of social science.

In practical terms, the Advisory Board is made up of colleagues who represent a broad spectrum of approaches and persuasions on political methods and methodology. Three members of this board of 14 are U.S.-based. From the outset, it was our conscious choice to include some North American scholars in our network. Similarly, we established contacts with colleagues across greater Europe (including southern, eastern, and central countries that are sometimes less tightly attached to the broader political science community), as well as in Asia (especially Japan).

A Full Methodology Section at the ECPR General Conferences

The first opportunity to bring together many political scientists around methodological issues was grasped at the second ECPR General Conference in Marburg (2003), through a specific political methodology section, Methodological Advances in Comparative Research: Concepts, Techniques, Applications. The aim of the section was to identify the state-of-the-art in this field, to discuss conceptual and methodological problems of the various approaches, and to identify avenues for research, both in terms of methodological developments and in terms of practical applications. Key issues in the call were accuracy versus generalizability, the respective strengths of existing quantitative and qualitative analysis techniques (vis-à-vis new techniques such as QCA), and possibilities to combine and/or integrate elements from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives into a common framework.

The section was a success as it attracted many paper proposals from colleagues, junior and senior, all across Europe, as well as from quite a few U.S. colleagues. Seven panels were held, some of them with packed audiences. We also hosted the concluding discussion, in which some core arguments of Rethinking Social Inquiry (Brady & Collier 2004) were hotly debated. There was also a round table on Comparative Methods, which hosted three influential U.S. colleagues: Charles Ragin, David Collier, and Nathaniel Beck. So, in many ways, the Marburg section was a transatlantic forum as well.

Building upon the success of Marburg, we chose to open up the perspectives at

the third ECPR General Conference in Budapest, Hungary (2005), with a more bottom-up approach in the definition of topics, and hence with broader coverage. Under the heading Methodological Innovations and Dilemmas in Political Research, we issued a call suggesting some key topics such as causation (given the remarkable lack of consensus among researchers about the role of causation in political research), the development of new, original approaches and/or techniques (across a broad spectrum of research designs, e.g., small-N, medium-N, large-N), and work that embraces multi-methods, multi-level analyses. Once again, we received many proposals, and eventually 10 diverse panels went ahead. As in Marburg, the majority of panels were very well attended, with lively debates, as was the aim of the section: to encourage debates across perspectives.

Finally, at the fourth ECPR General Conference in Pisa, Italy (2007), we pursued the effort in a more condensed way to try to concentrate on a few key methodological topics. The goal was to provide an overview of some debated approaches to empirical analyses relevant for political scientists and scholars working on political topics in neighboring disciplines. The idea was also to address various innovations and dilemmas in political methodology, with a particular emphasis on ways to bridge the gap between different analytical traditions. The attendance was high in every panel and the debates also quite lively, as in Marburg and in Budapest. For those of you that are interested, the majority of papers that are presented at ECPR Conferences are available online in the ECPR paper archive (www.ecprnet.org).

The conclusion from these three experiences is that there clearly is a need for such a broad forum, beyond traditional methodological divisions, and that colleagues enjoy the methodological openings that are provided in such panels. Thus, we certainly intend to organize a lively political methodology section once again at the next ECPR General Conference which will be held in Potsdam, Germany (September 2009). U.S. colleagues will be most welcome to join—their input in terms of panel proposals, or as paper givers, will also be most appreciated.

An Ambitious Venture: The ECPR Summer School in Methods and Techniques

In July 2007 the second ECPR Summer School in Methods and Techniques was held at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. The original idea behind the Summer School came from the former ECPR chair,

Dirk Berg-Schlosser, and current member of the ECPR Executive Committee and chair of the Sub-Committee for Training and Summer Schools, Ursula Hoffmann-Lange. Through many discussions with colleagues, and also through our experience as instructors in different venues and in particular at the well-established Essex Summer School, the idea gradually grew that a new concept for a summer school was needed—the sort of concept and philosophy around which the Standing Group on Political Methodology had been built, in particular in terms of opening up spaces for debates and cross-fertilization. ECPR asked us to specify the concept. We chose to name it ECPR Summer School in Methods and Techniques and its aims can be summarized as follows:

- It is specifically targeted towards junior researchers and advanced students (typically beginning Ph.D. students).
- It is also targeted towards researchers in political science (and open to other neighboring disciplines such as sociology);
- It provides up-to-date training in specially selected methods in the whole spectrum of approaches used in the social sciences, along six core dimensions of variation: (1) the macro-micro distinction; (2) the large N/small N distinction; (3) the quantitative/qualitative distinction (also bringing in more interpretive and ethnographic perspectives); (4) covering different camps in order to overcome traditional ontological and epistemological divisions; (5) methods for data collection and data analysis; and (6) the cross-sectional versus longitudinal data dimension.
- It fosters interaction between instructors and course participants.
- It offers opportunities for debates across methodological perspectives, in which instructors, guest speakers, and course participants can engage—in particular through a plenary program that is fully part of the training offer.
- It offers intensive courses over two weeks, mostly at the introductory and intermediate levels.
- It is organized in a pleasant environment: the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, between the Southern Alps and the Adriatic.
- It is offered at a reasonable fee, as low as possible while still ensuring state-of-the-art infrastructure and top-level instructors, as well as qualified teaching assistants and local support staff;
- It involves a pool of instructors and teaching assistants not only with different methodological backgrounds, but also as diverse as possible.
- It offers formal certification (ECTS Credits).
- It is thoroughly evaluated by the

participants so as to improve quality of the course offer, as well as the organizational aspects, year after year. The participants are also informed about some main results of the participants' survey, and about the main improvements that will be aimed at for the next year.

The first Summer School took place in August 2006. Nine parallel courses were held over two weeks with a full plenary program, animated by some instructors and guest lecturers on over-arching topics such as causality or new trends in survey research. In total, there were 155 participants, from 75 different institutions across Europe and beyond (5% from North America), 80% of which were from political science.

The online evaluation survey completed by most participants (including instructors and teaching assistants) showed that the majority of them were pleased with the Summer School, both from an academic, organizational, and social side. Of course, there was room for improvements, on the organizational side in particular, which we endeavored to introduce to the 2007 Summer School in August 2007.

This program offered a broader array of courses: four intensive refresher courses (three days long), followed by 12 main courses (again held over two weeks), which built upon the strengths of the 2006 program and further expanded it. We also introduced an original offer, called the Monday Mix on the first day of the main courses that enabled each participant to attend the introductory lecture of their chosen course as well as the introductory lecture of up to three other courses. This way, they were able to receive a much more detailed and concrete opening on three other methodological perspectives. In addition, four plenary evening debates/lectures were held to ensure more interaction and with more participant input on more concrete topics related to everyday research and methodological work.

The 2007 Summer School also proved to be successful; there were a total of 187 participants from 110 different institutions worldwide (although North American participation remained at 5%). The background of the participants proved slightly more varied than 2006, with approximately 70% from political science while others came from sociology, economics, management studies, communication studies, and so on. The evaluation survey showed even higher levels of satisfaction than in 2006, both on the academic (both short and full courses) and organizational fronts. In the plenary program, both the Monday Mix and the more interactive plenary sessions were well received.

We are now working on the third

ECPR Summer School in Methods and Techniques, which will be held from July 30 to August 16, 2008. In addition to the planned academic program (shown in Figure 1), there will also be a lively plenary and social program that will include receptions, interactive debates, and a further improved Monday Mix.

It has been quite a challenge—and a lot of hard work for the whole organizing team, ourselves (Benoît Rihoux and Bernhard Kittel) as Academic Convenors as well as the ECPR Central Services staff and the local academic coordinator Anuska Ferligoj and her staff—to launch this new venue, but we dare say that it proves to be a very successful venture. Let us clearly stress that we do not see this Summer School as competing against other venues but rather as a complementary, original offer in a broad, ever more open market.

We are confident that this summer school will further consolidate during the next few years, as a key place to be

for methodological training of junior political scientists, with high international standards, and also—and here probably lies its main originality—as a key place for methodological cross-fertilization. We welcome original course proposals from colleagues on established as well as on more emerging methodological topics, as long as they have direct relevance for political science.

Launching the ECPR Research Methods Series

With all of the above in mind, the ECPR felt it was timely to add a new book series on research methods to their growing portfolio of publications, which now includes two established book series (the Studies in European Political Science series with Routledge and the Comparative Politics series with OUP) and the highly ISI ranked (third for the second year running) European Journal of Political Research (EJPR). Because of our close

Figure 1

ECPR SUMMER SCHOOL IN METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

Wednesday 30 July to Saturday 16 August 2008

INTENSIVE COURSES (July 30–August 1)

- (1) Introduction to SPSS
- (2) Introduction to R
- (3) Math refresher (I): linear algebra
- (4) Math refresher (II): probability
- (5) Inferential statistics

NEW ONE DAY WORKSHOP (August 2)

A new, one-day condensed seminar on core challenges in a research project. Each participant will be able to select up to four topics among the following:

- (a) Linking theories, methods and data in political science
- (b) How to manage one's research planning
- (c) How to write a research proposal
- (d) How to write a journal article
- (e) How to present qualitative data
- (f) Visualizing quantitative data

MAIN COURSES (August 4–16)

- (1) Mathematical modeling
- (2) QCA and Fuzzy Sets—Configurational Comparative Methods
- (3) Multiple regression
- (4) Multivariate analysis / cross-national survey analysis
- (5) Network analysis
- (6) Case study research
- (7) Multilevel analysis
- (8) Expert interview (interview techniques) & documentary collection/management
- (9) Mixed methods: Methodology and applications
- (10) Survival analysis and event history analysis
- (11) Advances in survey methodology. Part I: Comparative survey design; Part II: online survey design
- (12) Computer-assisted textual data analysis
- (13) Interpretive analysis
- (14) Agent-based modeling (to be confirmed)

For further information, please visit www.ecprnet.org

links with the ECPR, they asked us to help develop a book series dedicated to producing cutting-edge titles in research methods with them and Palgrave Macmillan. Edited by Bernhard Kittel and Benoît Rihoux, the ECPR/Palgrave Research Methods Series will provide students and scholars with state-of-the-art scholarship on methodology, methods, and techniques. The series will comprise innovative and intellectually rigorous monographs and edited collections that bridge schools of thought and cross the boundaries of conventional approaches. It will cover both empirical-analytical and interpretive approaches, micro and macro studies, quantitative and qualitative methods, and so on.

The aim of the series is to present research methods in an accessible form, suitable both for researchers and graduate course-takers and tutors working in this broad and rapidly changing field. The presentation of methodology, methods, and techniques is always embedded in the context of specific research problems. Explicating the relationship between approach, theory, method, and substantive topics is at the core of the series, with a focus on political science broadly defined, as our discipline faces some specific methodological challenges. In a nutshell: the core aim is to promote research methods that cater to the specific needs of political science without precluding other applications in neighboring disciplines. It is set at an advanced level that nevertheless has to be accessible to graduate students.

In this new series, one key preoccupation of ours, beyond that of maintaining an overall balance between methodological traditions, is to maintain an overall balance between scholars from Europe

and North America. We will particularly encourage genuine transatlantic joint ventures.

In concrete terms, the series is open to two types of volumes, either edited or single-authored: (1) method-specific: volumes focusing on a specific method (or, preferably, on a group of related methods); and (2) thematic/transversal: volumes focusing on a key topic/methodological challenge that can be dealt with from various methodological perspectives, and with the help of various techniques.

Future titles are expected, among others, on the analysis of political attitudes and behavior; on the treatment of time and sequence; on case studies; on the collection, measurement, and analysis of macro data; on policy studies; on experimental research, and on mixed methods in political science. We very much welcome proposals, from established scholars as well as upcoming younger researchers and teachers. Prospective authors should submit their proposals to Alexandra Webster at a.webster@palgrave.com.

Conclusion: Different Paths Towards the Same Goal

There is also the forthcoming Rennes workshop (at the ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops, on April 11–16, 2008), on *Methodological Pluralism? Consolidating Political Science Methodology*, as well as past activities, such as joint panels at the last IPSA conference in Fukuoka (2006), sponsorship of a conference on *Comparative Methods in Tokyo* (also 2006, at Sophia University), regular participation of some of us (or close colleagues) at the APSA annual meetings, etc.

Why so many initiatives? Because, we

believe, each one of these fills a need, and also contributes towards our common goals of contributing to the further consolidation and methodological self-consciousness of the discipline. By launching these venues for debate, training, and dissemination, we hope to open up windows and give some fresh air to the discipline across the methodological divides and segmentations. This is not to say that we are preaching for some form of soft methodological syncretism—it is perfectly legitimate to privilege a given approach (and attached methods and techniques) in one's research, as long as one is also aware of the limitations of that approach, and on the potential and limitations of other approaches (and attached methods and techniques).

As outlined above, the state of methodological debates is not always comparable in the U.S. and in Europe. However, we believe that by pursuing our efforts and (hopefully) by involving more U.S.-based colleagues in our initiatives, we shall contribute to the consolidation of the discipline on both sides of the Atlantic. Our U.S.-based colleagues are most welcome to join. We are already in touch in various ways, through mailing lists, or through some organized sections of the APSA, especially the Political Methodology Section and the Qualitative and Multi-Methods Research Section. What we call upon is a further consolidation of these links, through cooperative projects that recognize the specificities and strengths of each partner. As the wise saying goes (is it American, European—or perhaps Asian?), “richness is born out of diversity.” In substantive and in methodological terms, political science is rich because it is diverse, on both sides of the Atlantic.

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