

## Case Studies in Comparative Political Research: Value, Versatility, and Methodological Integration

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper examines the role and significance of case studies in social science research, particularly within comparative politics. It analyzes the methodological debate between nomothetic and idiographic approaches to highlight how different perspectives on the aims and scope of science influence researchers' views on case studies' utility. The paper argues that case studies serve several crucial functions: they enable the exploration of understudied phenomena through rich, detailed examination; facilitate theory development and testing; ensure conceptual validity through contextual sensitivity; and reveal complex causal relationships that might be overlooked by statistical methods. Engaging with contemporary methodological developments including process tracing formalization, multi-method research designs, and the transparency movement, this study demonstrates how recent innovations have strengthened the analytical rigor of case-based research. While acknowledging common criticisms regarding limited generalizability and selection bias, the paper demonstrates that these limitations can be effectively addressed through careful research design and appropriate case selection strategies. Building on foundational works by Lijphart, Skocpol, and Gerring, and integrating recent scholarships from Beach and Pedersen, Seawright, and Goertz and Mahoney, the analysis suggests that the integration of case studies with cross-case analyses presents an optimal approach for researchers seeking to balance context-specific understanding with broader comparative insights. This paper contributes to methodological discussions by providing a comprehensive framework for understanding both the strengths and limitations of case-based research while offering practical strategies for maximizing their utility in political science research.*

**KEYWORDS:** Case studies, comparative politics, theory development, process tracing, multi-method research, qualitative methods, methodological pluralism

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In comparative political research, the methodological debate between nomothetic (general law-seeking) and idiographic (context-specific) approaches has long shaped how scholars

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investigate political phenomena. Case studies, defined as intensive analyses of a single unit with the aim of generating insights applicable to broader sets of cases, are central to this debate (Gerring, 2004; George & Bennett, 2005). They offer rich, context-sensitive insights essential for understanding complex political processes, but face criticisms related to limited generalizability, selection bias, and a perceived overemphasis on description at the expense of theory-building (Dion, 1998). Understanding the epistemological and ontological foundations of qualitative research is essential for appreciating how case studies contribute to knowledge generation in political science (Grass, 2024).

From a scholarly perspective, case studies are indispensable for theory development and testing. They allow researchers to examine specific instances in depth, identifying causal mechanisms and historical patterns that large-N statistical analyses might obscure. Skocpol's (1979) comparative study of social revolutions in France, Russia, and China exemplifies how case studies can illuminate the interplay of cultural, institutional, and structural factors in shaping political outcomes. Gerring (2004) underscores that case studies use covariational logic like non-case study research and can complement cross-unit statistical designs. This is evident in Achen and Snidal's (1989) exploration of rational deterrence theory, which highlights the value of case studies in unpacking complex decision-making dynamics.

Beyond theory, case studies have significant value in both policy and practice. In policymaking, they offer comprehensive and actionable insights into how political institutions and reforms function within specific contexts. For example, Acemoglu et al. (2003) analyze Botswana's economic success, revealing how institutional quality and historical trajectories shaped development outcomes, providing useful lessons for other developing countries. On the practical side, stakeholders such as activists, officials, and NGOs can draw on case studies to understand what strategies have worked or failed in comparable environments. Collier and Collier's (1991) study of regime change and labor movements in Latin America exemplifies how practitioners can use case-based knowledge to inform institutional reform. Recent applications of case study methodology across diverse fields, including education (Shrestha & Bhattarai, 2022) and social sciences more broadly (Chowdhury & Shil, 2021), demonstrate the continued versatility of this approach.

Despite these advantages, methodological critiques persist. Critics argue that the small sample sizes of case studies limit generalizability and that non-random case selection introduces bias (Dion, 1998). To respond to these concerns, this study emphasizes the importance of strategies such as process tracing and careful case selection to enhance the validity and reliability of findings (Gerring, 2004). Additionally, it highlights that methodological pluralism, which combines the depth of case studies with the breadth of large-N analysis, is increasingly seen as a robust approach for advancing comparative political research (Hall, 2003). Goodrick (2014) similarly highlights the value of comparative case studies that attend to global, national, and local dimensions.

Considering these considerations, this study addresses the following research questions to guide its examination of case studies in comparative politics:

1. How can case studies be most effectively used to develop new theories or refine existing ones in comparative politics?
2. What are the best practices for combining qualitative case study methods with quantitative statistical approaches to enhance research validity?
3. How do case studies contribute to understanding context-specific variations in political phenomena, such as the definition of "democracy" across different cultural or historical settings?
4. Can case studies provide insights into rare or significant political events (e.g., revolutions, regime changes) that are difficult to study using large-N methods?

By addressing these questions, this research contributes to ongoing methodological debates and advocates for a balanced and integrated use of case studies alongside other methods to advance both theoretical and practical understandings of political phenomena. To ensure trustworthiness, this study grounds its arguments in a broad range of peer-reviewed literature and canonical methodological texts, presenting perspectives from both advocates and critics to maintain analytical balance. It is transparent about limitations such as generalizability and selection bias and highlights strategies like process tracing, within-case inference, and methodological pluralism to address them.

## **Methodology**

This paper is a methodological review, synthesizing existing literature to evaluate the role and value of case studies in comparative political research. The approach involved a systematic review of peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and book chapters from political science and related fields, focusing on methodological debates surrounding case studies. Sources were selected based on their relevance to nomothetic and idiographic approaches, theory development, causal inference, and case study applications in comparative politics. Key databases included JSTOR, Google Scholar, and Web of Science, with search terms such as "case studies," "comparative politics," "qualitative methods," "process tracing," and "methodological pluralism." Both foundational works (e.g., Lijphart, 1971; Skocpol, 1979) and recent studies (e.g., Pepinsky, 2019; Gerring, 2017) were included to ensure a comprehensive and current analysis. The review prioritized works addressing case study strengths, limitations, and strategies for rigor, ensuring a balanced perspective by incorporating critiques from nomothetic scholars. Analysis involved thematic coding to identify key functions, critiques, and methodological advancements, which informed the paper's structure and arguments.

## ***Ethical Considerations***

As this study is a methodological review based on the synthesis and analysis of existing published literature, it did not involve human subjects, primary data collection, or empirical research requiring Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. All sources cited are publicly available academic publications. The author adhered to ethical standards of scholarship, including proper attribution of sources and transparent reporting of the review process.

## **Defining Case Studies and the Nomothetic-Idiographic Debate**

Case studies are most defined as detailed investigations of specific examples or instances of social phenomena utilizing a variety of data sources (Gerring, 2004; George & Bennett, 2005; Yin, 2009). Social phenomena encompass a wide range of elements, including events, processes, situations, relationships, practices, organizations, and larger societal structures. A unifying feature across all case studies is their emphasis on in-depth analysis of a particular instance, with attention to contextual features unique to that instance. Case studies serve various purposes based on researchers' interests and can function as standalone studies or complement broader cross-case studies involving extensive datasets.

Before exploring the specific roles that case studies fulfill, it is necessary to consider the differing perspectives among comparative politics researchers regarding the aims and scope of science. Many scholars argue that scientific endeavors should strive for valid and reliable explanations that remain applicable across time and contexts (King et al., 1994; Munck, 2006;

Steinmo, 2008). However, debates persist about whether such goals are attainable, particularly regarding the ability of social sciences to produce universally applicable laws. In political science, this debate is evident in contrasting perspectives of nomothetic and idiographic approaches. Scholars who align with the nomothetic approach contend that discovering laws and regularities within political science is feasible. They assert that general theories can explain social phenomena across diverse global contexts (Hall, 2003; Goertz & Mahoney, 2012). Consequently, these scholars advocate for research that provides predictive explanations transcending specific temporal and spatial boundaries (Munck, 2006; Steinmo, 2008).

Conversely, proponents of the idiographic approach, while acknowledging the value of broad and parsimonious explanations, argue that applying the methodologies and principles of natural sciences to political science presents challenges. They highlight the complexity and evolving nature of human behavior, the central subject of study, and emphasize the difficulty of conducting controlled scientific experiments in most social science contexts (Munck, 2006; Steinmo, 2008). Understanding these discussions is crucial. The arguments concerning the functions and limitations of case studies are deeply influenced by these differing views on the purpose and scope of science. A researcher's stance in this debate often shapes their perspective on the value of case studies in advancing knowledge. Scholars favoring the idiographic approach tend to view case studies more positively, while those adhering to the nomothetic approach often see them as less valuable, particularly compared to cross-case studies with large sample sizes. This study aligns more closely with scholars who adopt the idiographic approach, while recognizing the legitimate contributions of both perspectives to methodological advancement.

## **Contemporary Methodological Developments**

The past two decades have witnessed significant methodological innovations that have transformed case study research in comparative politics. These developments respond directly to earlier criticisms while substantially strengthening the analytical toolkit available to qualitative researchers. Three areas of advancement deserve particular attention: the formalization of process tracing, the systematization of multi-method research, and the emergence of transparency and research integrity initiatives.

### ***Process Tracing Formalization***

Process tracing has emerged as a central method for studying causal mechanisms linking causes with outcomes within case study research. Beach and Pedersen (2019) provide the most comprehensive treatment of this methodology, distinguishing between four distinct variants of process tracing: theory-testing, theory-building, explaining-outcome, and theory-revision process tracing. Their work emphasizes that process tracing is fundamentally about studying causal mechanisms rather than simply providing descriptive narratives. The method enables researchers to make strong inferences about how causes contribute to producing outcomes by examining the empirical "fingerprints" or traces left by the operation of causal mechanisms within a case.

This formalization addresses a longstanding criticism that case study research lacked explicit inferential frameworks. Beach and Pedersen demonstrate how Bayesian logic can be systematically applied to within-case evidence, allowing researchers to update their confidence in theoretical propositions based on the probative value of observed evidence. The distinction between different types of evidence, particularly between "smoking gun" evidence that strongly confirms a hypothesis and "hoop" tests that disconfirm alternatives—provides researchers with

clear guidelines for evaluating causal claims. This represents a significant advance over earlier, more intuitive approaches to within-case analysis.

### ***Multi-Method Research Integration***

The integration of qualitative and quantitative methods has become increasingly central to methodological discussions in comparative politics. Seawright (2016) provides the first systematic guide to designing multi-method research, arguing that methods can be productively combined within what he terms "integrative multi-method research." In this framework, one method carries out a final causal inference while methods from other traditions test the key assumptions underlying that inference. This approach transforms key issues of descriptive and causal inference from matters of speculative assertion into points of empirical investigation.

Seawright's framework addresses the practical challenges of combining case studies with statistical tools including regression, matching, and natural experiments. He demonstrates how case studies can be used to test the assumptions underlying statistical analyses, such as the presence of omitted variables or the validity of causal interpretations of correlational findings. Similarly, Dunning (2012) emphasizes the central role of qualitative evidence in natural experiments, arguing that the knowledge of context and detailed information on process that qualitative methods facilitate is crucial for the persuasive use of natural experimental designs. These works collectively demonstrate that the traditional divide between qualitative and quantitative research is increasingly giving way to a more integrated understanding of methodological practice.

### ***Transparency and Research Integrity***

A third significant development concerns the growing emphasis on data access and research transparency in qualitative research. Elman and Kapiszewski (2014) address how qualitative researchers can make their research processes and data more accessible to evaluation and replication. They argue that while qualitative research differs from quantitative research in important ways, particularly regarding the interpretive nature of data analysis, standards for transparency can and should be adapted to qualitative contexts. This includes documenting case selection processes, archiving interview transcripts and field notes where ethically appropriate, and making explicit the reasoning behind analytical decisions.

These transparency initiatives respond to concerns that qualitative research has historically been difficult to evaluate and replicate. By establishing clearer standards for documenting research processes, they strengthen the credibility of case study findings while preserving the flexibility and contextual sensitivity that make qualitative research valuable. Gerring (2017) provides a comprehensive overview of these developments in his review of qualitative methods, noting that political science has gone further than any other social science in developing a rigorous field devoted to qualitative methodology.

### ***Set-Theoretic Methods and QCA***

A fourth significant development concerns the rise of set-theoretic methods, particularly Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA). Schneider and Wagemann (2012) provide the most comprehensive treatment of these methods, demonstrating how they can bridge the gap between case-oriented and variable-oriented research. QCA employs Boolean algebra and fuzzy sets to analyze configurations of conditions associated with outcomes, allowing researchers to study complex causations including equifinality (multiple paths to the same outcome) and conjunctural

causation (where the effect of one condition depends on the presence of others). Unlike regression-based approaches that estimate the average effect of individual variables, QCA examines how combinations of conditions produce outcomes, preserving the configurational logic that characterizes much qualitative reasoning while enabling systematic comparison across multiple cases.

These methodological developments collectively address the principal criticisms historically leveled against case study research. The formalization of process tracing provides explicit standards for within-case causal inference. Multi-method frameworks demonstrate how case studies can be systematically integrated with statistical analysis to test assumptions and strengthen causal claims. Transparency initiatives establish protocols for documenting research processes that enable evaluation and replication. And set-theoretic methods provide tools for systematic comparison while preserving attention to configurational complexity. Together, these innovations have transformed case study research from a methodology sometimes dismissed as "merely descriptive" into a rigorous approach with well-defined procedures for causal inference.

### **Functions of Case Studies in Theory Development and Testing**

This section directly addresses Research Question 1: How can case studies be most effectively used to develop new theories or refine existing ones in comparative politics? Case studies contribute to theory in multiple ways, serving as essential tools for both generating new theoretical insights and testing existing propositions.

Firstly, case studies often explore areas where limited data is available and where clear explanations or theories have not yet been developed (George & Bennett, 2005; Munck & Snyder, 2007). They heavily rely on firsthand information collected from sources like newspapers, unofficial documents, and interviews, providing rich descriptions of actors, choices, events, and processes that make it significantly easier for researchers to uncover causal dynamics (Collier et al., 2004). Frequently, case studies enable the discovery of new independent variables and causal relationships that had previously gone unnoticed (George & Bennett, 2005; Steinmo, 2008). Some of the most successful political science projects have relied on case studies to develop explanations for critical events. Without them, our understanding of complex social issues like democratization or authoritarianism would remain highly limited (Mahoney, 2000; Gerring, 2004). Case studies often act as "building blocks" for broader theories, filling gaps in the existing literature (Kohli et al., 1995; George & Bennett, 2005).

Secondly, case studies play a crucial role in testing theories developed through other case studies or large-N cross-case studies. According to Przeworski and Teune (1970) and Kohli et al. (1995), explaining a specific case inherently involves identifying the conditions under which that instance consistently occurs. These studies not only reveal causal relationships between variables but also uncover the complex mechanisms, processes, and intervening variables linking independent and dependent variables (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003; George & Bennett, 2005; Goertz & Mahoney, 2012). Once a case is explained and its causal mechanism identified, this mechanism can often be applied to other cases (Chandra, 2006; Köllner et al., 2018).

Moreover, in the context of testing large-scale studies, case studies are instrumental in determining whether a statistically identified correlation reflects a genuine causal relationship. They assess whether the causal relationship functions as theorized and whether the causal weight of variables across a range of cases applies similarly in a significant case chosen from the sample (George & Bennett, 2005). An in-depth analysis of a case frequently exposes gaps or inaccuracies in the researcher's initial understanding of the values associated with independent and dependent

variables. This helps researchers analyze the viability and scope conditions of competing explanations (George & Bennett, 2005; Köllner et al., 2018).

### **Integrating Case Studies with Quantitative Approaches**

This section addresses Research Question 2: What are the best practices for combining qualitative case study methods with quantitative statistical approaches to enhance research validity? The relationship between case studies and statistical methods has evolved significantly, from one characterized by mutual suspicion to one of productive complementarity.

Goertz and Mahoney (2012) provide the most comprehensive analysis of the relationship between qualitative and quantitative research traditions. They demonstrate that these two paradigms constitute different "cultures," each internally coherent yet marked by contrasting norms, practices, and toolkits. Importantly, they argue that these differences do not preclude productive integration; rather, understanding the distinct logics of each approach enables more effective combination. Qualitative research typically focuses on necessary and sufficient conditions, employs set-theoretical logic, and emphasizes causal mechanisms, while quantitative research focuses on average causal effects, employs probabilistic logic, and emphasizes covariation across cases.

Lieberman (2005) developed the influential "nested analysis" framework, which provides a practical strategy for combining case studies with statistical analysis. In this approach, statistical analysis identifies patterns across cases and highlights potentially deviant cases, while case studies examine the causal processes underlying these patterns and investigate why certain cases deviate from general trends. When statistical analyses reveal anomalous cases, case studies can uncover overlooked variables or refine conceptual validity. If these outliers point to new variables or concepts, statistical studies can subsequently test whether the revised variables and concepts enhance the model's applicability across a broader range of cases (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003; George & Bennett, 2005; Lieberman, 2005).

Schneider and Wagemann (2012) further demonstrate how set-theoretic methods, particularly Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), can bridge case-oriented and variable-oriented research. QCA allows researchers to analyze configurations of conditions associated with outcomes, preserving attention to cases as coherent wholes while enabling systematic comparison across multiple cases. This approach is particularly valuable for studying complex causation, including equifinality (multiple paths to the same outcome) and conjunctural causation (where the effect of one condition depends on the presence of others).

The practical implications of these integrative frameworks are substantial. Researchers can now design studies that use statistical analysis to identify general patterns and then employ case studies to investigate the causal processes underlying those patterns. Conversely, case studies can be used first to develop theoretical propositions that are subsequently tested across larger samples. This iterative approach to knowledge building, moving between intensive and extensive analysis, offers significant advantages over single-method designs. It allows researchers to leverage the strengths of different approaches while using each to address the limitations of the other, ultimately producing more robust and well-supported causal claims.

### **Contextual Sensitivity and Conceptual Validity**

This section addresses Research Question 3: How do case studies contribute to understanding context-specific variations in political phenomena? Case studies ensure that the necessary assumptions for causal inference, such as valid measurement, unit homogeneity, and

unconfoundedness, are upheld through proper measurement of key variables, appropriate concepts, and contextually sensitive understanding of causal processes (Pepinsky, 2019).

Case studies allow researchers to define and classify social events or phenomena with accuracy, shedding light on their complex dynamics and contextual intricacies. Social phenomena can often be understood and described differently depending on the time and place of research. For instance, a procedure that is "democratic" in one cultural context might be profoundly undemocratic in another (George & Bennett, 2005), or the standards that define a democratic regime might shift over time (Oren, 1995). This contextual sensitivity proves invaluable when comparing multiple cases, enabling researchers to identify analytically equivalent phenomena and avoid "conceptual stretching" (Sartori, 1970; George & Bennett, 2005).

Achieving conceptual equivalence becomes particularly critical in theory testing, as meaningful comparisons can only be made when cases are sufficiently similar. Case studies provide in-depth, context-specific knowledge that aids scholars in identifying and quantifying indicators, most reflective of the theoretical ideas they aim to test. This process often leads to high levels of conceptual validity (Sartori, 1970; Pavone, 2014). As Sartori argues, whether a classification may serve multiple purposes and which classification fits this requirement best is something discovered inductively, starting from the bottom of the ladder of abstraction. Case studies empower researchers to select classifications that align with specific research requirements, which is essential in preventing conceptual misformation and advancing theory. By contrast, statistical methods often face challenges in achieving similar levels of accuracy when developing or testing theories due to assumptions of unit homogeneity that may not hold in many instances (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003).

### **Studying Rare Events and Complex Causation**

This section addresses Research Question 4: Can case studies provide insights into rare or significant political events that are difficult to study using large-N methods? Case studies play an essential role in uncovering complex causal relationships that statistical methods may struggle to capture. Researchers widely acknowledge that statistical and formal methods may not be well-suited for analyzing cases involving intricate causal mechanisms.

Statistical methods often imply a linear analysis of variables that can be distinguished from one another, and which react to one another in predictable ways (Steinmo, 2008). These methods tend to focus on the immediate and prioritize causes and outcomes that are both temporally contiguous and rapidly unfolding (Pierson, 2003). However, these traits present significant limitations. Linear methodologies may fail to capture gradual causal mechanisms, potentially overlooking slower-moving processes. In some instances, a cumulative or incremental causal process may be at work, where a variable's effect on the dependent variable becomes apparent only after a certain threshold is crossed. In other scenarios, path dependence may occur, where the effects triggered by an initial event or process persist and intensify over time, even if the original cause is no longer present (Hall, 2003; Pierson, 2003). Additionally, the same cause can produce different outcomes, or different causes may result in the same outcome (Hall, 2003; Pierson, 2003; George & Bennett, 2005).

Case studies, especially those spanning longer time periods and closely analyzing changes within a case, are better equipped to avoid erroneous conclusions (Brady & Collier, 2010). Process tracing is a particularly valuable method for examining the processes and mediating variables by which an explanatory variable produces its effects on an outcome (Bennett, 1997; Beach & Pedersen, 2019). This method helps eliminate potential endogeneity, employs counterfactual analysis, and investigates the potential for interaction effects, wherein a factor's impact occurs only

in conjunction with specific other factors (Hall, 2003; George & Bennett, 2005; Lieberman, 2005; Steinmo, 2008).

The value of case studies for studying rare events extends beyond their ability to accommodate small samples. Case studies allow researchers to examine the full complexity of critical junctures, institutional transformations, and other pivotal moments in political development. When revolutions, regime transitions, or other transformative events occur, they typically involve a confluence of factors operating through multiple causal pathways. Statistical methods, which typically examine the average effect of individual variables across many cases, may struggle to capture this configurational complexity. Case studies, by contrast, can trace how multiple factors combined in specific historical contexts to produce observed outcomes, providing insights into the conditions under which such outcomes might occur elsewhere.

### **Historical Foundations and Contemporary Applications**

The use of case studies in comparative political research has a long and well-established history. Foundational works have significantly shaped the methodological approaches in the field. Lijphart (1971) highlighted the importance of the "comparable cases strategy" for understanding political systems, while Skocpol's (1979) comparative analysis of social revolutions in France, Russia, and China illustrated how case studies can reveal the interplay of historical, cultural, and institutional factors. Gerring (2004) defined case studies as in-depth investigations of specific units and emphasized their role in theory-building, conceptual validity, and causal inference. Still, case studies have faced ongoing criticisms, particularly regarding their limited generalizability, potential for selection bias, and supposed lack of methodological rigor when compared to large-N designs (Dion, 1998).

Recent scholarship builds on this foundational work, reaffirming the continued relevance of case studies and demonstrating how methodological advancements can address historical critiques. Pepinsky (2019) examines the changing status of single-country research in comparative politics, noting how such research has evolved from an emphasis on description and theory generation to an emphasis on hypothesis testing and research design. This shift reflects broader changes in methodological preferences within the discipline while affirming the continued importance of intensive case-based analysis.

Goritz (2025) employs comparative case studies to examine peasant protests in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, focusing on how coalitions between smallholder farmers and traders can prompt collective action against adverse government policies. This work offers a compelling example of how case studies can uncover nuanced causal mechanisms—specifically, how traders' networks and financial resources can mobilize farmer protest when both groups are harmed by price-distorting policies—that might be difficult to identify using statistical data alone. Meanwhile, Carelli (2024) demonstrates the value of single-case designs by analyzing the shift from patrimonial structures to meritocratic recruitment in Swedish state-building. Analyzing newly collected data on over 1,300 civil servants, the research reveals how the demand for competence led to the adoption of meritocratic recruitment starting in the seventeenth century. Contrary to common assumptions, Carelli shows that when carefully designed with systematic archival data, single-case studies can contribute to broader theoretical discussions, especially in historical institutional research on state capacity and bureaucratic development.

These recent studies reflect important methodological advancements in how case studies are designed and executed. Pepinsky (2019) documents how single-country research has increasingly adopted rigorous research designs that enhance internal validity, including careful attention to case selection, systematic data collection, and explicit theorization of causal

mechanisms. Goritz (2025) demonstrates how comparative case studies can trace causal processes linking policy decisions to collective action outcomes, using process tracing to identify the specific mechanisms through which traders facilitated farmer mobilization. Carelli (2024) shows how even single-case studies can be designed with sufficient theoretical grounding and empirical rigor to offer broader relevance, combining historical analysis with quantitative data on personnel records to test claims about the origins of meritocratic bureaucracy.

### **Addressing Critiques: Strategies for Effective Case Study Research**

Despite the cited advantages of case studies, proponents of the nomothetic approach in comparative politics may question their utility in theory development, arguing that the generality and parsimony of theories should be given primacy over their accuracy (Przeworski & Teune, 1970). This preference for statistical methods stems from the belief that, while direct experimentation may not be feasible for most social science phenomena, statistical methods can simulate this process by employing a random selection of a large number of cases (Hall, 2003).

Criticisms of case study methods often center around their perceived emphasis on descriptive narratives over theory-driven explanations, lack of rigorous methodologies, and the constraints posed by the limited number of cases they examine. The primary limitation arises from the focus on a single case or a small number of cases. Critics argue that with a small number of cases and numerous variables, it becomes challenging to ascertain which variables hold significant explanatory power for a particular outcome (Liebersohn, 1991). Similarly, limited variation among cases (Small-N) can hinder the ability to generalize findings to other cases or evaluate alternative explanations with broader applicability.

Nevertheless, while these criticisms highlight issues of generalizability and indeterminacy associated with case studies, these limitations are not as severe as some critics claim. In recent years, a growing consensus among scholars suggests that criticisms of case studies largely result from the inappropriate application of conventional statistical assumptions to case studies (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003). These scholars highlight a fundamental difference in how "adding new observations" is interpreted between case study researchers and cross-case researchers. For cross-case researchers, adding new observations means increasing the sample size of the main unit of analysis. In contrast, for case study researchers, it involves uncovering new evidence within the case, adding observable implications of proposed theories, and testing these propositions against numerous data points (Hall, 2003; George & Bennett, 2005; Goertz & Mahoney, 2012).

Peter Hall (2003) asserts that good theories specify a set of causal processes associated with the operation of particular variables. These include predictions about the events that can be expected to occur, the sequence of those events, and the public and private positions actors are likely to take. Thus, criticisms of case studies regarding their restricted case size often stem from the mistaken equation of a single case with a single observation (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003). To address the critique of "too many variables, too small an N," researchers can include more observable implications of their theories and test these against multiple data points within the study.

One of the other most significant criticisms of case study research is that researchers often choose cases based on the dependent variable, leading to selection bias (Geddes, 1990; Gerring, 2004). However, many researchers purposefully select cases based on dependent variable values because this approach offers advantages that can outweigh its disadvantages. First, selecting cases based on the dependent variable can be essential for studying rare and significant events that serve as historical turning points with profound implications for subsequent developments (Steinmo, 2008; Goertz & Mahoney, 2012). Second, dependent variable-based case selection can be practical for researchers with deep familiarity with a country's culture, history, and politics, allowing them

to interpret and comprehend causal relationships in the data more effectively (Gerring, 2004). Third, a carefully planned case selection strategy can address concerns related to selection bias, indeterminacy, and the ability of case studies to generate generalizable explanations.

Researchers widely agree that case selection should align with the researcher's objectives and the type of analysis they aim to conduct. For example, if the goal is to measure the average effects of variables, statistical analysis with random case selection is more appropriate (Goertz & Mahoney, 2012). However, if the objective is to identify necessary or sufficient conditions for an outcome, purposive case selection is ideal (George & Bennett, 2005). Importantly, non-random case selection does not inherently hinder theory generation or testing. Several strategies have been proposed to ensure the effective use of case studies while addressing criticisms. One such strategy involves selecting a puzzling or interesting case, developing a theory to explain it, and then applying the theory to additional cases to assess its broader explanatory power (Lieberman, 2005; Chandra, 2006). Researchers can test the causal mechanism derived from a case in two ways. For necessary conditions, they can examine cases where the outcome is present to verify whether the conditions are also present (George & Bennett, 2005). For sufficient conditions, they can check whether the presence of certain conditions leads to the expected outcome.

Alternatively, researchers can incorporate independent and dependent variables from a case study into a statistical model and test their correlation across a larger sample of cases (George & Bennett, 2005; Lieberman, 2005; Goertz & Mahoney, 2012). If the statistical analysis reveals deviant cases, these outliers can be examined to uncover potential reasons for their deviation from the general trend (Lieberman, 2005). In this way, case studies and statistical methods can complement each other, with each approach addressing the limitations of the other. The growing sophistication of multi-method designs, as outlined by Seawright (2016) and others, provides researchers with systematic frameworks for integrating these approaches in ways that strengthen causal inference beyond what either method could achieve alone.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This paper has argued that case studies remain an essential methodological tool in comparative political research, serving multiple functions including exploring understudied areas, developing and testing theories, ensuring conceptual validity, and uncovering complex causal dynamics such as path dependence and gradual institutional change that statistical methods may struggle to capture. The analysis has directly addressed the four research questions guiding this study, demonstrating how case studies contribute to theory development (RQ1), how they can be effectively integrated with quantitative approaches (RQ2), how they ensure contextual sensitivity and conceptual validity (RQ3), and how they enable the study of rare events and complex causation (RQ4).

Contemporary methodological developments have substantially strengthened the case for case-based research. The formalization of process tracing by Beach and Pedersen (2019) provides explicit guidelines for within-case causal inference. Seawright's (2016) framework for multi-method research demonstrates how case studies can be systematically integrated with statistical analysis. The transparency initiatives documented by Elman and Kapiszewski (2014) establish clearer standards for documenting qualitative research processes. And Goertz and Mahoney's (2012) analysis of the "two cultures" provides a foundation for productive dialogue between qualitative and quantitative traditions.

Recent empirical studies strongly support this position. Pepinsky (2019) documents how single-country research in comparative politics has evolved toward greater methodological rigor. Goritz (2025) uses comparative case studies to uncover mechanisms of mobilization that would be

difficult to capture with survey data or regression analysis alone. Carelli's (2024) single-case study of Swedish state-building illustrates how deeply historical case research can inform current debates on administrative reform and bureaucratic competence.

These findings are consistent with classical scholarship. George and Bennett (2005) and Mahoney (2000) emphasized case studies' unique ability to test and refine theoretical arguments, while Lijphart (1971) and Collier et al. (2004) defended their value within the broader methodological debate between idiographic and nomothetic approaches. The present study builds on this tradition by integrating insights from more recent methodological innovations, demonstrating that the traditional critiques of case study research are increasingly being addressed through more rigorous designs.

Importantly, this study rejects the notion that case studies and large-N statistical methods exist in opposition. Instead, it adopts a spectrum-based view of methodological diversity, where both approaches offer distinct yet complementary insights. This integrated approach produces richer, more inclusive, and more accurate understandings of political phenomena.

The implications of this study are significant:

- **Enhanced Understanding of Political Phenomena:** Combining case studies with large-N statistical methods allows researchers to capture both general trends and specific contexts, leading to a deeper understanding of complex political issues.
- **Improved Policy Recommendations:** Case studies' detailed insights into policy implementation enable more effective, context-specific policy solutions, benefiting policymakers in diverse settings.
- **Advancement of Methodological Rigor:** Methodological pluralism, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches with explicit attention to process tracing and multi-method designs, enhances the credibility and robustness of political science research.
- **Contribution to Theory Development:** Case studies' ability to explore causal mechanisms and ensure conceptual validity drives theoretical advancements, refining existing frameworks and generating new hypotheses.

In sum, supported by both classical scholarship and recent methodological innovations, this study offers a renewed defense of case-based research in comparative politics. It advocates for an integrated methodological framework—one that utilizes the contextual depth of case studies and the generalizability of statistical methods. As the field continues to evolve, the ability to synthesize diverse methodological tools will be essential for producing a comparative politics that is sensitive to the particularities of each society yet explores overarching and universal inquiries across all societies (Laitin, 1986).

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### **Notes on Contributor**

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