

## The Expansion of the Political Science Dataverse<sup>1</sup>

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“The scientific method consists of observation, measurement, experiment--and the formulation, testing, and modification of hypotheses.”

Sheldon Cooper

The former mayor of New York City, Michael Bloomberg, says that one cannot evaluate policies or the performance of government without empirical evidence. Historically, academic scholarship provided a rich base for discussing human values, the role of institutions, the evolution of democracy, and the relationship between states. This literature left us theoretically rich, but with little way to objectively evaluate competing theories—such as the contrasting views of Jefferson, Bagehot, Toqueville, Schumpeter, and Lippmann on citizens and democracy—other than choosing the one we preferred or we thought applied. If one of the main goals of academic research is to understand how the political process actually functions, we had an abundance of ideas but uncertain answers. Moreover, large portions of the political science world appeared as medieval maps, with large voids and only lacking the ‘there be dragons here’ demarcation.

This situation has changed fundamentally with the behavioral revolution that began in the 1960s. The *behavioral revolution* was part of the *scientific revolution* in political science. The collection of empirical, intersubjective evidence, theory-testing, and statistical methods became more central to the research process. In addition, technological advances led to an explosion of empirical evidence on citizens’ opinions, the patterns of electoral politics, the functioning of political institutions, and the characteristics of governments. Scholarship also expanded internationally to include emerging democracies and the developing world. The collapse of the

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Soviet Union enabled rigorous social science to develop in the successor nations. As a discipline, we have gone from being data-poor to data-billionaires in a few decades.

My career as a political scientist has spanned this development. My first presentation as an aspiring political scientist (a Ph.D. student) was at a 1974 ECPR workshop on political cleavages chaired by Stein Rokkan (Dalton 1974). Most of the workshop papers utilized a described an election or a single data source (a survey or electoral statistics) from one nation. Today, political scientists have ready access to a volume and cross-national diversity of information on voters, parties and election campaigns that would amaze Stein Rokkan or Warren Miller.

The collection of data, per se, is less important than how this has changed the field of political behavior, and the value of political science research that merges theory, systematic data collection, and scientific theory-testing. The party research and electoral studies fields, for example, have changed from a small set of scholars doing an ad hoc project in one nation – to large research groups, with an institutionalized infrastructure, doing complex data collections to address major topics, and often spanning national borders. Research becomes more cumulative in such settings, providing continuing investigations into central interests in the field, while also providing the seed capital to extend the boundaries of research. And the skills and knowledge brought to bear on a topic in such an environment typically goes beyond what a single scholar or ad hoc project is likely to achieve.

This essay describes the evolution of electoral research to illustrate the expansion of the political science dataverse over the past five decades. I also discuss parallel developments in research on political parties and political participation. Cross-national studies of these topics inevitably have a high representation of European nations and are often developed by European scholars. This is because Europe contains a large number of democracies with varied social and institutional conditions, as well as the intellectual and financial resources to support large-scale data projects. This produces a rich context for testing theories about democratic topics. However, the topics themselves are obviously relevant to democracies outside of Europe as seen in many cross-national collaborative projects. I also believe that many of the same developmental patterns described here extend to parliamentary studies, policy research, and other areas of political science. Finally, the essay discusses some of the implications of this data explosion for our

understanding of citizen political behavior and the democratic process, as well as implications for the social science research community.

### **The Behavioral Revolution in Electoral Research**

One of the classics of modern electoral research is David Butler's (1952), *The British General Election of 1951*. Butler's first sentence boldly stated: "Until recently General Elections have been surprisingly neglected in academic research." He then focused on the supply aspects of elections: candidates, parties and the media. Much less attention was devoted to citizens' political views and choices.<sup>1</sup> Data from the British Institute of Public Opinion briefly described a few basic traits of 1951 voters. My, how things have changed. In the next several decades, academic election research focused on the public, their engagement in the electoral process, and the factors shaping voting choices.

One of the wellsprings of the behavioral revolution was the University of Michigan election studies (now the American National Election Studies) (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1987). A *technological innovation*—the development of area-probability survey sampling—created the opportunity to scientifically sample public opinion for a large population. Research moved away from unrepresentative samples, anecdotal evidence, or the insights of expert observers to assess public opinion on political issues and how citizens made their electoral choices.

This technological advance had a magnified research impact because it was paired with the *theoretical innovation* of the Michigan model of voting behavior. Psychological concepts of party identification, candidate images, and party images became central tools in electoral research—moving the field beyond the sociological framework of most previous research. As research progressed, this model incorporated the research of cognitive scientists, political economy scholars, and public choice research.

The Michigan team also had a conscious goal of international collaboration because they saw comparative research as a means to study the interaction of politics and institutions. . Warren Miller (1994, 256) stated, "the Michigan contribution to the international effort was guided—if not driven—by a particular view of the intellectual discipline of political science. That view held that the essential uniqueness of the discipline was to be found in the need to understand the contributions, the roles and the impact of institutions of politics and government."

National election studies in Britain, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and other nations built upon this new methodology (Curtice 1994; Holmberg 1994; Van der Eijk and Niemöller 1994; Valen and Aardal 1994). In other nations, collaboration with the Michigan group was less extensive or built on existing national initiatives (Thomassen 1994; Kaase and Klingemann 1994; Schmitt-Beck et al. 2010).<sup>2</sup> I am surprised when some Europeans refer to this as the Americanization of electoral studies; rather, it was the combination of technological and theoretical innovation that happened to occur in the United States with the involvement of many emigres from Europe (Meny this volume; Boncourt 2008; Schmitter 2002).<sup>3</sup>

Electoral research then expanded in methodological sophistication. Panel studies (pre/post-election or inter-election) became more common to track the dynamics of electoral choice. Data collections periodically include surveys of the candidates running for office. Other projects examine media coverage of elections; recent projects add a social media component. This rich array of evidence has pushed forward the quantity and quality of electoral research and beyond. For example, the 2017 German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) collected over 35 million data units in their public opinion surveys, along with parallel data on party elites and the media election content; the 2017 British Election Study (BES) was slightly larger.<sup>4</sup>

Another major advance is the *institutionalization of a research infrastructure*. Instead of the traditional individualistic style of scholars collecting and analyzing evidence on their own, national election research centers were created, and their expertise disseminated to regional and local centers. Surveys are relatively high-cost activities, requiring facilities, principal investigators, research assistants, and interviewers. When done within universities, this creates a framework for recruiting, funding and training graduate students on a large scale.

National election study teams also developed training programs in the new research approach. Summer schools in survey and statistical methods formed in the ICPSR program in Michigan and the ECPR summer schools in Essex and Grenoble. Another component was the creation of data archives to collect, prepare and disseminate empirical data. This often overlapped with the home institutions of the election study teams in Ann Arbor, Essex, Bergen, Cologne, Gotenberg, and other locations. For example, the United Kingdom Data Archive celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2017; its dataset collection grew from 450 studies in 1975 to almost 7500 studies in 2018. The Zentralarchiv in Cologne merged into the GESIS network; its holdings increased from about 500 studies in the mid-1970s to more than 7000 datasets in 2017.

A further development has been the growing collaboration among national research groups. The creation of the ECPR was, in part, an effort to provide an institutional setting for cross-national exchange among empirically oriented researchers who were a distinct minority in European academia (Meny in this volume; Boncourt in this volume). Data collections also developed from these international networks. The Cross-National Election Project (<https://u.osu.edu/cnep/>) began with election studies in five nations in the early 1990s. The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems ([www.cses.org](http://www.cses.org)) is now in its fifth wave and includes 30-40 elections in each wave.<sup>5</sup> The European Election Studies ([www.europeanelectionstudies.net](http://www.europeanelectionstudies.net)) are a valuable vehicle for studying European Union elections (Schmitt and Thomassen 1999; Dalton 2018). This is only a partial list of examples. International agencies and foundations also regularly conduct cross-national opinion surveys on a wide variety of political topics.

The value of these international networks was apparent after the democratic transitions in Eastern Europe in the 1990s. The infrastructure for scientific polling was understandably limited in most of these nations. Technology and resource transfers from Western Europe and North America assisted in creating academic surveys in the East. For example, the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin coordinated six national surveys in Eastern Europe in 1990-91 (Barnes and Simon 1998). Richard Rose instituted the New Democracies Barometer in 1991 (Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer 1998). Foundations in the West provided funds for surveys and institution building in the East. Post-communist democracies were rapidly integrated into international survey projects such as the World Values Survey, the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, and eventually the European Election Studies (Schmitt 2010).<sup>6</sup> The behavioral revolution took root in a decade rather than a generation as in the West.

Not only do electoral researchers collect public opinion data, but the empirical approach provides a common methodological and theoretical paradigm that facilitates discourse and collaboration among researchers. This research community also expanded beyond electoral studies. The same survey research networks began investigating sociological themes. For example, the International Social Survey Program ([www.issp.org](http://www.issp.org)) began in the early 1980s as a collaboration between social surveys in three nations (the US, UK, and Germany). These modules expand research to topics such as social inequality, family and changing gender roles, work orientations, environmental attitudes, national identity, and health care. Now the typical

ISSP module includes several dozen nations on a global scale. Other projects, such as the European Values Survey (<https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu>) and the European Social Survey ([www.europeansocialsurvey.org](http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org)) provide platforms for other research on European public opinion. The Eurobarometers are an invaluable resource for tracking the evolution of European opinions with several hundred surveys since the 1970s ([www.gesis.org/eurobarometer-data-service/home/](http://www.gesis.org/eurobarometer-data-service/home/)). Innumerable ad hoc research projects examine the opinions of European publics on diverse themes.

This data explosion greatly expanded our knowledge of citizen political behavior. I would argue that we now know more about political psychology, political thought, and political behavior since the advent of behavioral research than in previous scholarship. Instead of experts' speculation about the opinions of citizens, we can consult the citizenry directly. Of all the things "we know" are true, empirical research helps to determine which of these are accurate. For example, I believe that a political party competing in a contemporary election with the extant knowledge of the 1950s would be severely disadvantaged in comparison to a party drawing on the current state of electoral research. The same applies to research on political participation, citizen policy preferences, their images of government, and many other areas of social science.

Even more important, public opinion studies and other empirical research has changed the dynamics of democratic politics. Surveys give citizens a greater voice in the policy process. This is especially true in relatively closed societies where the opportunities for public voice are limited. This also applies to established democracies where public opinion has a policy impact (Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Bevan and Jennings 2013). Public opinion results can affect contemporary policy debates—and empirical studies give the overall public an opportunity to voice their views and preferences.

In short, in the span roughly matching the history of the ECPR, electoral studies and public opinion research more broadly have undergone a transition from a data-poor field to a large-data scientific enterprise. A theory-rich field with long-standing philosophical debates about the mass public can finally discuss these theories in light of empirical evidence.

### **Research on Political Parties**

Some of the classic works in modern political science research involve political parties (Michels 1962; Durverger 1954; Sartori 1976; Reiter 2006). Parties deserve this attention because they are

so central to the democratic process. In addition, the methodological advances in electoral studies naturally expanded to party research because parties are so central to the electoral process and governing process.

Albeit to a lesser degree, I see research on political parties as following the same trajectory of expanding empirical and comparative analyses over recent decades. Earlier research primarily offered descriptive or anecdotal information about a specific party or family of parties. Larger studies comparing parties often required collaboration between individual specialists. As political science research became more comparative and empirical, party research followed these trends.

A founding work was Kenneth Janda's (1980) International Comparative Parties Project that collected evidence on 158 parties in 53 nations. A large part of the research agenda was drawn from earlier theorizing on political party organization, the centralization of power, party behavior, and the involvement of its members. This was an incredible effort when party records were dispersed, unorganized, and followed different reporting standards. Janda produced one of the first systematic studies of parties' structure and behavior embedded their respective political environments (Harmel and Janda 1982). Their reach for evidence may have been beyond their grasp, because they were so ambitious in the range of nations they studied and the detailed information on party structures, party actions, and other factors that they wished to capture. But this pushed forward the boundaries of our knowledge.

Another major milestone was the Katz/Mair project on party organizations, their funding, and their actions (Katz and Mair 1995a).<sup>7</sup> The rich conceptual writings on parties—such as the iron law of oligarchy—were examined with systematic comparative evidence. In addition, Katz and Mair (1995b) added to our theories of parties through this project.

Building on this tradition, the Political Parties Data Base (PPDB) is an ongoing collection of information on party organizational structures, internal decision-making processes, and party funding (Scarrow, Webb, and Poguntke 2017). As evidence of the expanding dataverse, the Katz/Mair study included sixty-eight parties in 11 nations; Round 2 of the PPDB is collecting data from nearly 300 parties in over 40 established and developing democracies.

A challenge in studying political parties is their involvement in so many diverse aspects of the democratic process. Consequently, additional data collections exist in many distinct areas. For example, Ian Budge and his colleagues established the Manifesto Research Group in 1979 to

collect and code the content of party manifestos (Budge, Robertson, and Hearl 1987; Budge et al. 2001; Klingemann et al. 2006; Volkens et al. 2016). The international scale of the project expanded to include the post-communist democracies in Central-Eastern Europe and emerging democracies in the developing world. At present, the project has coded the content of nearly 2.5 million quasi-sentences and roughly half of the manifestos are available in digital form.

Other new studies rely on academic experts to describe party policies and other party traits. After several early starts, most notably by W. Ben Hunt and Michael Laver (1992), the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) now asks academic experts for information on party positions for a growing set of nations (Bakker et al. 2015; [www.ches.org](http://www.ches.org)). Rohrschneider and Whitefield's (2012) expert surveys provide information on European parties' positions, internal structure, and other organizational traits. New voter advice applications (VAAs) are designed to help voters to make electoral choices; they also provide extensive information on the party positions that are the foundation of the VAA (Garzia and Marshall 2019). Moreover, the policy of open access leads to extensive use of these data to study spatial models of party competition, political representation, the electoral strategy of political parties, political agenda-setting, democratic responsiveness, and numerous other topics.

Another party subfield focuses on party candidates/officeholders (Best and Higley 2018). These began as ad hoc single-nation surveys of elites that often built upon the national election studies platform (e.g., Miller et al. 1999; Aberbach, Putnam, and Rockman 1981). Several nations, such as Germany, The Netherlands, and Sweden now survey MPs over time, which provides a valuable resource for studying topics such as the changing social composition of elites, the expansion of women's representation, and changing styles of representation. Building on the 1994 and 2009 European Election Studies surveying citizens EP candidates (Katz and Wessels 1999), the Comparative Candidate Survey (CCS) has created an international network collecting coordinate information from candidates in several dozen nations (<http://www.comparativecandidates.org>). Studies of party members and party activists are also more common, ranging from the Reif, Cayrol, and Niedermayer (1980) survey of elites in 39 parties in the 1970s, to a set of surveys in the 1990s that collected data on members of 57 parties (van Haute and Gauja 2015). A new study of party members in European democracies includes nearly 40 parties ([www.projectmapp.eu](http://www.projectmapp.eu)). These projects provide exciting opportunities to test long-standing theories of elite political behavior (Rodriguez-Teruel and Daloz 2018).



In short, after a long history of experts describing how parties function and the mechanisms of electoral change based on individual observation of a limited number of parties, scholars now have access to rich evidence that allows us to test these ideas systematically and cross-nationally. Imagine if Duverger or Michels began their studies of political parties with access to the systematic evidence now available to every Ph.D. student in political science.

### **Research on Participation and Social Protest**

A third example of the expansion of empirical resources comes from the study of political participation and social protest. Electoral studies naturally were concerned with voting turnout as well as participation in the campaign. Other early studies of mass publics expanded this interest to other forms of participation (Almond and Verba 1963), and gradually to a wider repertoire of political activities. To many scholars, the vitality of democracy was often equated to the public's level of political involvement.

Verba, Nie and Kim's (1978) 7-nation survey was a landmark in participation research in operationalizing a theoretical model of participation and then applying this to a diverse set of nations. Today, on-going cross-national studies—the International Social Survey, the European Social Survey, the European/World Values Survey, and other projects—periodically include a battery of participation questions. As the extent of cross-national data has increased over time, this has produced a series of comparative studies focusing on voting (Blais 2000; Franklin 2004; Gallego 2014), non-electoral participation (Vráblíková 2017; Micheletti and McFarland 2011), and related topics (van Deth 2007; Dalton 2017). This literature provides in-depth knowledge of who participates, why people participate, and the changing nature of participation in democracies today, which often conflicts with popular impressions of public activity based solely on voting turnout statistics.

The study of protest illustrates the challenge in collecting evidence for an activity that is episodic and not highly institutionalized. The protest movements of the 1960-70s stimulated the first systematic cross-national study of unconventional political action (Barnes, Kaase, et al. 1979). The Political Action project assembled evidence on who were protesting, the values underlying these new forms of action, and the relationship between conventional and unconventional action. Since then, cross-national studies routinely include examples of contentious action in their general battery of political activities (Quaranta 2016). The Data

Harmonization project has taken these efforts a step further. It has merged the survey questions on protest activity from over 1700 national surveys and into a database of over 2.25 million respondents (Słomczyński et al. 2016). An innovative project collects comparable information from individuals in the act of protesting (Stekelenburg et al. 2012; [www.protestsurvey.eu](http://www.protestsurvey.eu)). The novelty was not interviewing protesters per se, but in recognizing the value of comparison and systematic measurement across different protests and national experiences.

Another method of studying protest collects information on individual protest events from media sources. This began in the early waves of the World Handbook data. More recently, J. Craig Jenkins assembled a cross-national (97 countries) and cross-temporal (1994–2004) database on protest events (Maher and Peterson 2008).<sup>8</sup> These data include rich information on the types of protest, the major actors, the government response, and other characteristics. Similarly, other projects have collected longitudinal data on specific protest actions for a set of European democracies (Kriesi 2012; Hutter 2014). New projects, such as ICEWS and Google's GDELT use AI methods to create a database on political events on a daily basis.<sup>9</sup> With refinement, these data may provide an exceptional resource for tracking the ebb and flow of protest activity over time and across countries.

As patterns of citizen participation change, research has evolved to examine the use of new political tools, such as Twitter, Facebook, and social media postings (Anduiza, Jensen, and Jorba 2011; Cantijoch Cunill and Gibson 2019). Such postings include valuable information on the flow of political information, the content of these posts, the networks of interaction, and their shifting currents over time.

In summary, with expanding systematic evidence, our understanding of how citizens think about politics, make their political decisions, and participate in politics is much richer. Researchers have objective evidence of what parties promise in the campaign, thus generating the potential to see who and why parties fulfill these promises. Scholars can determine the most common paths to becoming a successful politician, and how the class and gender diversity of elites is changing. We can learn more about how institutional structures shape party actions, and thus the democratic process. We know who participates in politics and why, and what factors produce political inequality. Data for data's sake is not the goal, and any measure is somewhat imperfect. However, the goal should be to use empirical evidence to address broader theoretical and empirical questions.

## The Changing Research Dataverse

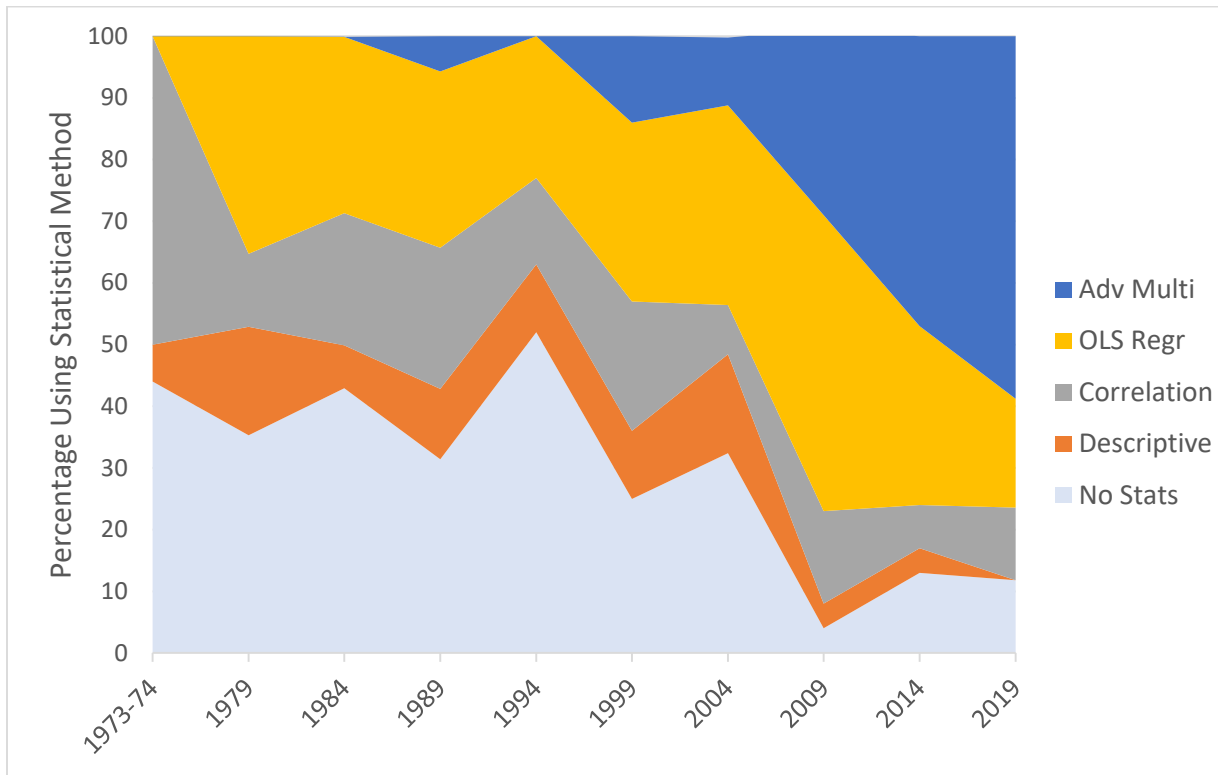
The expansion of research in electoral politics, political parties, and participation has followed different courses. Electoral research benefitted from the regularized and publicly visible nature of elections, and thus grew most dramatically and became highly institutionalized. Party research lacks the organizational and financial stimulus that comes from studying elections. Thus, this field has followed a more varied course in gradually developing large projects, databases, and collaborative networks. In addition, party research is more differentiated because parties are active in so many different elements of democratic politics and most projects focus on one subsection. Participation research has expanded, but through a less structured process. Survey data on participation grew dramatically because of the frequency of public opinion surveys. As the modes of participation changed, the methods of research also shifted toward more detailed and large scale projects. In each field, however, our empirical and cross-national knowledge base has expanded exponentially in the past five decades.

To illustrate these conclusions, I sought empirical evidence of the trends described in this chapter—focusing on *the use of such data and methods* over time. Several studies have tracked the evolution of political science research by classifying journal articles over time, including the *European Journal of Political Research* (Norris 1997; also Boncourt 2008).<sup>10</sup> The EJPR is part of the international research community described in these pages, and thus its articles can illustrate how scholarly research has evolved over time. I categorized EJPR articles from 1973 to 2019 at five-year intervals. The anomalies of a single year or changes in EJPR editors might affect journal content in a specific year, but the pattern over four plus decades should reflect long-term patterns in scholarship.

Figure 1 shows the changes in the methodology of articles over time. In the EJPR's first years (1973-74), the journal published a diverse mix of methodologies as others have shown (Norris 1997; Boncourt 2008).<sup>11</sup> A conceptual piece on the nature of political power appeared alongside an empirical study of government coalition behavior or the correlates of protest activity. The research methodology gradually shifted toward empirical analyses and then more advanced statistical analyses. Hypothesis-testing correlational or multivariate analyses grew from a small share of articles to the majority in the 1990s.<sup>12</sup> Then, more articles began utilizing advanced multivariate methods, such as time series models, hierarchic multi-level analyses, or structural equation models. Not a single article in the 2014 issue lacked some empirical evidence, and

nearly all were hypothesis-testing empirical studies. There is a similar trend toward statistical methodologies in the *American Political Science Review* up through the most recent evidence (Sigelman 2006).

**Figure 1. Methodology Used in EJPR Articles over Time**



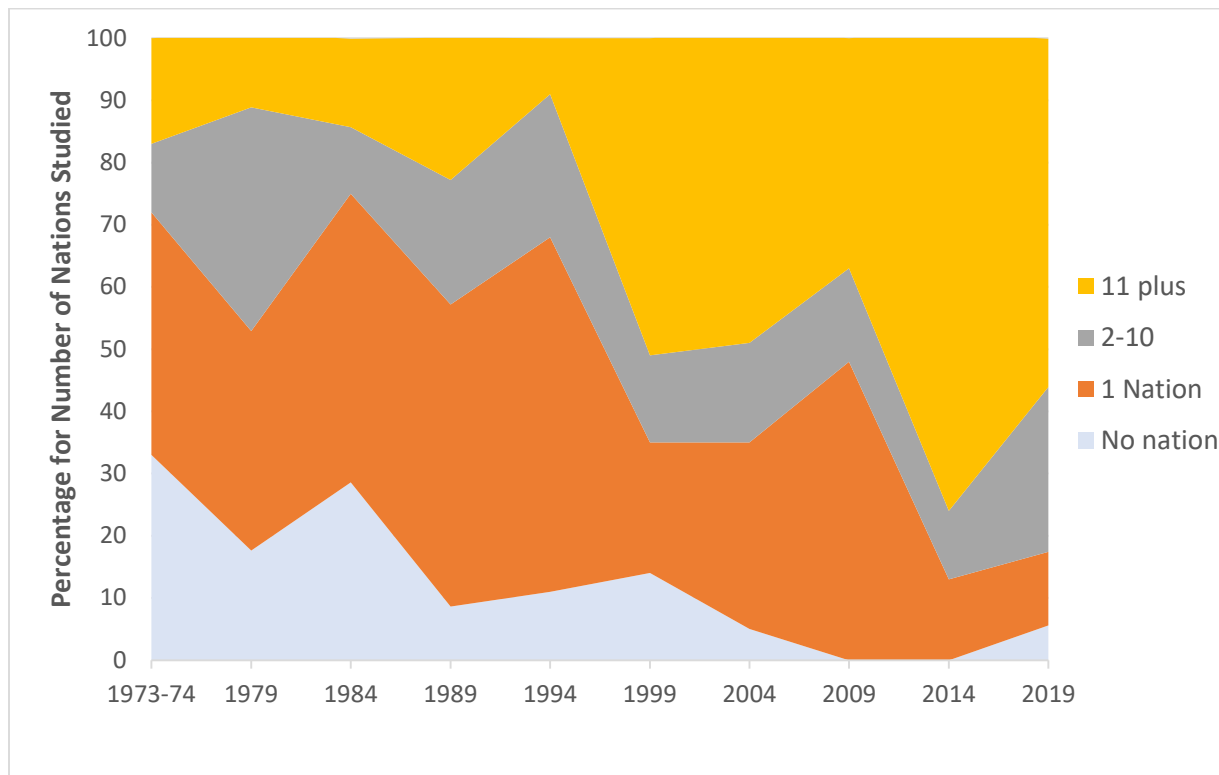
Source: Author coding of EJPR journal articles by year.

I have also described the expansion of cross-national analyses as an increasingly rich research infrastructure created new research opportunities. Early in my career, access to even a single national survey was often rare outside the individual principal investigators, and ‘comparativists’ were often a group of single-nation experts. The proliferation of data sources, open access to data, and the dissemination through archives create a rich resource environment that facilitates cross-national comparison.<sup>13</sup>

Figure 2 illustrates the expansion of cross-national research in EJPR articles. In 1973-74, nearly three-quarters of the articles considered only a single nation or presented a conceptual discussion without focusing on any nation national experience. By 1999, single nation articles are a minority, and the largest proportion includes 10 or more nations. Some of these articles

utilize cross-national opinion surveys, but a substantial number study political economy topics across OECD nations or other international topics. Single nation studies can illuminate general theory, but increasingly research seeks to place nations into a larger context.

**Figure 2. The Number of Countries in EJPR Articles over Time**



Source: Author coding of EJPR journal articles by year.

Admittedly, these research trends have sometimes divided our discipline. From the outset, pre-existing academic communities criticized empirical political behavior studies. Jean Converse (1987, 252) described reactions to the first wave of survey research in the 1950-60s:

“Quantitative work was criticized for many sins—for being antitheoretical and barren of intellect (“dustbowl empiricism”); for triviality (“If you can count it, it isn’t worth counting”); for illiteracy, deliberate obscurantism, and mumbo jumbo; for malicious or mindless “scientism”; for mechanical reductionism; for displacement of the individual scholar; for pretentious explication of the obvious; for prodigal waste of money. (1987, 252)

I have heard these sentiments throughout my academic career, although often less elegantly phrased. They existed when I first attended large political science conferences and have continued through my last political science department meeting. Such sentiments were a factor encouraging the formation of the ECPR at a time when many national associations in Europe were heavily oriented toward humanities, legal studies, and qualitative research. I see this methodological debate as a natural part of the research process, as a new paradigm challenges traditional scholarly ways. And as empirical theory-testing research has grown in volume and stature, it is still being questioned from new (or sometimes old) quarters.

If anything, the pace of empirical data collections is likely to increase as new technological developments open up additional research frontiers. Big Data is rapidly developing massive data sources bringing together diverse information in analyzable forms (Hersch 2015; Dalton 2016). Artificial intelligence methods, such as the ICEWS and Google's GDELT projects, enable researchers to process unprecedented masses of data and examines the patterns in these data. As the digital world develops, so also will the data on voting patterns, consumer behavior, political activity, and other aspects of our lives. High school coders are now collecting and analyzing data that go beyond the skill set of most political science faculty. I suspect that at the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ECPR, scholars can look back at today as the rudimentary nature of political behavior research.

I want to conclude by discussing some of the possible consequences of these trends toward empirical and cross-national political science research.<sup>14</sup> A primary consequence is the increased specialization of knowledge by individual scholars. In virtually every field of political science, there has been an explosion in research output that challenges our ability to keep current beyond our field of specialization. This follows from more research funds flowing into political science, more scholars active in the discipline, the expanding topics of study, more published research, and the publish-or-perish demands of academia.

Another potential problem is that specialization may narrow our research horizons. Public opinion studies sometimes focus on narrow questions or methodology, or are not driven by significant theoretical interests. Similarly, often social movement research examines a single protest or a single movement organization, without understanding the need for variance and comparison. But the same can be said of many academic fields. Indeed, at one time or another,

all of us probably feel that we are learning more and more about less and less. And this issue is not limited to empirical social sciences.<sup>15</sup>

At the present state of our discipline, I would suggest that a focus on *theory-based empirical testing* of mid-level theories seems appropriate. We have a large storehouse of grand theories from historical sources, it is time to take stock of which ideas best fit reality. Moreover, a critique of political behavior research often misunderstands how cumulative, scientific research progresses. In our cognate field of economics, the Nobel Prize is often given for a lifetime of research, building the evidence behind a new principle—and seldom for a single grand theorem that transforms the field. Many more economists are testing these ideas in different contexts or with different assumptions to address the same principle (without winning the Nobel). Specific knowledge that is theoretically guided is more likely to cumulate into scientific progress, even if the steps are small and uncertain.<sup>16</sup>

At about the time of the ECPR's twenty-fifth anniversary, Gabriel Almond (1988) expressed a related concern that specialization means that researchers are increasingly sitting at separate tables and not discussing their findings and the connections between separate parts of political science. I understood his concerns, but was more optimistic about the future (Dalton 1991). I still am. My general optimism flows from observing how political science research has built bridges between related islands of theory and research. The growth of empirical and cross-national research applies to media studies, elite studies and policy analyses. Electoral research projects often include these other sources—and vice versa. Social movement scholars coordinate data collections with researchers studying similar movements in other nations and then use multiple methods of data collection (participant interviews, events coding, media reports, etc.). This is less a top-down framework for building an understanding of the world, and more a bottom-up approach. It results in building connections between many diverse specializations in political research.

Another concern is that the expansion of large scale cross-national research may diminish country-specific knowledge. Others raise legitimate concerns that some important islands of potential scholarship will remain uninhabited because of the focus on other areas. However, the expansion in the number of journals and publications across topics and methodologies has increased and diversified views of the field and the world rather than narrowed it. A hundred flowers are blooming, although they vary in size and relevance.

These questions about research deserve our attention, and this discussion has continued for several decades now. I have become more sanguine as research has developed. In international projects, the principal investigators inevitably bring their own national experience to the project. Now they benefit by comparing their theoretical expectations to other national experiences. And the cross-national project benefits from the insights of national participants. In terms of diversity, the research topics have expanded to include inequality, gender, race, gay rights, and other diversity themes—now with a discussion linked to research findings rather than debating opinions. In addition, research foundations and universities demonstrate a tendency to seek out new targets of opportunity, rather than doubling-down on past investments. And new large-scale institutes for social research provide a foundation for further advances.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, some skeptics argue that empirical research naturally supports the existing social paradigm and is anti-progressive and conservative by nature. To me, this is the weakest point that critics have voiced. As Stephen Pinker (2018) has recently stated:

“Enlightenment thinkers had in common . . . an insistence that we energetically apply our faculty of reason to understanding our world, rather than fall back on generators of delusion like faith, dogma, revelation, authority, superstition, charisma, mysticism, divination, visions, gut feelings, or the hermeneutic parsing of sacred texts. . . To the Enlightenment thinkers, the escape from ignorance and superstition showed how mistaken our conventional wisdom could be, and how the methods of science—skepticism, fallibilism, open debate, and empirical testing—are the paradigm of how to achieve reliable knowledge about the world.”

This positivist logic applies as much to understanding the political issues of our times as it did to shape the course of civilization during the Enlightenment.

Intersubjective evidence and a diversity of ideas are essential to scientific inquiry. The diversity of ideas has a long history in the social sciences. But only in the past generation has empirical evidence begun to evaluate these long-established theories. The quality and quantity of evidence is still evolving and remains imperfect, but it has generated major advances in scientific knowledge. To its credit, the ECPR has played a major role in promoting the intellectual discourse behind this development.



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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Data from the British Institute of Public Opinion polls were briefly cited in Butler's study. However, these surveys were methodologically limited and were not focused on understanding and modeling electoral choices.

<sup>2</sup> Germany followed a different path (Kaase and Klingemann 1994). The post-WWII occupation forces established a survey research capability as a policy tool during the reconstruction period. Residence cards provided an alternative to area probability sampling. This led to the establishment of the Allensbach Institut in 1947 and the German Institute for Population Surveys (DIVO) in 1951.

<sup>3</sup> For example, when astronomers changed their conception of the solar system because of Galileo's discoveries, we would not call this was the Italianization of astronomy. Or perhaps some would?

<sup>4</sup> Data units are the number of survey respondents multiplied by the number of items collected on each person. In addition, there were nearly half a million data units in the GLES candidate survey. My thanks to Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck for these estimates. By comparison, the three separate surveys of the 1961 election study had only nine hundred thousand data units.

<sup>5</sup> An ICORE conference launched the CSES drawing on the Michigan "network" (Thomassen et al. 1994).

<sup>6</sup> For example, the initial wave of the CSES included Belarus, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovenia and the Ukraine.

<sup>7</sup> A predecessor was *The Future of Party Government* project that connected many of the participants and provided a theoretical foundation for the Katz/Mair project (Castles and Wildenmann 1986).

<sup>8</sup> These data are available from <https://sociology.osu.edu/worldhandbook>.

<sup>9</sup> The respective project websites are: ICEWS (<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/icews>), POLCON ([www.eui.eu/Projects/POLCON](http://www.eui.eu/Projects/POLCON)) and GDELT ([www.gdelproject.org/](http://www.gdelproject.org/))

<sup>10</sup> The ECPR has a more empirical research profile because of its origins. Boncourt's (2008; 2010) comparison of the EJPR to *Political Studies* in Britain and the *Revue Française de Science Politique* finds a higher percentage of comparative and quantitative studies in the EJPR. I suspect each journal's identity produces such patterns. *Political Studies* has highlighted political theory articles in contrast to the more comparative and empirical *British Journal of Political Science*. In the United States, *Comparative Political Studies* is more empirical than *Comparative Politics*. The value of using the *EJPR* as a base is

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also illustrated by the 2017 ISI journal citation impact rankings: *EJPR* #6, *BJPS* #9, *CPS* #16, *Political Studies* #54 and *Comparative Politics* #73. Also see Klingemann (2007) on the divergent paths of national political sciences.

<sup>11</sup> I followed a more detailed definition of methodology than Norris or Boncourt, so the results are not fully comparable. In addition, the figures span an additional 25 years. The 2019 data are based on the first 3 issues of the journal.

<sup>12</sup> The 1994 *EJPR* shows a drop in statistical analyses, but this is because a special issue was devoted to the history of national election studies. These articles described these empirical projects but without statistical analyses.

<sup>13</sup> Since 2000, a majority of the articles dealing with citizens, political organizations, national governments or IR/EU studies use multivariate analyses or more sophisticated statistics.

<sup>14</sup> This section draws upon my earlier discussion of the evolution of comparative politics research in industrial democracies (Dalton 1991).

<sup>15</sup> For example, in discussing British historians, Bagehot (2019) recently stated “some historians almost seem to be engaged in a race to discover the most marginalised subject imaginable.”

<sup>16</sup> Another possible question asks whether easy access to so much information may lead to misuse or naïve use of the data by some analysts. If this implies we should limit access, this solution would be worse than the initial problem. Scientific research should be an open process with minimal limits on access, whether it is a data archive or a document archive. An insightful example of the negative consequences of limited access in another field involves the Dead Sea Scrolls (Collins 2012). A double-blind review process with access to intersubjective evidence exists to make quality judgments, even if requests for reviewing manuscripts fill our email inbasket.

<sup>17</sup> This involves the development of large social science research institutes, such as the Institute for Social Research in Ann Arbor, GESIS in Germany, the National Centre for Social Research in London, the Varieties of Democracy and Quality of Government projects in Sweden, or the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin.