

Comparing political systems: Establishing similarities and dissimilarities

GISÈLE DE MEUR¹ & DIRK BERG-SCHLOSSER²

¹*Université Libre, Bruxelles, Belgium;* ²*Philipps-Universität, Marburg, Germany*

Abstract. Comparative political analysis at the macro-level of political systems can reduce the inevitably high complexity of such comparisons by the systematic matching or contrasting of cases, depending on the particular problem. Such 'most similar systems' or 'most different systems' designs, in Przeworski & Teune's terminology, thus constitute one of the major ways out of the usual 'small N – many variables' dilemma. This paper proposes a detailed and comprehensive method to establish such similarities and dissimilarities in a systematic and at all stages transparent way. The examples chosen refer to an analysis of the conditions of survival or breakdown of democratic systems in the inter-war period in Europe.

Introduction

Since the time of Aristotle comparative politics and the comparative method have been considered by many authors to be the 'royal road' of political science. (For an assessment of the venerable history of this field see Eckstein 1963). Comparative politics was to provide the discipline with a method and a perspective which would lead to scientifically valid, testable propositions with a high explanatory power in both space and time. Yet, as one major analyst has noted, much of what has been written under this heading has remained 'essentially noncomparative, essentially descriptive, essentially parochial, essentially static, and essentially monographic' (Macridis 1955: 7). To be sure, our substantive body of knowledge has expanded considerably during the past decades and now encompasses much important information relating to practically all countries and regions of the world. (The various editions of the *World Handbook of Political and Social Indicators*, for example, constitute a major effort in this regard; see Taylor & Jodice 1983.) Still, in actual performance, the 'revolution in comparative politics' which began in the 1950s has not lived up to its original promise in terms of the collection of world-wide data and the development of new concepts and approaches. (For recent assessments of this topic see Mayer 1989; Collier 1993).

On the one hand, configurative studies, dealing with the complex interaction of a wide variety of variables in a single system, have remained mostly descriptive. Their potential breadth and historical depth have often been achieved at the price of a lack of systematic argument and scientific rigour. On the other hand, macro-quantitative studies testing the relationships of a few variables across a great number of cases have often been too narrow in

perspective, too unspecific in the operationalisation of concepts and too indiscriminate in their selection of cases. In consequence, their results have often remained spurious or superficial. Such studies can rightly be termed 'scientistic' in as much as they arrive at false or irrelevant substantive results by the use of (presumably impressive) quantitative techniques (see also Ragin 1981).

In order to assess developments in the field of comparative politics, the contents of the two leading specialized journals, *Comparative Politics* and *Comparative Political Studies*, were analysed from their inception until 1981. This study showed that, in actual fact, not so much had changed since Macridis remarks: 'Our inventory . . . reveals that in some respects the new comparative politics is remarkably like the old comparative government. In particular, the single country study – the mainstay of the field as it was defined traditionally – has proved to be extremely durable, and still holds firmly to its longstanding pre-eminence . . . masquerading under the comparative label' (Sigelman & Gadbois 1983: 301).

Adam Przeworski, co-author of the most influential methodological study in this area (Przeworski & Teune 1970), also notes in his review of more recent developments that 'by the early nineteen seventies the field of comparative methodology had run out of steam' (Przeworski 1987: 34). In particular, the 'quasi-experimental design' advocated as the central concern of the comparative method by him and his predecessors, most notably John Stuart Mill, hardly ever seems to have been put into practice: 'I do not know one single study which has successfully applied Mill's canon of only difference' (i.e. 'most similar systems design' in the terminology of Przeworski & Teune 1970; *ibid.*, 19). As he further laments, 'Methodologists are at times listened to, always acclaimed, but rarely followed. Their canons are often impossible to observe and their advice often turns out to be impractical' (Przeworski 1987: 31).

The crux of comparative politics lies in the central dilemma that, on the one hand, we are always dealing with very complex systems and a large number of variables and that, on the other hand, the number of cases to be analysed at the country level, even in global terms, remains relatively small (see also Blalock 1984). The various emphases which can be undertaken in this regard are illustrated in Figure 1.

The 'most similar systems design' refers to what is listed above as 'pairwise comparisons' (C_2V_Y) and the 'comparative method' (C_XV_Y) in the narrower sense of the term. Here, as Przeworski and Teune state, 'the assumption is that we can find a pair of (or more) countries which differ in all but two characteristics and that we will be able to confirm a hypothesis that X is a cause of Y under conditions under which *Ceteris Paribus* holds in the real world' (Przeworski & Teune: 17). However, they also note that 'There are no two countries in the world . . . which differ in only two characteristics and in practice there are always numerous competing hypotheses' (*ibid.*).

Before abandoning all systematic efforts in this direction, we would like

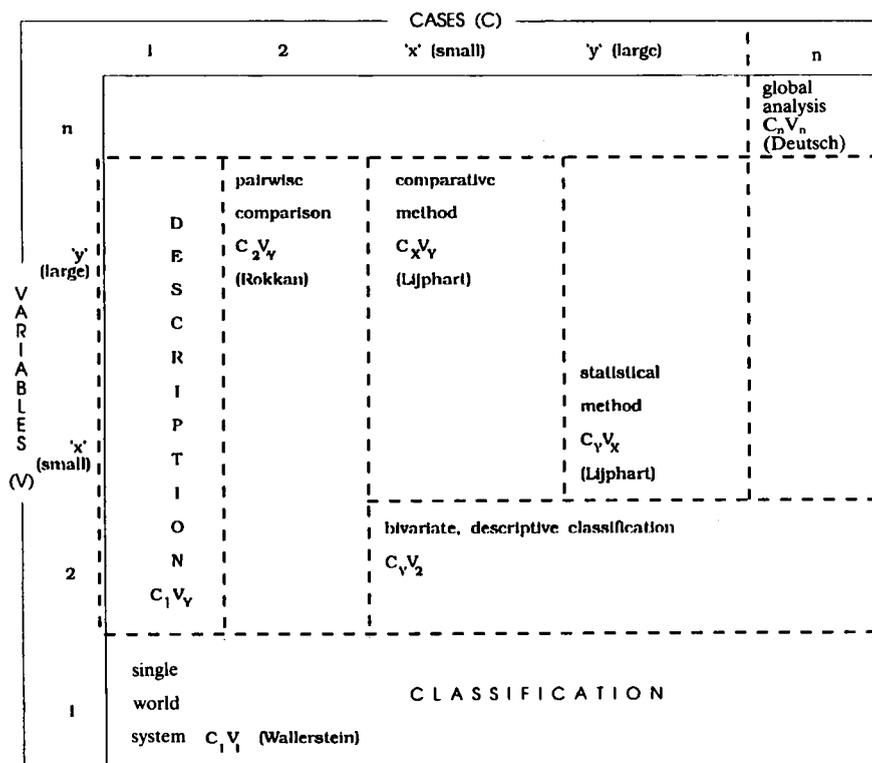


Fig. 1. Types of comparisons. Source: Adapted from Aarebrot & Bakka (1992: 59).

to propose a method which attempts to operationalise some of Przeworski's and Teune's original ideas and to indicate at least certain approximations by which such a research programme can be carried out with a reduced regional and historical scope. In so doing, we consciously abandon the possibility of immediately arriving at 'universal' and ahistorical propositions and focus our efforts instead on a clearly-chosen 'medium range'. Only at a later stage, or in parallel attempts, might similar comparisons on an intra- and inter-regional or asynchronic scale prove helpful for more global considerations.

The inter-war period in Europe provides a particularly favourable setting for such an undertaking since the cases to be considered share many common socio-economic and political-cultural characteristics. Not only is their history relatively well researched and documented, but the period concerned is also clearly demarcated by common events, the two World Wars. Both wars significantly altered the internal and external political landscapes, setting the time between them apart from earlier and later developments. All of the cases under consideration can be defined as having been parliamentary democracies initially, some well established and of relatively long standing, others

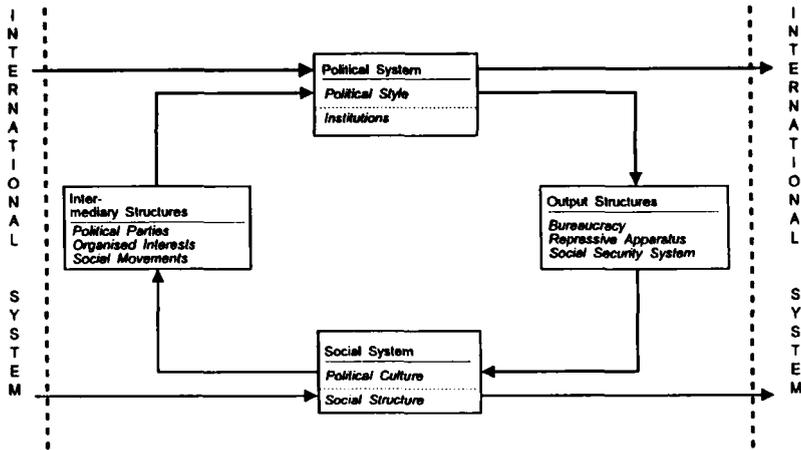


Fig. 2. Simplified system model.

of more recent origin and, in many instances, more democratic in form than in substance. They were all subsequently affected by a common external stimulus, the world economic crisis of the late 1920s and early 1930s.

The consequences of this 'quasi-experiment' can be examined with the help of a 'most similar systems' – 'most different systems' research design. For this purpose, we shall first sketch a general but 'historically-informed' systems model which is capable of accommodating the high level of complexity of each case. On this basis a method will then be elaborated by which the respective similarities or dissimilarities of systems can be specified more closely. This procedure will be illustrated by concrete examples taken from an international comparative research project in which the factors conducive to the breakdown or survival of inter-war European democracies are analysed.

The systems framework

Our simplified systems model was developed on the basis of well-known studies by Deutsch (1963), Easton (1965), Almond & Powell (1978) and others. However, it is used here solely in a pre-theoretical, classificatory sense in order to locate different elements and possible interactions more closely without necessarily implying distinct causal relationships (such as the effectiveness of certain links and feedbacks or the stability of the system as such). A preliminary outline of the model is provided in Figure 2.

With the help of this model, it is possible to distinguish and locate the general social system, the intermediary structures on the input side, the

central political system and the output structures together with the respective international environment. Furthermore, with regard to each sub-system, we can distinguish an 'objective' dimension consisting of its internal structures, institutions and similar aspects of a more durable and 'tangible' nature, and a 'subjective' dimension reflecting the respective perceptions and actual behaviour of the individuals and groups concerned. (For a fuller exposition of a model of this type see Berg-Schlosser/Siegler 1990; Berg-Schlosser/Stammen 1992.⁵)

Using this broad systems outline, we selected seven major categories and a certain number of characteristic variables within each category on which to base our comparisons. In so doing, we attempted to be as parsimonious as possible without losing sight of the overall dimensions and their complexity. The first category, overall geopolitical and historical background, draws its main substance from Rokkan's (1975) 'Political Map of Europe'. Here, particular consideration was given to the 'seaward-corebelt-landward' and 'reformation-non-reformation' dimensions, the overall size of the population and the timing of both the formation of the state and the establishment of a democratic political system.

The second category deals with general economic conditions and includes both the level of development and the basic class structure of the societies concerned. Among the indicators selected for this category are the national product per capita; urbanisation; literacy; industrialisation; and data pertaining to the main social classes. In the latter context, the rural structure (a significant share of landlords and a rural proletariat vs. a dominance of family farms), the extent of the middle classes and the size of the industrial labour force (coinciding with the indicator for the level of industrialisation) are of particular importance.

The third category is concerned with the particular ethnic, linguistic, religious and regional composition of each case together with the possible existence of overarching structures which bridge the gap between such cleavages (for example, a pattern of *verzuiling*). The second and third categories thus cover the major social structural dimensions which figure in the bottom square ('social system') of the overall systems model.

The fourth category summarizes those aspects of political culture which are most relevant to our concerns. These include: the overall ('national') identity of the society in question; the existence of strong cultural sub-milieus which characterise the 'community system'; attributes such as the extent of secularisation, egalitarianism, tolerance and the acceptance of violence in the 'socio-cultural' sphere. They also include a number of more directly political orientations such as the level of political interest and information; political participation; the dominant patterns of conflict resolution (competitive or consensual) and decision-making (authoritarian or participatory); the extent of 'parochial' and 'subject' orientations (according to Almond & Verba's (1963) definition); and the resulting degree of overall democratic legitimacy.

The fifth category groups together significant features of the intermediary structures. These include the strength of the major interest groups (rural, commercial, employers, trade unions); the existence of important social movements, militias or anti-system parties; the overall fragmentation of the party system; and the incidence of clientelistic or corporatist forms of interest mediation.

The sixth category deals with specific features of the central political system. Among these are the general system type; the vertical separation of powers (e.g. independence of the judiciary); the horizontal separation of powers (centralized or federal); the electoral system (proportional or majoritarian); the stability of governments; the strength of the bureaucracy and the repressive apparatus; the social security system; the political role of the military; and, as an important normative criterion, the guarantee and observance of civil rights and political liberties.

Finally, the seventh category treats the external environment and includes such factors as economic or political interactions, cultural influences and specific historical conditions (e.g. the consequences of World War I, the possession of colonies) The complete list of variables together with their respective operationalisations is provided in the appendix.

Establishing similarities and dissimilarities

This kind of operationalisation, of course, can only provide a certain approximation and is open to further modification. Still, despite the rather rudimentary manner in which categories and variables were selected, it leaves us with altogether 61 variables for the 18 cases included in our project. Each case can thus be characterized within its particular configuration, thereby replacing 'proper names . . . by the relevant variables' (Przeworski & Teune 1970: 30). However, the differences remain considerable nonetheless. Across all variables the minimum variation is 14 for the two 'most similar' cases Estonia and Finland. It is 17 for Belgium – the Netherlands or Germany – Austria.

The particular research design chosen – 'most similar' or 'most different systems' also depends on the dependent variable in a given 'quasi-experiment'. In our case, we were interested in the effects which the world economic crisis of the late 1920s and early 1930s had as the major stimulus for the eventual survival or breakdown of democratic regimes. Accordingly, only 'most similar systems with different outcomes' (MSDO) or 'most different systems with the same outcome' (MDSO) designs were set up for closer analysis.

Furthermore, we distinguish between breakdowns which led to the establishment of more traditional 'authoritarian' regimes and those where inter-

	Survivors	Breakdowns with Fascist Intervention	Authoritarian
Most Different with Same Outcome (MDSO)	Survivors (1)	Breakdowns (2)	
		Fascist (3) Breakdowns	Authoritarian (4) Breakdowns
Most Similar with Different Outcome (MSDO)	Survivors vs. Breakdowns (5)		
		Fascist	vs. Authoritarian (6)

Fig. 3. Comparative research design.

ventions of strong fascist forces occurred in the process of breakdown. The resulting pattern of research designs is illustrated in Figure 3.

Thus, six different types of comparison emerge: the *most different cases* (1) among all survivors as well as (2) among all breakdowns and, more specifically, (3) among all fascist and (4) among all authoritarian breakdowns; and the *most similar cases* (5) among all survivors versus all breakdowns and (6) among fascist versus authoritarian breakdowns. We face the difficulty of having to measure the closeness or remoteness of any given pair of cases in a heterogeneous, multi-dimensional space and then of finding the 'most different' and the 'most similar' cases. Accordingly, several problems had to be addressed. These included in particular the choice of a distance with which to measure proximity and the weighting of the variables.

As a measure of distance we opted for 'Boolean' distance. This measures the number of Boolean (i.e. dichotomised) variables by which two selected countries differ from one another. In itself, of course, the Booleanization of variables implies a certain loss of information when compared to more finely graded measures or scales. However, a number of the variables for our cases were in a rather crude form anyhow, for example those relating to the levels 'low' and 'high' (especially when the variables in question were of the 'softer' judgemental type) and to the absence or presence of certain factors. Even where 'harder' and more differentiated independent data from standard sources (levels of GNP, urbanisation, etc.) were available, it turned out upon closer inspection that many of these data were not really comparable because of differences in definition or coverage, or even because of gross insufficiencies on the part of statistical bureaus in the countries concerned. Thus, for the present purpose, we adopted a fairly straightforward measure of Boolean distance, seeing that its relative crudeness is offset to a certain extent by other advantages (see Berg-Schlösser/De Meur 1994 for another application).

The second consideration concerned the weighting of the variables and the possible effects of intercorrelations of certain factors. Here, we decided not to consider all variables at once and give them an equal weight because

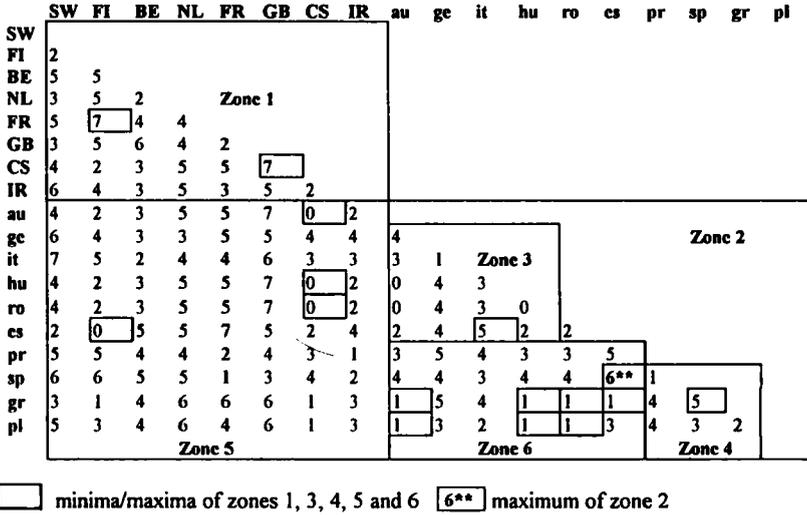


Fig. 4. Distance matrix for 'general background' (8 variables). Countries: SW – Switzerland; FI – Finland; BE – Belgium; NL – The Netherlands; GB – Great Britain; CS – Czechoslovakia; IR – Ireland; au – Austria; ge – Germany; it – Italy; hu – Hungary; ro – Romania; es – Estonia; pr – Portugal; sp – Spain; gr – Greece; pl – Poland.

the number of variables can differ widely from one category to the next. Rather, we proceeded first by establishing similarities and dissimilarities category by category and then, in a second step, by aggregating these somewhat further. In this way, the qualitative importance of each (systemically derived) category was retained. Also, it was now more justifiable to give the variables an equal weight within each category (any other weighting would have been just as arbitrary, but at least gross distortions could be avoided). On this basis we proceeded in three main consecutive steps:

- the composition and synthesis of distance matrices;
- the design and synthesis of similarity and dissimilarity graphs; and
- the selection of the most striking configurations for comparison.

Distance matrices

Within each of the seven categories of Boolean variables (see Table 1 in the Appendix for the full data), we computed the *Boolean distance* between pairs of countries – this distance is defined above – and listed them in a triangular distance matrix. An example of the first category is given in Figure 4.

In this matrix we have grouped the survivor cases (indicated by capital letters) and the breakdown cases (indicated by small letters) separately so that the comparative designs mentioned above emerge. On the one hand,

we consider the *most difference systems* among all survivors (zone 1), among all breakdowns (zone 2), among all fascist cases (zone 3) and among all authoritarian cases (zone 4). On the other hand, we look at *most similar systems* when survivors and breakdowns (zone 5) or fascist and authoritarian cases (zone 6) are contrasted.

For each of the seven distance matrices, we considered the *minimum distance* obtained for different outcomes (MSDO) and the *maximum distance* for countries with the same outcome (MDSO). For the first category, the most different cases among the survivors are Finland/France and Czechoslovakia/Great Britain (distance 7). The most different among the breakdowns are Spain and Estonia (distance 6). The most similar pairs when comparing survivors and breakdowns are Czechoslovakia/Austria Czechoslovakia/Hungary, Czechoslovakia/Romania and Finland/Estonia (distance 0). Each MSDO or MDSO pair is indicated in Figure 4 by its respective distance which has been highlighted by a box.

The additional distinction between fascist and authoritarian breakdowns is covered in zones 3, 4 and 6. The most dissimilar pair among fascist cases is Estonia/Italy (with distance 5) and among authoritarian cases Greece/Spain (with distance 5). Contrasting fascist and authoritarian breakdowns, the most similar pairs are Austria/Greece, Austria/Poland, Hungary/Greece, Hungary/Poland, Romania/Greece, Romania/Poland, and Estonia/Greece (with distance 1).

Somewhat different results were obtained, as was to be expected, across all seven categories. We thus aggregated the results by category in a further step. For this purpose, we first juxtaposed the results within each category in a comprehensive triangle in which each cell was composed as follows:

C1	C2
C3	C4
C5	C6
C7	

Here, C_i = the distance (between a pair of countries) for the i th category.

This resulted in Table 2 in the Appendix.

Then, for each of the six zones of comparison, we marked the resulting matrix at several levels. We started (at level 0) by selecting for each pair of countries the categories in which the distance was either equal to the *minimum* (for countries with a different outcome) or to the *maximum* (for countries with the same outcome).

The minimal and maximal values for each category actually obtained in each zone (as contrasted to the hypothetically possible minimal and maximal values) are portrayed in Figure 5.

Subsequently, level 1 was obtained by considering the categories in which the distance was $\leq \min + 1$ (resp. $\geq \max - 1$). In this way, we continued to mark all further levels until we reached the *threshold level* k which separates similarity from dissimilarity. This borderline was established for each category by dividing the total number of variables by 2.

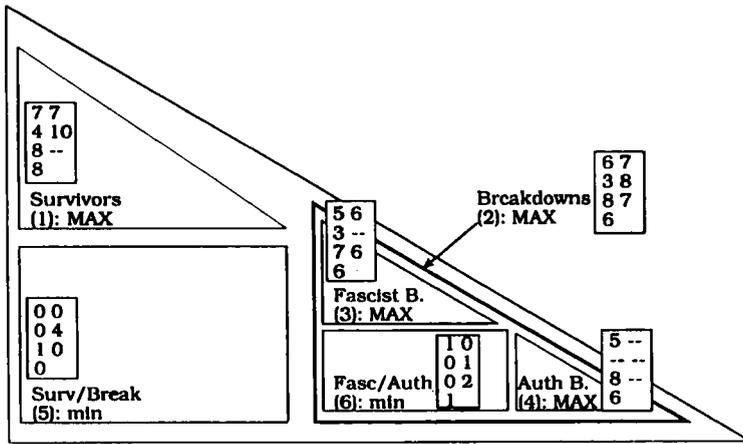


Fig. 5. MSDO minima and MDSO maxima.

In order to reduce the heterogeneity of the number of variables per category, we decided to retain four levels of (dis)similarity (and no more). The lower levels are more restrictive than the higher which, for their part, provide more comprehensive information involving a larger set of categories. If the threshold level in a particular category is obtained at an earlier stage, this value is retained for the subsequent levels as shown below:

Levels of dissimilarity:

D ₀	D ₁	D ₂	D ₃	Mean
7 7	6 6	5* 5*	5* 5*	4 4
4 10	3* 9	3* 8*	3* 8*	2 7
8 --	7 --	6* --	6* --	5 4
8	7	6	5	4,5

Here, for example, all levels for category 7 are clearly differentiated. For category 3, in contrast, the threshold is reached at level I and thus remains the same for levels 2 and 3 (see numbers marked with an asterisk). Category 6 does not produce any dissimilarities at all since its starting value of 4 already lies at the threshold (mean).

Figure 6 shows markings at four levels (D₀ to D₃) within the MDSO zone 1 which compares survivors. Level 0 is symbolized by D₀, level 1 includes both D₀ and D₁, level 2 D₀, D₁, D₂ and so on. For each pair, the individual symbols are located in the position of the respective category as indicated in Figure 6. For example, for the pair Belgium/Sweden, D₂ is located in the position of category 1 and D₃ is located in the position of category 7.

	SW	FI	BE	NL	FR	GB	CS
FI							
BE	D2	D2 D2 D2 D2					
NL	D3 D1	D1 D2 D2 D0 D2 D2 D3					
FR	D2 D1	D0 D2		D2			
GB	D2 D3	D2 D0 D0 D3	D1 D2				
CS	D0 D1	D1 D2		D2 D2	D2 D1 D2	D0 D1 D2 D0	
IR	D1	D0 D2 D2	D1	D2 D1 D2		D2 D1 D3	D0 D3

Fig. 6. Dissimilarities among survivors. Countries: SW - Switzerland; FI - Finland; BE - Belgium; NL - The Netherlands; GB - Great Britain; CS - Czechoslovakia.

Overall similarity and dissimilarity graphs

Next, we counted the number of marked categories for each level. Here, for example, the pair NL/FI has the highest number (5). The highest value obtained (h) between a pair of countries was then reproduced in a 'similarity' or 'dissimilarity' graph. An additional procedure, providing a more complex set of information takes the value ($h - 1$) into account as well - those pairs which, in this example, show levels of difference for four categories, namely BE/FI, GB/FI and CS/GB. The results of both procedures are illustrated in Figure 7 with regard to the most different systems among survivors. Continuous lines indicate the maximal value (h), dotted lines indicate the sub-maximal value ($h - 1$). The specific categories concerned are indicated in parentheses for each pair.

Finally, we synthesised all this information into aggregated graphs like the one for survivors shown in Figure 8. The four levels of (dis)similarity are superimposed; in the cases where the value h alone determines the pairs, the procedure stops here. Alternatively, when $h - 1$ is also taken into account, we decided to keep each (h) pair and those ($h - 1$) pairs which occur at least twice.

In our example, the final graph for survivors contains such pairs as SW-

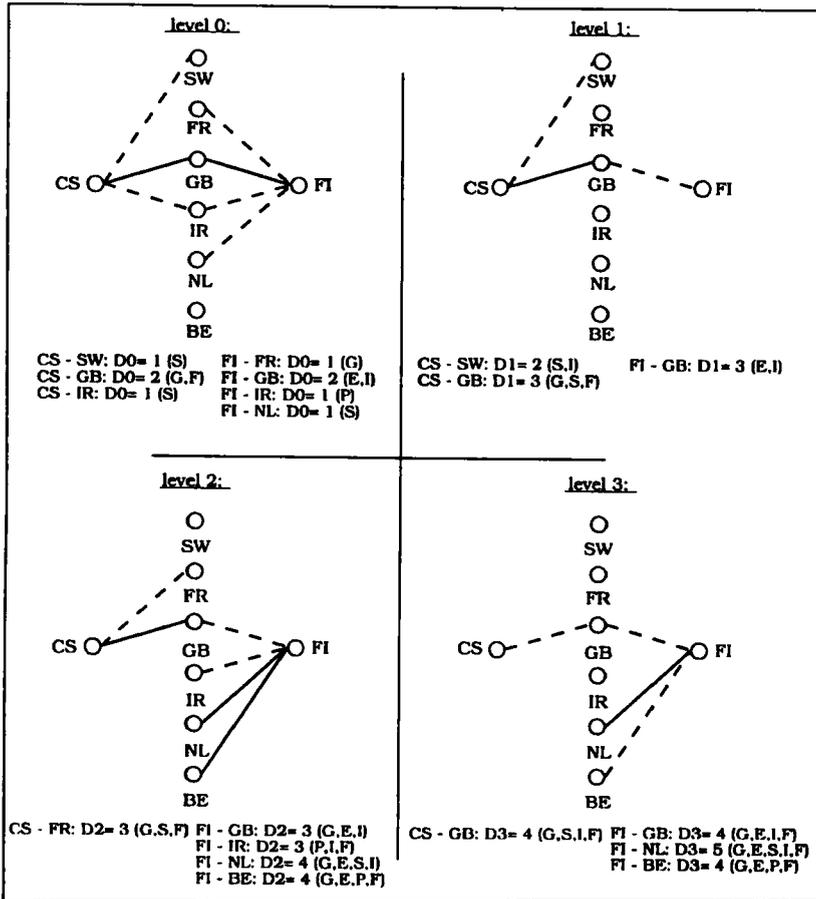


Fig. 7. Dissimilarity graph (at all levels) for survivors. Abbreviations for the categories: G – Category 1 (General background); E – Category 2 (Socio-economic conditions); S – Category 3 (Social composition); P – Category 4 (Political-cultural traditions) I – Category 5 (Intermediary structures); C – Category 6 (Central political system); F – Category 7 (External factors).

BE (corresponding to the maximal value h at level 1) and SW-IR (corresponding to the sub-maximal value $h - 1$ at levels 0 and level 2); however, it does not contain SW-FI which occurs only once (at level 2) with a weak ($h - 1$) relation. When underlined, D_i indicates the strong (h) relation.

In summary, the process described above is designed to reveal *similarities* (or proximities) and *dissimilarities* (or remoteness) between countries in a number of complementary ways. On the one hand, the construction of different *levels* (of which we retained four) establishes proximities of different kinds: the lower the level, the higher the demands placed on the criterion of likeness (or of dissemblance) *within each category*. Accordingly, few cate-

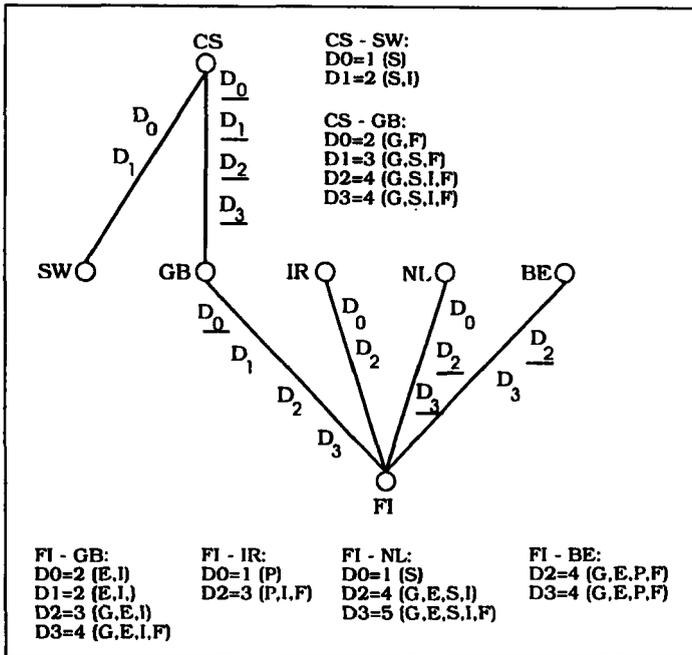


Fig. 8. Most different pairs among survivors.

gories will fit this requirement. To be 'alike at level zero' thus means to be as close as possible within the (few) categories where this high proximity occurs.

Moving to higher levels implies a progressive relaxation of the likeness (or dissemblance) requirement within each category and the simultaneous demand that it should appear in a growing number of categories. Here, proximity is weaker and less specific but concerns a greater number of dimensions; it is *locally less* but *globally more* demanding.

On the other hand, considering the *maximal value* (h) of the number of categories which satisfy the proximity criterion at a given level corresponds to focusing upon the *closest* pairs for that criterion. The additional consideration of the next closest value ($h - 1$) means that pairs just a bit less proximate will also be taken into account. Such a weakening of the proximity requirement provides for a wider range of information.

Selection of most important configurations

The final graphs obtained for the six possibilities (zones) in our overall research design (see Figure 1) resulted in the following six patterns which are illustrated in Figures 9a to 9f.

For the purpose of clarity, we isolated the configurations which were

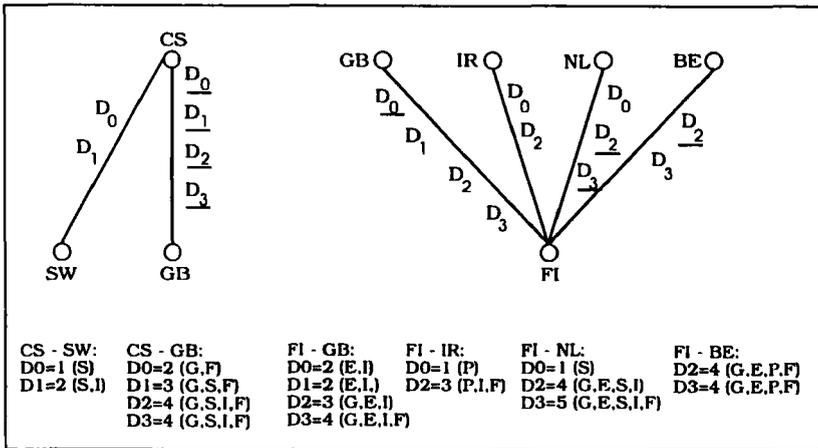


Fig. 9a. MDSO among survivors.

chosen to be studied as a whole. When 'poor' configurations (consisting of an isolated pair) emerged, we decided to enrich the possible comparisons by adding a case with weaker links (symbolised by dotted lines). Greece, for example, was added to the second configuration in Figure 9b and placed in relationship to Spain. In general, we considered multiple comparisons to be more interesting than pairwise comparisons: they determine a more restricted subset of variables and thus allow us to focus on those which might contribute more decisively to the outcome.

At first, we considered the most dissimilar systems designs.

(a) *Survivors* (as demonstrated above). The greatest differences can be found between Great Britain and Finland on the one hand and Great Britain and Czechoslovakia on the other. If we add the weaker links, the configurations highlighted in Figure 9a (a triple comparison of Great Britain and Sweden versus Czechoslovakia on the one hand and a fivefold comparison of Great Britain, Belgium, the Netherlands and Ireland versus Finland on the other) emerge.

(b) *Breakdowns*. Here, the greatest differences are between Germany and the triad Portugal, Romania and Greece on the one hand and between Spain and Estonia on the other. To the latter constellation one can add the case of Greece as contrasted with Spain.

(c) *Fascist breakdowns*. For the fascist breakdowns two major constellations emerged: Germany versus Romania on the one hand and Estonia versus Italy on the other. Weak links between Germany and the pair of Italy and Estonia can be added.

(d) *Authoritarian breakdowns*. Here, Greece and Spain are the most dif-

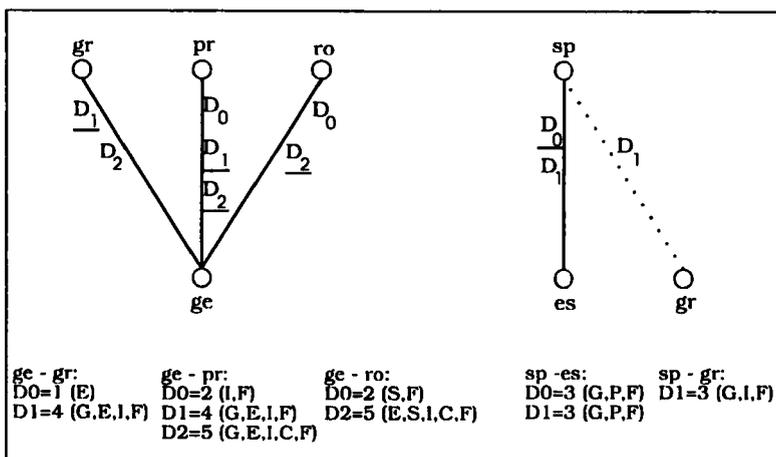


Fig. 9b. MDSO for all breakdowns.

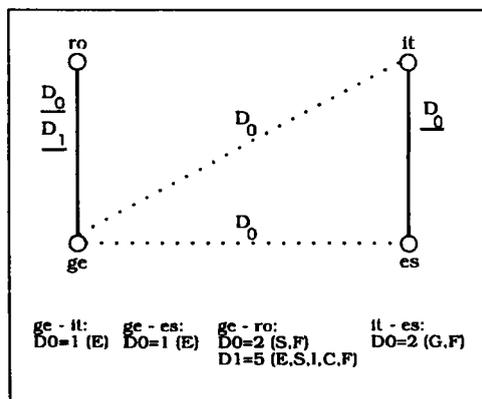


Fig. 9c. MDSO among fascist breakdowns.

ferent cases. Some additional information can be gained by looking at Portugal (weakly linked to Spain) within the context of a triple comparison.

Finally, the most similar systems designs for different outcomes can be listed as follows.

(e) *Survivors versus breakdowns*. Here, three constellations are especially noteworthy. Finland and Estonia are the pair with by far the strongest similarities but with a different outcome; to this we can add Sweden and Ireland on the one hand and Hungary and Germany on the other. Another

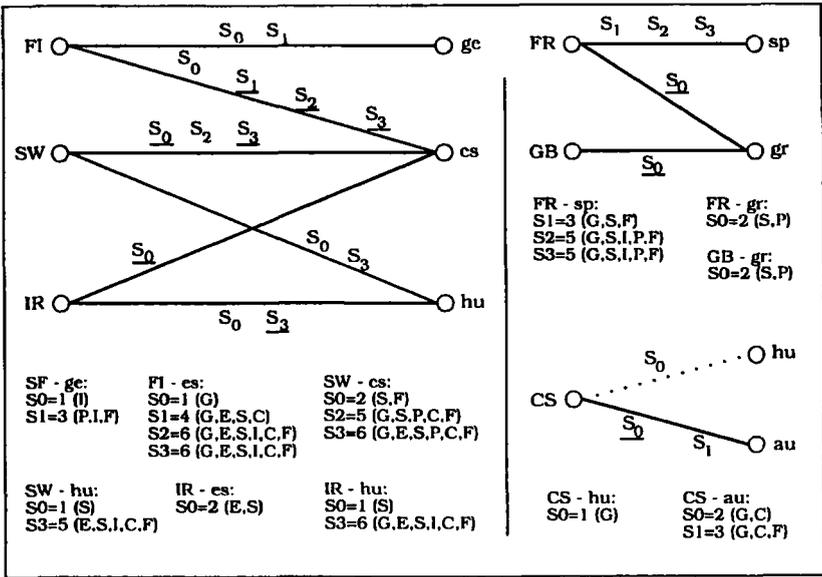


Fig. 9d. MSDO among authoritarian breakdowns.

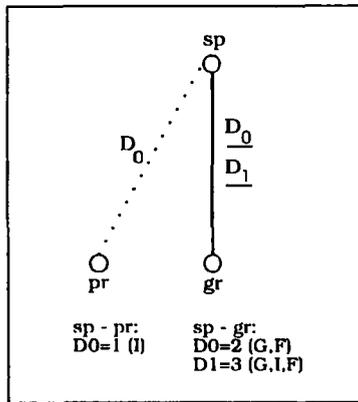


Fig. 9e. MDSO contrasting survivors and breakdowns.

very similar pair is Czechoslovakia and Austria which, together with Hungary, make an interesting triple comparison. France and Spain also have much in common but a different outcome; here, a further comparison with Greece and Great Britain can provide additional information.

(f) *Fascist versus authoritarian breakdowns.* Three interesting constellations can be recognised here: Germany and Italy versus Spain and Portugal;

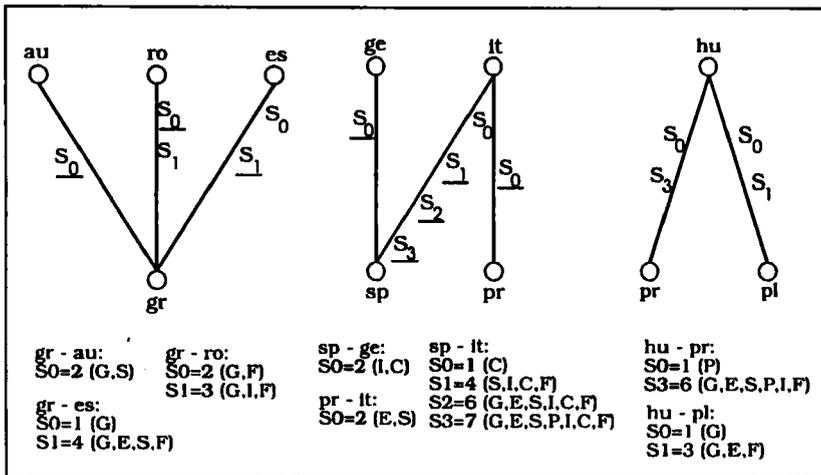


Fig. 9f. MSDO comparing fascist versus authoritarian breakdowns.

Greece versus Austria, Romania and Estonia; and, finally, Hungary versus Poland and Portugal.

All major patterns have thus been identified and can now be discussed in greater detail. As a shortcut to identifying additional relationships, similarities and dissimilarities can also be approximated by a more 'down and dirty' method. This consists of calculating the sum of the number of identical variables divided by the maximum number of variables obtained in each category; the total is then divided by 7 – the total number of categories. In this way, the principle of giving each variable the same weight within each category and similarly of giving each category an equal weight is maintained. The results of this procedure are depicted in Figure 10. As cutting points we can choose, for example >0.5 for the most different and <0.35 for the most similar pairs. The latter threshold is somewhat more demanding because, given the regional and historical focus of our analysis, the overall similarities in our universe of cases are relatively greater than the differences. It must be born in mind, however, that this procedure is much less accurate and reliable than the method demonstrated above.

Example

Among the various constellations considered, Finland and Estonia (MSDO contrasting survivors and breakdowns) constitute a particularly striking example. They are by far the most similar cases, having evidenced the highest number of similar categories across all four levels (S0...S3). When the actual differences are listed across all categories (see Table 3 in the Appen-

	SW	FI	BE	NL	FR	GB	CS	IR	au	ge	it	hu	ro	es	pr	sp	gr
SW																	
FI	0.28																
BE	0.37	0.51															
NL	0.33	0.56	0.28														
FR	0.45	0.52	0.30	0.40													
GB	0.41	0.61	0.48	0.38	0.30												
CS	0.54	0.45	0.40	0.38	0.42	0.52											
IR	0.41	0.44	0.44	0.52	0.42	0.47	0.50										
au	0.42	0.35	0.47	0.50	0.46	0.52	0.37	0.37									
ge	0.49	0.38	0.47	0.40	0.41	0.50	0.39	0.54	0.25								
it	0.54	0.42	0.44	0.55	0.45	0.55	0.60	0.39	0.35	0.33							
hu	0.32	0.34	0.59	0.58	0.56	0.58	0.48	0.29	0.28	0.49	0.37						
ro	0.45	0.37	0.61	0.74	0.65	0.61	0.57	0.42	0.44	0.59	0.38	0.22					
es	0.27	0.22	0.54	0.48	0.52	0.51	0.46	0.41	0.33	0.41	0.48	0.34	0.37				
pr	0.52	0.54	0.63	0.59	0.48	0.52	0.66	0.43	0.46	0.58	0.34	0.33	0.32	0.51			
sp	0.58	0.40	0.46	0.63	0.37	0.54	0.55	0.43	0.37	0.34	0.25	0.46	0.43	0.54	0.36		
gr	0.41	0.39	0.54	0.58	0.48	0.47	0.46	0.37	0.42	0.53	0.40	0.37	0.31	0.27	0.31	0.46	
pl	0.57	0.40	0.55	0.64	0.61	0.74	0.41	0.47	0.38	0.38	0.40	0.38	0.34	0.38	0.44	0.38	0.38

Fig. 10. 'Down and dirty' distance matrix. (For abbreviations of the countries, see Figure 4.)

dix), the remaining variables are highlighted and these indicate where the reasons for the difference in outcome may lie. In the case of Finland and Estonia, 14 variables out of the original 61 were left over as 'different'. Such a table can direct the researcher's attention to those areas in which the most significant differences – those which may explain the different outcome in spite of all similarities – are located. In our example, the greatest discrepancies between the two cases clearly occur within the area of political culture, indicating that one should investigate this aspect and its different components (including their historical roots) more closely.

It is also possible to add a further very similar case – Sweden recommends itself in our example – and to inspect the similarities and dissimilarities within the resulting triangular constellation (see Table 3b in the Appendix). The overall differences between the two survivor cases on the one hand and the breakdown case on the other are thereby reduced to 8 variables. With further additions of very similar cases it may be possible to eliminate more idiosyncrasies and thus to reduce the range of relevant variables even further.

The categories and variables discussed thus far describe the general historical, social structural, political cultural, and institutional background of the cases under investigation. Some of the important 'structural' reasons for the observed outcome (which can be identified by our method) can be considered to lie among these variables. Now, it is possible to introduce a further element into our quasi-experiment: the specific outside stimulus (in our example, the effects of the world economic crisis – see category 8 in Table 3). It can be shown that the effects of both the immediate post-war crisis of 1918/19 and the general economic crisis after 1929 were particularly severe in both of our 'most similar' systems. While the first crisis was overcome by

the existing parliamentary regimes in both Finland and Estonia, the second crisis led to the collapse of parliamentary democracy in the latter case.

At this point the specific actions and reactions of the major political groups and actors become crucially important (see category 9). In the case of Finland, the threat posed by the Lapua movement was countered by the energetic intervention of President Svinhufvud on behalf of the democratic system which led to the formation of a broad-based 'red-green' (socialist-agrarian) coalition (see Karvonen 1988). In Estonia, it was also the elected President who intervened, but this time in what he claimed to be a pre-emptive coup against the similarly strong 'veterans' movement' which led to the establishment of an authoritarian regime (see Varrack, forthcoming).

With the help of the method outlined here, both structure- and actor-related approaches can be brought to bear on any particular constellation of factors and their respective outcome. In Jon Elster's (1984: 13ff.) somewhat different terminology, both the specific 'opportunity set' and the particular choices of relevant actors, including their interdependencies and interactions, can be highlighted and more specifically analysed. It is thus actually possible to conduct a 'quasi-experiment' in which most factors are controlled and crucial differences arising in a critical situation are emphasized.

Conclusions

The preceding presentation has attempted to demonstrate an approximate but, in our opinion, feasible way out of the central dilemma of comparative social research which Przeworski & Teune have formulated as follows: 'Since the number of the relevant determinants of any kind of social behavior is likely to exceed the number of accessible social systems, the objective of a theory free of all proper names will not be easily reached, and thus procedures must be formulated to maximize this objective' (loc.cit.: 31). This was done with the help of an explicit systems model which, for the example chosen, was given a more concrete 'filling' in the form of conceptual and historical considerations concerning the cases and the period under investigation.

It was then shown how the respective similarities and dissimilarities for different possible research designs can be established in a systematic manner while taking into account the difficulties of reducing such complexity within a multi-dimensional space. The example given, the pairwise and triple comparisons of the Estonian, Finnish and Swedish cases, illustrated the reductive power inherent in the process of 'matching' these cases more closely in the manner described. Against this background, the effects of the crisis and the reactions of the major actors could be demonstrated.

It must be noted, however, that such an approach should not be employed mechanically in order to 'distill' out any single causal factor. The cases and the problems investigated remain much too complex for an analysis of this

kind. Rather, the complexity reduction and the similarities and dissimilarities arrived at should be utilised to guide the researcher and focus his/her attention on certain key categories and variables with the help of which a more qualitative and theoretically founded explanation might be attempted. For such purposes, even the approximations and procedures outlined above which make use of Boolean variables may, although in some ways still relatively crude, prove to be sufficient. With the help of this method, then, quantitative and qualitative procedures can be meaningfully combined. Sufficiently operationalised comparisons of this type may not lead to a 'royal road', but they do provide indispensable elements for all kinds of empirically-based theory. As Arthur Stinchcombe put it: 'By the simple act of asserting that two instances are alike . . . a class, a concept, is created, a generalization about it is offered, some evidence is brought forth, and we are embarked on a scientific enterprise' (1978: 123). Thus, in the manner described, it may be possible to generate approximations for a 'medium range' of proposition-testing and theory-building which are more conceptually guided and historically informed.

Such an approach, with appropriate modifications, can be applied to other regions, periods and theoretical problems as well. As Theda Skocpol notes: 'The practice of analytic historical sociology forces a more intimate **dialogue** with historical evidence than either interpretative historical sociology or the application of a model to a historical case' (Skocpol 1984: 385; emphasis in the original). Or, to use Arthur Stinchcombe's metaphor, 'the theory is built as a carpenter builds, adjusting the measurement as he goes along, rather than as an architect builds, drawing first, building later' (Stinchcombe 1978: 122). The results of systematic operationalised comparisons are indispensable building blocks for any such purpose.

Appendix: Definition of variables (Boolean version)
(thresholds indicated in parentheses)

0: no, low, weak, below threshold, etc.
1: yes, high, strong, above threshold, etc.

1. *General background*

POPULATION	population (20 million)
SEAWARD	seaward periphery
COREBELT	core belt
LANDWARD	landward periphery
NONREF	non-reformed or counter-reformation
REFORM	reformation
EARLYSTATE	early state-building (before 1800)
PREWARDEM	consolidated pre-WWI democracy

2. *Socio-economic conditions*

NATPRODCAP	national product/cap. (<200 US\$)
------------	-----------------------------------

URBANIZATI	urbanization (50%; population in towns with more than 20,000 inhabitants)
LITERACY	literacy (75%)
LANDLORD	significant share of landownership by landlords (100 ha)
FAMFARMS	family farmers (50% of agrarian population) (Vanhanen 1984)
AGRPROL	agrarian proletariat (20% of agrarian population)
INDLAB	industrial labour force (30% of labour force)
MIDDLE	old and new middle classes

3. *Social composition*

ETHNLINGCL	ethno-linguistic cleavage(s) (weak/strong)
RELIGCL	religious cleavage(s)
REGIONALCL	regional cleavage(s)
OVERVERZUI	overarching structures ('verzuiling')

4. *Political-cultural traditions*

NATIDENTIT	'national identity'
SUBMILIEUS	sub-milieus (class, religion, regional, or ethnic; at least one of these milieus 'strong')
VIOLACC	acceptance of violence
EGALITAR	egalitarianism
POLINFORM	political information
POLITIPART	political participation
STATISM	statism
PAROCHIAL	parochialism
DEMLEGITIM	democratic legitimacy
CONSENS/CONFL	dominant pattern of conflict resolution (0 conflict/ 1 consensual)
TOLERANCE	social and political tolerance
AUTH/PART	authoritarian/participatory style of decision making
SECULAR	secularization
SUBJECT	subject orientation

5. *Intermediate structures*

INTRURAL	rural interest groups (weak/strong)
INTCOMMERC	small commercial interest groups
INTUNIONS	trade unions (weak/strong)
INTEMPLOYE	employers' organizations (weak/strong)
CLIENTELISM	clientelism
MOVEMENTS 0	social movements of more recent origin (strong/weak)
MILITIAS	armed militias (weak/strong)
PARTFRAG	fragmentation of party system (Rae's F 0.8)
ANTISYSP	share of votes of right and left antisystem parties (15%)
CORPORATISM	corporatism (weak/strong)

6. *Central political system*

POLITTYPE	political system (constitutional monarchy/republic)
ELECTSYSPR	electoral system (majoritarian/proportional)

STABGOVERN	stability of governments
ROLEBUREUA	political role of bureaucracy (weak/strong)
MILITARY 01	political role of military (weak/strong)
SOCIALSEC	social security system (weak/strong)
CIVRIGHT	Freedom House Index of civil rights (0 if score 3 and above)
POLRIGHT	Freedom House Index of political rights (0 if score 2 and above)

7. *External factors*

WW1WINNER	winner of WWI
ECONDEPEND	economic dependence
CULTANGLO	cultural links: Anglo-Saxon (weak/strong)
CULTGERM	cultural links: Germanic
CULTROMAN	cultural links: Romanic
CULTSLAVIC	cultural links: Slavic
IDEOLCATH	ideological links: Catholicism
IDEOLMARX	ideological links: Marxism
COLONIES	colonies

8. *Crisis*

POSTWARCRI	impact of post-war crisis (weak/strong)
WORLDECON	impact of world economic crisis
INTERNREACT	internal reactions (strikes, demonstrations, violence)
ELECTANTI	significant strengthening of right and left wing antisystem parties.

9. *Major interventions and moves*

KEYMDEMCOA	broader democratic coalition
KEYMECOREF	economic reforms
KEYMCHURCH	pro-democratic intervention of church
KEYMMILIT	anti-democratic intervention of military
KEYMAUTHOR	anti-democratic intervention of authoritarian (upper class based) forces
KEYMFASCIS	fascist intervention
USEOFEMERG	use of emergency powers
EXTERNALIN	external influences (weak/strong)

10. *Outcome*

OUTCOME	breakdown/survival of democracy
---------	---------------------------------

Table 1. Boolean data

	SW	FI	BE	NL	FR	GB	CS	IR	AU	GE	IT	HU	RO	ES	PR	SP	GR	PL
1. General Background (G)																		
POPULATIO	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
SEAWARD	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
COREBELT	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
LANDWARD	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1
NONREF	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	1
REFORM	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
EARLYSTATE	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
PREWARDEM	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2. Socio-Economic Conditions (E)																		
NATPRODCAP	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
URBANIZATI	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
LITERACY	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
LANDLORD	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0
FAMFARMS	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
AGRPROL	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1
INDLAB	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
MIDDLE	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
3. Social Composition (S)																		
ETHNLINGCL	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	1
RELIGCL	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
REGIONALCL	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	1
OVERVERZUI	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
4. Political-Cultural Traditions (P)																		
NATIDENTIT	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
SUBMILIEUS	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	1
VIOLACC	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0
EGALITAR	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
POLINFORM	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1
POLITIPART	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
STATISM	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0
PAROCHIAL	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1
DEMLEOITIM	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
CONSENS/CONFL	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
TOLERANCE	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
AUTH/PART	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
SECULAR	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
SUBJECT	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	1
5. Intermediate Structures (I)																		
INTRURAL	0	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	1
INTCOMMERC	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
INTUNIONS	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
INTEMPLOYE	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0
CLIENTELISM	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	1
MOVEMENTS0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	1
MILITIAS	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
PARTFRAG	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
ANTISYSP	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	1
CORPORATISM	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
6. Central Political System (C)																		
POLITTYPE	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1
ELECTSYSPR	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
STABGOVERN	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
ROLEBUREUA	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1
MILITARY01	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	1
SOCIALSEC	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1
CIVRIGHT	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	0
POLRIGHT	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0
7. External Factors (F)																		
WW1WINNER	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
ECONDEPEND	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1
CULTANGLO	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
CULTGERM	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
CULTROMAN	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	1
CULTSLAVIC	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
IDEOLCATH	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	1
IDEOLMARX	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
COLONIES	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0

Countries: SW – Switzerland; FI – Finland; BE – Belgium; NL – The Netherlands; FR – France; GB – Great Britain; CS – Czechoslovakia; IR – Ireland; AU – Austria; GE – Germany; IT – Italy; HU – Hungary; RO – Romania; ES – Estonia; PR – Portugal; SP – Spain; GR – Greece; PL – Poland.

References

- Aarebrot, F. & Bakka, P.H. (1992). Die vergleichende Methode in der Politikwissenschaft, pp. 51–69 in D. Berg-Schlosser & F. Müller-Rommel (eds.), *Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft*. Opladen: Leske & Budrich.
- Almond, G.A. & Verba, S. (1963). *The civic culture: Political attitudes and democracy in five Western nations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Almond, G.A. & Powell, G.B. (1978). *Comparative politics: system, process, and polity*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Berg-Schlosser, D. & Siegler, R. (1989). *Political stability and development*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.
- Berg-Schlosser, D. & Stammen, Th. (1992). *Einführung in die Politikwissenschaft*, 5th ed. München: Beck.
- Berg-Schlosser, D. & De Meur, G. (1994). Conditions of democracy in inter-war Europe: A Boolean test of major hypotheses, *Comparative Politics*.
- Blalock, H.M. (1984). *Basic dilemmas in the social sciences*. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Collier, D. (1993). The comparative method, pp. 105–119 in A.W. Finifter (ed.), *Political science: The state of the discipline II*. Washington, DC: American Political Science Association.
- Deutsch, K.W. (1963). *The nerves of government*. New York: The Free Press.
- Easton, D. (1965). *A systems analysis of political life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Eckstein, H. (1963). A perspective on comparative politics, past and present, pp. 3–32, in H. Eckstein & D.E. Apter (eds.), *Comparative Politics*. New York: The Free Press.
- Elster, J. (1984). *Nuts and bolts for the social sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Flora, P. et al., eds. (1983/1987). *State, economy and society in Western Europe 1815–1975. A data handbook*. 2 vols. London: Macmillan.
- Karvonen, L. (1988). *From white to blue-and-black: Finnish fascism in the inter-war era*. Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica.
- Larsen, S.U., Hagtvet, B. & Myklebust, J.P., eds. (1980). *Who were the fascists?* Bergen: Universitets Forlaget.
- Lijphart, A. (1971). Comparative politics and the comparative method, *American Political Science Review* 65: 682–693.
- Lijphart, A. (1975). The comparable cases strategy in comparative research, *Comparative Political Studies* 157–175.
- Lijphart, A. (1977). *Democracy in plural societies*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Linz, J.J. & Stepan, A. (1978). *The breakdown of democratic regimes*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Linz, J.J. (1975). Totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, pp. 175–411, in F.J. Greenstein & N.W. Polsby (eds.), *Handbook of Political Science*, Vol. 3: *Macropolitical Theory*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- Lipset, S.M. & Rokkan, S. (1967). Introduction, in S.M. Lipset & S. Rokkan (eds.), *Party Systems and Voter Alignments*. New York: The Free Press.
- Macridis, R.C. (1955). *The study of comparative government*. New York: Random House.
- Mayer, L.C. (1989). *Redefining comparative politics*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.
- Mills, J.S. (1843). *A system of logic*. Quoted from the eighth edition 1904. New York.
- Mitchell, B.R. (1981). *European historical statistics 1750–1975*. London: Macmillan.
- Nunnally, J.C. (1978). *Psychometric theory*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Przeworski, A. & Teune, H. (1970). *The logic of comparative social inquiry*. New York: Wiley.
- Przeworski, A. (1987). Methods of cross-national research, 1970–1983, pp. 31–49, in M. Di-erkes, H.N. Weiler & A.B. Antal, *Comparative policy research: Learning from experience*. Aldershot: Gower Publishing Company.
- Ragin, Ch.C. (1981). Comparative sociology and the comparative method, *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 22: 102–120.

- Ragin, Ch.C. (1987). *The comparative method*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Rokkan, S. (1975). Dimensions of state formation and nation-building, pp. 562–600, in Ch. Tilly (ed.), *The formation of national states in Western Europe*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Sigelman, L. & Gadbois, G.H. (1983). Contemporary comparative politics: An inventory and assessment, *Comparative Political Studies* 16: 275–305.
- Skocpol, Th., ed. (1984). *Vision and method in historical sociology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stinchcombe, A.L. (1978). *Theoretical methods in social history*. New York: Academic Press.
- Taylor, Ch.L. & Jodice, D. (1983). *World handbook of political and social indicators*, 3rd ed. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Tilly, Ch. (1984). *Big structures, large processes, huge comparisons*. New York: Russel Sage Foundation.
- Varrak, T. (forthcoming). The Collapse of Democracy in Inter-War Estonia, in D. Berg-Schlosser & J. Mitchell (ed.), *Crisis, compromise, collapse – Conditions of authoritarianism, fascism and democracy in inter-war Europe*, Vol. 1. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wiarda, H.H., ed. (1985). *New directions in comparative politics*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Winer, B.J. (1971). *Statistical principles in experiment design*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Address for correspondence: Dirk Berg-Schlosser, Institut für Politikwissenschaft, Philipps-Universität, D-35032 Marburg, Germany
Phone: 6421-284397 ; Fax: 6421-288913