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Q1(a)

Discuss the main limitations of the comparative method to the study of Political Science.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · PSIR GS 2 · 10 marks · Comparative Politics

Comparative Politics: Nature and major approaches; political economy and political sociology perspectives; limitations of the comparative method.

Core demand of the question

- Discuss the main limitations of the comparative method to the study of Political Science
- Keep the answer within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

Comparison substitutes for experiment, as Lijphart argued.

Mill's designs fail when variables outnumber cases.

Galton's problem and conceptual stretching are standing limits.

Official data and Eurocentric concepts add political distortion.

The method is disciplined inference, not a controlled trial.

Introduction

The comparative method is the main tool of Comparative Politics. It seeks general statements from a small number of States. Its limits are conceptual, statistical, and political.

Body

What the method tries to do

- **John Stuart Mill's method of agreement and difference is the classical template:** hold some factors constant and vary others.
- Arend Lijphart treated comparison as a substitute for experiment when the political scientist cannot randomise regimes.
- Giovanni Sartori insisted that concepts must travel without stretching, or the comparison is only a word.

Main limitations

- **Too many variables and too few cases:** cabinets, culture, class, and colonial history cannot all be controlled in a handful of States.
- **Galton's problem:** States copy constitutions and parties, so cases are not independent experiments.
- **Conceptual stretching:** democracy, federalism, or failed State mean unlike things in India, Belgium, and a post-conflict territory.
- **Selection bias:** studying only wars or only successful democracies distorts causes.
- Data are State products. Official turnout, growth, and rights scores may hide informal power.

- Value-laden concepts and Eurocentric baselines, which dependency writers and Immanuel Wallerstein's world-system work also flag, make "development" a loaded yardstick.
- Language and meaning change the same institution. A vote is not the same act in every political culture.

What still remains

- Most-similar and most-different designs and process tracing reduce error. They do not make Political Science a laboratory.

Flow diagram

Comparative method -> Few cases many variables

Comparative method -> Galton dependence

Comparative method -> Sartori stretching

Few cases many variables -> Limits of inference

Galton dependence -> Limits of inference

Sartori stretching -> Limits of inference

Conclusion

The comparative method is limited by few cases, dependent cases, stretched concepts, biased selection, and political data. It remains necessary. It is not a proof machine.

Facts & figures

Sartori

Warned that concepts that travel too far become stretched and stop explaining.

Lijphart

Treated the comparative method as the case-oriented alternative to statistical and experimental methods.

Galton's problem

Cases are not independent when States borrow laws, parties, or constitutions.

Wallerstein

World-system analysis treats States as units inside a hierarchy, not as matched laboratories.