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Q1(b)

What are the difficulties faced by a political theorist in comparing the States?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · 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

- State the difficulties a political scientist faces when comparing States
- Keep the answer within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

States are unlike in size, history, and capacity, so the unit of comparison is not automatic.

Conceptual stretching, Galton's problem, and **selection bias** are standard difficulties.

Data are political products, and language changes the meaning of institutions.

Interdependence means States are not independent experiments.

Designs such as most-similar cases reduce error; they do not remove it.

Introduction

Comparing States is the core of Comparative Politics, yet States differ in size, history, language, and data. The difficulty is to compare without false identity and without giving up generalisation.

Body

Conceptual and unit problems

- Sartori's **conceptual stretching** appears when one word, such as democracy or federalism, is applied to unlike regimes.
- The State as a unit is not the same object in a small island, a continental federation, and a weak post-conflict territory.
- Galton's problem appears when States are not independent cases because they copy laws, parties, or constitutions from one another.

Method and data

- Small-N comparison cannot control every variable; large-N work often lacks valid indicators for the same idea in every country.
- Official statistics, election results, and survey items are produced by States and may hide repression or informal power.
- Language, legal tradition, and political culture change the meaning of a vote, a court, or a party label.

Politics of comparison

- **Selection bias** appears when only successful or only failed States are studied.
- Levels of analysis mix when a scholar compares a cabinet in one country with a whole region in another.
- Robert Keohane's **complex interdependence** and world-economy hierarchies mean that two States are never isolated laboratories.

How the field still proceeds

- Most-similar and most-different designs, process tracing, and careful concept formation reduce, but do not erase, these difficulties.

Flow diagram

Compare States -> Concept stretching
Compare States -> Data and language
Compare States -> Interdependence of cases
Concept stretching -> Limits of generalisation
Data and language -> Limits of generalisation
Interdependence of cases -> Limits of generalisation

Conclusion

Comparing States is difficult because concepts, data, dependence among cases, and unequal power distort the objects being compared. The political scientist's task is disciplined comparison, not the claim that States are identical units.

Facts & figures

Conceptual stretching

Sartori's term for using one concept on cases so unlike that the word loses meaning.

Galton's problem

Cases are not independent when they borrow institutions or policies from one another.

Small-N / large-N

Few cases allow depth but weak control; many cases allow control but often weak validity of indicators.

Selection bias

Studying only wars, only democracies, or only successes distorts inferred causes.

Complex interdependence

Keohane and Nye's account that States are linked by multiple channels, not only by military rank.

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