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Cross-National Surveys and the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems: When Country/Elections Become Cases

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter examines the development of cross-national survey research in political science and the challenges that it brings. Cross-national surveys have proliferated across the globe and arguably now form one of the most important frontiers in the development of survey research in political science. Cross-national comparison allows researchers to investigate the importance of institutional and cultural contexts that shape public opinion and political behavior. The chapter traces the development of such instruments for the purposes of comparative analysis in political science, in the context of more general developments in polling and survey research. As an example, it focuses on the case of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), an international collaboration active since 1996, examining the development of the project and evaluating issues such as cross-cultural equivalence in questionnaire design, survey mode and response rates, and case selection.

Keywords: cross-national survey, survey research, cross-national comparison, comparative analysis, political science, polling research, questionnaire design, survey mode, response rates, case selection

Introduction

The origins of public opinion polls and election studies have been well covered in a relatively extensive literature (Burdick and Brodbeck 1959; Converse 1987; Herbst 1993). Less attention has been paid, however, to the development of political polling and survey research across national boundaries (for brief accounts see Smith 2010a; Kittilson 2007; Heath, Fisher, and Smith 2005). By this we do not mean the simple expansion of polls and surveys into more and more countries, but rather the construction of polling and survey

instruments specifically designed to be fielded in more than one country for purposes of direct comparison. Here we focus on the development of such instruments for the purposes of comparative analysis in political science, in the context of more general developments in survey and polling research. As an example, we take the case of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), an international collaboration active since 1996.

Cross-national comparison can draw increasing attention to the importance of the institutional and cultural contexts that shape public opinion and political behavior, as well as the underlying variables that may shape and perhaps account for those contextual differences. Since the 1990s such polls and surveys have expanded both in their numbers and their extension, and they arguably now form one of the most important frontiers in the development of survey research in political science.

The CSES stands out because, in cross-national comparative research, countries—and indeed, for political scientists, the elections within them—become cases of equal significance to the individual respondents within each national component. In most cross-national surveys, timing is relatively random, depending on when finance is secured and the demands of fieldwork. Cross-national election surveys, however, are conducted after elections. The election, rather than simply country x at time t , becomes a case. Because of its theoretical focus on institutional differences between countries, the CSES also stands out because it both provides data and explicitly encourages analysis of macro country-level differences and cross-level interactions between micro and macro variables. Finally, its individual-level data are immediately released to the public, at no charge and with no embargo or delay, benefiting CSES collaborators.

The International Proliferation of Surveys and Polls

Before political polls and surveys could become cross-national, it was necessary for them to proliferate. Polling on political issues based on random probability sampling originated in the United States in the 1930s, pioneered by George Gallup and Elmo Roper (Cantril and Strunk 1951; Converse 1987). Political polling began in France in 1939, inspired by Gallup, and in Great Britain in the 1940s, when Gallup launched a subsidiary there, with similar questions being asked in both countries. Survey institutes were set up throughout West Germany during the Allied occupation as part of a strategy to reduce the persisting influence of the Nazi regime on public opinion. By the 1950s political polling had spread

to many other democracies, and polls sponsored by media organizations began to be reported regularly.

Academic election studies followed in the wake of the political pollsters. The United States led the way, and indeed early election studies in the United States provided both the methodological and theoretical inspiration for the extension of those studies elsewhere and the eventual development of cross-national studies. The first academic election studies, known as the “Columbia studies,” can be traced back to the work of Paul Lazarfeld and his colleagues, who conducted what can still be considered a sophisticated survey to examine campaign effects. The findings were published in the *People’s Choice* (Lazarfeld et al. 1948), known for introducing the theory of “the two step flow of communications,” which assumes that public opinion is influenced by elites. While the initial motivation was to examine media effects and opinion change, the data revealed remarkable opinion stability. This led to a second study, which was conducted in Elmira, New York, during the 1948 election, in which was developed the sociological model that was the theoretical focus of *Voting* (Berelson et al. 1954).

The origins of the American National Election Studies (ANES), based at the University of Michigan and also, in recent cycles, at Stanford University, can be traced back to a survey from 1948. The survey, which was not primarily concerned with the election, was designed to examine foreign policy attitudes. Truman’s surprise victory in 1948 is considered to be one of the greatest upsets in American history. Virtually all of the major polling organizations, including Gallup, had predicted that Thomas Dewey, the Republican governor of New York, would easily defeat Truman. Given the unexpected outcome, the decision was taken to interview the same respondents again after the election to gain more knowledge about some of the perplexities of the presidential vote.

The success of the Michigan Survey Research Center in producing a survey estimate that essentially matched the electoral outcome helped to establish the University of Michigan as a center for electoral research (Miller 1994). As a newly trained political scientist and the assistant director of the Michigan Survey Research Center, Warren Miller helped to design the 1952 national study, which was largely based on his PhD dissertation and provided the framework for further studies that would become known as the Michigan Election Studies.¹ He recruited two graduate students to work on the project, Donald Stokes and Philip Converse, who together would represent the core team. The early studies were primarily designed to examine the effects of partisanship, issues, and personalities on voting behavior. The 1952 study surveyed 1,899 respondents and included 293 variables. These data, along with data from the 1956 election, formed the basis for *The American Voter*, a seminal study of voting behavior that provided a theoretical framework that has had a major influence on electoral research not only in the United States, but also abroad (Campbell et al. 1960).

Outside the United States, the first election studies began to appear in the 1950s and 1960s in various European countries, including Britain (1964), France (1958), Germany (1949), Denmark (1959), Norway (1957), Sweden (1956), and the Netherlands (1967). (Website links to most of these long-standing studies are provided in an appendix to this chapter.) They developed as a result of the exchange of various individuals who were part of teams based in the United States or Europe. For example, the first British Election Study (BES) was conducted by David Butler and Donald Stokes in 1964, the latter of whom was a coauthor of *American Voter*. The Michigan school heavily influenced the development of election studies in other countries, which has led to a similarity in both theoretical and methodological features. Germany is said to have been influenced by both the Columbia and Michigan schools, and the funnel of causality approach from the Michigan model can be found in every German election study since the 1960s (Kaase and Klingemann 1994). Other coauthors of *American Voter* were also instrumental in helping to initiate election studies in Europe. For example, Philip Converse collaborated on the earliest election studies in France and is said to have had a hand in the first Norwegian Election Study in 1965. Converse was also the principal investigator of the first Canadian Election Study, also conducted in 1965. Of the coauthors of *American Voter*, Warren Miller was viewed as one of the most active on the European front, having spent lengthy visits in the Scandinavian countries, Britain, the Netherlands, and West Germany (Thomassen 1994). The Swedish election study of 1954 was also heavily influenced by the Columbia studies, closely resembling Lazarfeld's Erie County study of 1940, although later studies were more heavily inspired by the Michigan model (Holmberg 1994).

The Development of Cross-National Polls and Surveys

Polls and election surveys proliferated, and the scene was set for comparative research on political matters using these methods. The first large-scale, cross-national survey was a 1948 *Time* magazine survey on freedom (Roper 1948; Smith 2014), followed by a now little-cited nine-country study, "How Nations See Each Other" (Buchanan and Cantril 1953). But the most influential comparative study based on survey research in political science was *The Civic Culture* (Almond and Verba 1963), which introduced and developed concepts that continue to shape contemporary studies of democracy. Surveys were conducted in five countries: the United States, Britain, West Germany, Mexico, and Italy, in 1959 and 1960. The theme was to investigate the consolidation of democracy and, in particular, the political culture that might sustain it. The case selection was deliberate and well-conceived: the United States and Britain represented stable, long-established

democracies; West Germany and Italy represented postauthoritarian regimes in which democracy was becoming established; and Mexico represented a less-developed country with what we would now describe as a partial democracy or hybrid regime.

With only five country cases, and given the much less powerful statistical resources of the time, the cross-national comparison was qualitative and descriptive, and the data analysis was almost entirely made up of cross-tabulations. Out of a rich mixture of normative theory and psychology, engaging with their data, the researchers developed a typology of political cultures and identified the mixture that they considered would best support democracy. While *The Civic Culture* was subject to much criticism at the time, some of which the authors later conceded was justified (Almond and Verba 1980), the book remains a landmark of research in comparative political science. It was followed up by a study on political participation and equality in seven nations (Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978), and, not long afterward, by a five-nation study of unconventional political participation (Barnes, Kaase, et al. 1979).

However, none of these were election studies, as most of their fieldwork took place between elections. Nor were they institutionalized, repeated, or longitudinal. With the advance of economic and political integration in Europe, however, a source of funding for more continuous comparative research had emerged in the form of the institutions of the European Union. A five-country “Attitudes to Europe” (1962) study paved the way. In the context of the intensification of European economic integration, the European Commission established the Eurobarometer in 1973. The Eurobarometer conducts two surveys per year in each European Union member country, with a target of one thousand interviews per country. The original mission was to observe public attitudes toward the most important current events connected directly or indirectly with the development of the European Union and the unification of Europe (Aldrin 2011).

By the turn of the twenty-first century a number of comparative social science survey projects had been established. Table 1 provides a list, their foundation date, and links to further information.² The first fully global collaboration in international survey research was the World Values Survey (WVS), established in 1981 in tandem with the European Values Survey (World Values Survey 2015). While the initial set of countries tended to come from the developed world, the reach of the WVS has expanded to include countries with a wide range of cultures and stages of development. The WVS follows a theme first investigated in *The Civic Culture*: the extent to which modernization and economic development may be transforming values and cultures around the world, particularly as a result of generational replacement (Inglehart 1997). Research based on these data has produced major contributions to the literature and some challenging and controversial findings on political development and political culture (e.g., Welzel 2013).

Table 1 Major Cross-National Survey Programs, 1973–2015

Eurobarometer	1973	http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm
European Election Study	1979	http://eeshomepage.net/
World Values	1981	http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp
ISSP	1984	http://www.gesis.org/en/issp/issp-home/
CNEP	1990	http://www.cnep.ics.ul.pt/
Latino Barometer	1995	http://www.latinobarometro.org/latContents.jsp
CSES	1996	http://www.cses.org
Afro-Barometer	1999	http://www.afrobarometer.org
Asian Barometer	2000	http://www.asianbarometer.org
AsiaBarometer	2003	https://www.asiabarometer.org/
Pew Global Attitudes	2001	http://www.pewglobal.org/about/
European Social Survey	2002	http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/
Arab Barometer	2005	http://www.arabbarometer.org/
Gallup World Poll	2005	http://www.gallup.com/services/170945/world-poll.aspx

The WVS has mounted seven waves, all covering three-year periods, with roughly two-year gaps between these periods. The WVS established a model that has since been applied in later cross-national collaborations. The program itself maintains a central infrastructure that organizes the formulation of questionnaire content for each wave, collects the data, and makes them available, but the funding of surveys within the respective countries is generally the responsibility of country collaborators, although the

WVS has sometimes provided financial assistance. This means that country coverage is uneven, some countries having continuous representation, while others have participated on a more episodic basis. This poses some problems that are shared with some other cross-national survey projects, discussed below.

The next international social survey to be established was the International Social Survey Programme, in 1984. Its mission is to run annual surveys on “topics important for the social sciences” (ISSP 2015). Each year has a theme, and the themes are repeated after a period of intervening years. For example, there have been three studies of national identity, begun in 1995 and repeated in 2001 and 2013. The ISSP began with four member countries and had expanded to forty-eight countries by 2013. Its central infrastructure is quite limited, and it again relies on country-collaborator funding for its surveys (Skjak 2010; Haller, Jowell, and Smith 2012). Unlike the WVS, which usually shapes the entire questionnaire to be fielded in each country, the ISSP develops a module of questions that are included within a broader national social survey.

In 1995 the Eurobarometer was joined by the Latino-Barometer, covering countries in Latin America; in 2000 by the Asian Barometer; and in 2005 by the Arab Barometer, forming a loose network, the Global Barometer program (Global Barometer Surveys 2015). Another AsiaBarometer program, based in Japan, began in 2003. In 2002 there was a further European initiative, the European Social Survey (ESS). While the Eurobarometer’s key themes tend to have a policy-relevant focus in accord with the concerns of its funder, the European Commission, the ESS is driven primarily by academic researchers. The ESS has a strong methodological focus, one of its aims being “to achieve and spread higher standards of rigor in cross-national research in the social sciences, including for example, questionnaire design and pre-testing, sampling, data collection, reduction of bias and the reliability of questions” (ESS 2015). Relatively speaking, the ESS has generous funding and therefore has considerable resources to put into the pursuit of methodological excellence (Fitzgerald and Jowell 2010). Within a regional framework, in addition, like other similarly focused programs, compared to global studies it faces fewer problems of cross-cultural variation.

The extent of comparative polling by commercial polling organizations or outside the universities has been extensive, given that many are cross-national themselves, either directly linked or affiliated.³ But these data tend to remain unreleased at the individual level, appearing in reports or confidential documents released to clients commissioning such research. A major exception is the Pew Global Attitudes Survey, which since 2002 has conducted annual surveys around the world “on a broad array of subjects ranging from people’s assessments of their own lives to their views about the current state of the world and important issues of the day.” In 2014 Pew reported having collected data from sixty-three countries, although in any one year the number has varied from only fifteen to

just under fifty (Pew Research Center 2014). The most recent entry to the field and currently the most comprehensive has been the Gallup World Poll. It collects data from over 160 countries, addressing many questions of interest to political science, such as confidence in institutions and levels of human development. Its data are available on a subscription basis, although some may be more easily accessible to academics (Gallup 2015; Kittilson 2007, 880; Tortora, Srinivasan, and Esipova 2010).

These various programs of comparative survey research have much in common, both in their strengths and weaknesses. In terms of methodology, there are various well-understood challenges (Harkness 2008; Smith 2010b, 2014, 285–286; Stegmüller 2011). One particularly relevant to political science is that of the timing of fieldwork. Because interest in politics waxes and wanes over the election cycle, and recall error increases over time, any variables associated with elections or even political participation in general may be affected.

With fieldwork timed post-election, defining elections as cases allows researchers to more rigorously address new questions about how context influences behavior. One early within-country example is Markus (1988), who merged eight presidential election studies to examine how national economic conditions influence voting behavior. An early exercise in systematically comparing findings from national election studies was Franklin (1992). The similarity of many of these election studies in theory and methodology, not to mention the frequent use of similar or at least comparable instruments, offered opportunities that were not generally foreseen for comparative research (Thomassen 1994). This replication of surveys across countries had begun to make it possible to investigate how institutional and cultural contexts affect electoral behavior.

Among political scientists principally interested in elections, attempts to take advantage of the common heritage of election studies and to exploit the opportunities for comparative research began in the late 1980s. The first attempt to conduct cross-national election research was that of the Comparative National Elections Project (CNEP). Its theme has been “the processes of intermediation through which citizens receive information about policies, parties, candidates, and politics in general during the course of election campaigns, thus reviving the long neglected research perspective of the ‘Columbia School’ established by Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues in the 1940s and 1950s.” As of 2015 it included twenty-five election studies collected in twenty countries and had led to a significant list of publications (CNEP 2015). However, its focus tends to remain largely on individual-level factors, with less attention paid to differences between countries and elections themselves.

Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES)

Background and Development

At the same time, a wider group of electoral researchers was forming the International Committee for Research into Elections and Representative Democracy (ICORE), which served as the precursor to the CSES. Like the ISSP, the CSES relies on national teams of researchers to both fund and administer a common ten- to fifteen-minute module of questions.⁴ This instrument is put into the field after a general election, along with additional demographic, administrative, and other behavioral and attitudinal variables that are usually part of a wider election study. The CSES began in 1996 and has grown into a project that, early in 2015, included data from 146 elections in over fifty countries and was accessible to all wishing to use it.⁵ In combination with the increased number of democratic countries during this period, the CSES has been instrumental in broadening the number of countries running election studies. The CSES was developed to address three questions: how social, political, and economic institutional contexts shape belief and behaviors, affecting the nature and quality of democratic choice; the nature of political and social cleavages and alignments; and how citizens evaluate democratic institutions and practices (Grosse and Appleton 2009).

To date, four modules have been in the field, each focusing on a different theme. Table 2 provides a brief summary. Much more detail is of course available on the CSES website.⁶ Modules are current for five years. In most countries, the CSES module is run in a single election during that period, but some CSES collaborators have repeated the same module in more than one election. While much of the CSES module does change from one time to the next, a few core questions are becoming increasingly valuable for time series analysis. Because many collaborators regard their commitment to the CSES as including the module once only, in jurisdictions where more than one election is held over the period of the module, there are sometimes gaps in the time series. Other collaborators run the same module twice in those circumstances, a practice that should be encouraged.

Table 2 CSES Modules and Themes, 1996–2016

Module 1: 1996-2001	Module 2: 2002-2006	Module 3: 2006-2011	Module 4: 2011-2016
System performance: constitutional and institutional effects on democratic performance; the social underpinnings of party systems; attitudes to parties, political institutions, and the democratic process.	Accountability and representation: do elections make governments accountable, are citizens' views represented? Political participation and turnout; institutions and contexts in new democracies.	Political choices, contestation and inclusiveness: policy questions about electoral system design. In established democracies, how satisfaction varies with choices, how and why new parties are formed. In new democracies: Electoral system design and political stability.	Distributional politics and social protection; campaign mobilization, new and old forms; a new approach to political knowledge.

As noted, like the WVS and ISSP, the CSES is based on a national collaboration model, rather than on a centralized one (Curtice 2007). Consequently, it is difficult to impose rigorous methodological consistency across the various country studies. Many country studies are established election studies, with their own instruments, time series, and standards to maintain. Inclusion in the CSES requires a random probability national sample that can, however, include a properly administered quota sample with substitution. Some contributed studies have been rejected for failing to meet those standards. Quality control is a high priority. Collaborators are required to submit a detailed design report that is available to users (data from which are deployed in the analysis below). Central coordination is split between the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center and the Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences (GESIS), where the data sets are cleaned and tested (Howell and Jusko 2009; Howell 2010). Users are provided with extensive documentation, which includes any information that might be relevant for the inclusion or possible exclusion of a country/election study on methodological grounds.

Case Selection

Of course the inclusion of country/election cases is far from a random process, dependent as it is on the willingness of country-based researchers to participate and to secure funding for an election study in the first place. While most countries included maintain a continuous presence, some drop in and out as funding or collaborator availability permits. The nonrandom nature of country case selection in the CSES is the first challenge we address here, one that is common to most, if not quite all, other similar research programs.

Bormann and Golder (2013) collected data on all legislative and presidential elections up to 2011 that had been held in democratic regimes. This forms a baseline from which to first construct a population of elections from which the CSES data are drawn during the same period (thus excluding more recent country/elections).⁷ From its inception in 1996 through 2011, the CSES module was fielded in 116 democratic elections in forty-six countries.⁸ In thirty-one countries the CSES module had been run at least twice, and in nine countries the CSES module had been run in at least four elections. This, however, is only a small fraction of the overall number of elections that were held in democratic regimes during that period. While the CSES includes one of the largest cross-national surveys to date, the CSES sample consists of just 16% of all general parliamentary/legislative and presidential elections held between 1996 and 2011.

As Table 3 shows, the coverage of the CSES is best in the West, which includes Western Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, and in the democratic elections held in the Middle East and Northern Africa. There was no election under a democratic regime as defined by Borman and Golder that was covered in elections in sub-Saharan Africa ($n = 96$) and none in the Pacific Islands ($n = 57$), and Latin America and Asia are also underrepresented.

Table 3 Representation of Elections by Region in the CSES (1996–2011)

	Elections	Percent
1. Sub-Saharan Africa	96	0
2. Asia	81	15
3. West (incl. US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand)	165	35
4. Eastern Europe/post-Soviet states	130	18
5. Pacific Islands/Oceania	57	0
6. Middle East/North Africa	9	44
7. Latin America/Caribbean	180	11
Total	718	16

Sources: CSES, Modules 1–3; IDEA 2015.

Perhaps more important, the CSES appears to be not very representative of the selection of electoral systems, which was at least initially a primary focus for the project (see below). Elections held in majoritarian systems account for only 7% of the sample, although majoritarian elections formed 23% of all possible cases (sourced from IDEA 2015). Less than 10% of the CSES cases include presidential elections, compared to 31% of the potential cases. To further examine this, we constructed a simple model of case selection in which the dependent variable represents whether a survey was conducted after the election that included the CSES module. The results are reported in Table 4. Some 30% of the variance in case selection can be explained by the electoral system, democratic development, and the size of the country's population. Established democracies are much more likely to be included than newer democracies, and larger countries rather than smaller countries, while presidential elections and majoritarian systems are underrepresented.⁹ There appear to be no significant differences in the selection of mixed electoral systems compared to proportional representation systems (the omitted category).

Table 4 CSES Case Selection (Logit Coefficients)

	Coef	S.E.
Majoritarian system	-1.82**	0.41
Mixed electoral system	-0.22	0.33
Established democracy	1.61**	0.24
Presidential election	-1.10**	0.30
Log of population in millions	0.45**	0.08
Constant	-2.50**	0.25
Nagelkerke R^2	0.30	
N	675	

**p < .01; *p < .05.

Sources: CSES, Modules 1-3; IDEA 2015.

Another possible selection of cases might be confined to countries that are members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), significant both for the size of their populations and their economies, and often the reference point for much comparative research because of the higher quality and range of data available from them. From this standpoint, up to mid-2015 every single country currently in the OECD has featured in the CSES, except for Luxembourg. However, some countries have contributed data for every single election since 1996 (e.g., Poland, Switzerland, and France for all presidential elections), while others have contributed but one (Italy, Estonia, Slovakia). Overall, the OECD country response rate between 1996 and 2015 was just under 60%, estimated after the second release of Module 4 in March 2015. However, that should climb significantly when Module 4 data submission and release are complete.

It is important not to make too much of apparent “bias” in the CSES. So long as there is sufficient variation in the macro-level variables of interest across the country cases, inferences can be drawn from properly specified models. However, researchers ought to pay more attention to case selection issues. As noted previously, small countries—

particularly very small countries—are less likely to appear in the CSES, and indeed in cross-national survey samples in general. Inferences about OECD countries are unlikely to be greatly affected by the absence of Luxembourg, for example (although it is one of the world's richest countries). However, about half of the world's countries and territories have populations of fewer than five million people, and a quarter have fewer than half a million. Such countries tend to collect and report less information about themselves. Much cross-national comparative research is likely to have a large country bias.¹⁰ But of course the majority of the world's population is found in the larger countries. Yet cross-national comparative researchers do not weight their data by population size, because virtually all inferences would then be driven by the largest countries. The whole point of cross-national comparative research is to use countries as cases, on the assumption that their particular characteristics are variables in question and therefore they should be weighted equally. On this assumption, cross-national researchers should probably weight their country-cases equally. Most do not, although the CSES does provide an appropriate weight to do so. In multivariate analysis, of course, weights matter less: most of the relevant parameters will be captured by the control variables and by other features of model specification.

The Multilevel Data Structure

If case selection continues to be a challenge, at least advances in statistical modeling techniques give analysts more scope to address some of the problems and some assurance of greater rigor in comparative analysis. As in similar international studies, new strategies of analysis have come to the fore in recent years. Since *The Civic Culture*, methodological standards have risen, and the capacities of statistical techniques and computer hardware and software have increased to match them. No longer is it sufficient to simply compare frequencies and cross-tabulations between countries.

The CSES has led the way in combining individual-level data and country-level data, opening up new possibilities, but at the cost of increasing complexity. When pooling cross-national comparative survey data, one must also take account of their multiple levels, and in particular the nesting of individuals within countries. As noted previously, analysis is also possible over time, adding a further dimension. Thus models are needed to provide for random intercepts for each country (or country-year/election) and, quite frequently, random slopes, on the assumption that the effects of the variables in question will not be the same across time and space (Gelman and Hill 2007, 235–342).

While multilevel models can address these questions, with a data set the size of the CSES, in more complex forms with more than two levels and random slopes that may not always converge, all this can take time to run and can require more advanced

methodological skills to interpret. There may be systematic, culturally derived differences between countries in terms of response patterns, some leaning to the extremes, others closer to the middle, which sophisticated methods can be used to address (Stegmueller 2011). When analyzing smaller subsets of units, standard errors may become biased using standard frequentist methods, requiring a Bayesian approach. Indeed, given the nonrandom selection of country cases, an argument can be made that Bayesian approaches should be used more generally (Western and Jackman 1994; Stegmueller 2013). Other techniques of multilevel analysis have also been proposed and implemented, such as the “two-step” method (Jusko and Shively 2005), but most published work using the CSES, at least, tends to employ multilevel, random-intercept models.

Question Design: Translation, Institutions, and Context

Like other international surveys, the CSES must address other significant problems: the translation of its instruments into numerous languages, and indeed, the broader concern that even with the most accurate translation, some questions and concepts will simply not mean the same thing in a different context. The questionnaire is first produced in English, but within the framework of the CSES Planning Committee, representation within which has always included members with a broad representation of native languages. Difficulties of translation therefore enter the question design process very early. Collaborators who administer the questionnaire in languages other than English produce their own translations, recording details of the translation process, including notes about questions and concepts that are difficult to translate. Following current standards of cross-national survey design, these are recorded in the design report for each country submitted by collaborators and made available to users in the documentation associated with the CSES data sets (Survey Research Center 2010).

One of the more contentious debates within the CSES has been on how best to estimate respondents’ political knowledge. In an ideal world, one would design a battery of questions to be asked in all countries that would allow us to compare levels of political knowledge cross-nationally. Yet institutional and cultural differences are such that the search for such a common battery is akin to that for the Holy Grail of Christian mythology. Nonetheless, some do argue for a more consistent design of political knowledge questions across countries (e.g., Milner 2002). In Modules 1–3, the objective was simply to estimate the distribution of political knowledge within each country, on a similar scale. Collaborators were asked to choose three questions, to one of which two-thirds of respondents were expected to provide the correct answer, to the second of which half were expected to do so, and to the third, only one-third. This was intended to produce a scale with a similar mean and standard deviation in each country that would provide an estimate of relative levels of knowledge within each country. However, the

substantive content of the questions was left entirely to collaborators, increasing uncertainty about their value and robustness. As it turned out, further standardization of the scale within countries was usually necessary, as not all collaborators could accurately calibrate their questions to the requested distribution. Analysis of the questions over the first two modules found significant measurement problems (Elff 2009).

For Module 4, four standard questions were developed: which party had come in second in the election in question; the name of the minister of finance or equivalent; the most recent unemployment figure; and the name of the Secretary-General of the United Nations (CSES 2011, 18–20). The first three questions, in particular, were intended to capture the extent to which respondents could grasp who was, or who was not, in government, and the extent to which they might be aware of that government's economic performance. The latter question in particular was calibrated to the broader substantive content of Module 4. Because of different institutional frameworks and other contextual differences, different levels of knowledge of these questions are expected across countries. Assuming sufficient variation, standardized scales will be produced for each country. Country variation in these responses to the same instruments could be of interest in certain areas of research, addressing the question of institutional and other contextual differences that might account for such variations, as well as their implications.

Another vexed matter of question design debated within the CSES has been the use of the standard left-right scale as a basis for estimating the dimensionality of the party system and where individuals situate themselves within it. The question, on an eleven-point scale from 0 ("Most Left") to 10 ("Most Right"), asks respondents to place both parties and themselves on that scale. Some country collaborators argue that Left-Right means little or nothing in their countries, and they do have the option of including an alternative dimension that they think is more meaningful.

A more fundamental and related problem is the limited space available for the module. In this case, the CSES faces a greater problem than other cross-national surveys that can command most, if not all, of the questionnaire space for their comparative questions. Because the CSES is usually incorporated within a broader election study questionnaire, there is much greater competition for space. This sometimes means that collaborators will drop a question or questions from the module or demographics. It also means that multiple instruments to better estimate an underlying variable or dimension are usually excluded; one question alone must suffice. Innovative advances in survey research, such as vignettes or experiments, have yet to be implemented. The strategy has been to keep instruments and the batteries within them as simple, short, and straightforward as possible.

Fieldwork, Mode, and Response Rates

As noted, a feature common in cross-national surveys is the need for country collaborators to obtain their own funding. The limited availability of funding can often limit the options available for fieldwork. The optimal method recommended by the CSES Planning Committee is face-to-face (FTF) interviews with a sample of respondents selected from a national probability design. These surveys have long been considered to be the “gold standard” because of their ability to achieve longer interviews with high response rates. Respondents are much more likely to cooperate if they are approached in person, as opposed to receiving a self-completion questionnaire in the mail or a call on the telephone or email message. This is confirmed in Table 5, which shows that within the CSES, FTF surveys have an average response rate of 57%, which is higher than the average response rate achieved through other methods.

Table 5 Election Study Designs and Response Rates in the CSES

Mode	Response Rate	n
Face to face	57.2	75
Telephone	45.1	21
Mail	45.4	8
Module 1 (1996–2001)	60.0	23
Module 2 (2001–2006)	52.1	31
Module 3 (2006–2011)	53.5	42
Module 4 (2011–2016)	45.4	8
No incentive	54.6	76
Token	48.1	7
Payment (i.e., lottery)	52.7	16

Source: Compiled from Design Reports, Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (2011).

The FTF surveys are very costly and are reaching a point that may soon be unsustainable in some countries. For example, the 2012 American National Election Study (ANES) that contains CSES Module 4 was estimated to cost \$4.2 million to complete two thousand FTF interviews of seventy minutes in length (both pre and post), or \$2,100 per respondent. The Economic and Social Research Council’s (ESRC) call for the 2015 British Election Study (BES) was for a maximum of £1.25 million, most of which will be devoted to the core FTF probability sample, which traditionally consists of about three thousand completed FTF interviews (Karp and Luhiste 2016).

As Table 5 shows, FTF interviews are the dominant mode in the majority of studies within the CSES, if only because the costs of such interviews remain lower in many countries than in Britain or the United States. However, 20% of the election studies were conducted by telephone. Telephone surveys tend to suffer from declining response rates

as well as diminished coverage of households by landlines and the increased use of mobile phones. Estimates from the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) conducted in the second half of 2013 indicate that two in every five households (39.1%) lived in households with only wireless telephones (Blumberg and Luke 2014). The high level of mobile-only households in the United States is not unique. Estimates from Europe indicate that the number of households with only mobile phones increased dramatically in the 2000s. As of 2009, three-quarters of the Finish population had mobile-only households. The rate of mobile-only coverage varies substantially across Europe. By 2009 a majority in Slovakia, Latvia, Lithuania, and the Czech Republic had only mobile phones, although Europeans in other democracies were not so quick to abandon their landlines (Mohorko, de Leeuw, and Hox 2013). These differences pose new challenges for survey researchers that are not just restricted to reaching respondents but include interviewing them in different contexts (Lynn and Kaminska 2012).

Variation in survey practices and standards across countries raises the question of whether observed differences are real (Heath, Fisher, and Smith 2005). Countries with low responses rates are likely to underrepresent potential participants, for example those with lower levels of education, leading to a biased sample that may not be corrected by weights or applying controls.¹¹ There is also considerable inconsistency in the collaborators' calculations and reporting of response rates themselves, of which the CSES is well aware.

As Table 5 shows, response rates vary not only across mode but also across time. However, on the surface at least the response rates for telephone interviews from other countries in the CSES do not appear to be substantially lower than for FTF surveys. Australia and New Zealand rely almost entirely on the "mail-back" method, mailing questionnaires to respondents randomly sampled from the electoral register, thus excluding those who are not registered from their samples (although these numbers are usually less than 10%).¹² Both countries have robust mail delivery systems. While mail surveys have the advantage of low costs, they may not be viable where postal systems are less reliable.

As a result of these and other differences, response rates differ between country studies and for the most part are declining over time within countries, a feature common to most survey research and polling. This is also evident in Table 5. Yet the differences in response rates across modes are not as high as one might have expected.¹³

Research shows that providing respondents with different mode options can in some circumstances reduce response rates (Griffin, Fisher, and Morgan 2001), but in others enhance them (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian 2009). Many researchers seek to encourage respondents to use the Internet to reduce survey costs. They may present

their sample with a first option of web only, but later offer mail-back as an option for nonrespondents. This tends to reduce response rates, as web surveys tend to have low response rates (Manfreda et al. 2008; Shinn, Baker, and Briers 2007). When given unconstrained choice between mail-back and web interface from the beginning, by far the majority of respondents choose hard copy (Bensky, Link, and Shuttles 2010). Offering an additional web option can encourage procrastination and thus nonresponse in some cases (Medway and Fulton 2012; Millar and Dillman 2011). However, simultaneous mode offering can enhance response rates if one—the mail-back—is seen as the primary mode and the other—the web—is offered less prominently (Newsome et al. 2013). As this is the case with the Australian and New Zealand election studies, our expectation is that their web option as a supplementary add-on to mail-back should marginally enhance their response rates.

Debate continues within the CSES about whether or not to accept data that are not based on a random probability sample. In 2005 and 2010 the BES included the CSES module on a nonprobability Internet-based sample; both times it was rejected by the CSES Planning Committee. While it may be the case that online nonprobability samples drawn from repeatedly contacted panels can match patterns of party choice and much of what lies behind such choices (Sanders et al. 2007), the objectives of the CSES range far beyond simple party choice. In an online panel, perceptions of the accountability and representativeness of government and political leaders, satisfaction with democracy, and age-related patterns of turnout may be subject to more bias than random probability samples using traditional methods, even when their response rates are low (Karp and Luhiste 2016).

Conclusions

The development of comparative cross-national survey research programs in social and political science has transformed the field of comparative politics. One can now talk of “comparative political behavior” as a significant subfield of political science, in a way that was not so credible twenty years ago. Over this period, a paucity of data has turned into, if anything, an oversupply, albeit with significant deficits in coverage. Yet significant challenges remain. Inattention to nonrandom country case selection issues, problems of comparability of question design, variations in country sampling, and questionnaire modes and response rates expose researchers to risks of making incorrect inferences. But these challenges can be addressed. The CSES provides detailed reports that can be used to identify potential problems. Researchers should subject their cases to scrutiny and as a

last resort even discard those about which doubts may be raised that might affect findings about the particular research question being addressed.

We must also acknowledge that declining response rates, increasing survey costs, and declining social science research budgets all combine to make the future of cross-national survey research programs uncertain, despite recent progress.¹⁴ Nonetheless, election study participation in the CSES increased through Modules 1 to 3 and is likely do so again in Module 4. The number of publications using the CSES has also been on an upward track. Increasingly sophisticated methods are being developed to compensate for some of the methodological challenges posed by the national collaboration model.

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Appendix: Selected List of National Election Study Websites

The National Election Study (United States): <http://www.electionstudies.org/>

The British Election Study: <http://www.britishelectionstudy.com/>

The Swedish National Election Studies: <http://valforskning.pol.gu.se/english>

The French National Election Study: <http://www.cevipof.fr/fr/eef2017/fnes/>

The Danish National Election Study: <http://www.valgprojektet.dk/default.asp>

The Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies: <http://www.dpes.nl/en/>

German Federal Election Studies: <http://www.gesis.org/en/elections-home/german-federal-elections/>

Notes:

⁽¹⁾ In 1977 the Michigan Election Studies was changed to the National Election Studies, where control over content and design was vested in a board of overseers appointed by the principal investigator in consultation with the National Science Foundation (Miller 1994). In 2005 the National Election Studies became known as the American National Election Studies.

⁽²⁾ A more comprehensive list including several regional studies can be found in Kittilson (2007, 867–887).

⁽³⁾ Aside from the two commercial firms noted here, Gfk NOP, Harris Interactive, IPSOS, Synovote/Agis, and TNS have also been active in cross-national polling (Smith 2010a).

⁽⁴⁾ We thank Dave Howell for his very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter, but of course take full responsibility ourselves for what follows.

⁽⁵⁾ Some of the cases include elections that are not sovereign nations, such as Hong Kong.

⁽⁶⁾ Major studies have emerged and are emerging from the CSES: Norris (2004); Klingemann (2009); Dalton and Anderson (2010); Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister (2011); Thomassen (2014); Vowles and Xezonakis (2016). A short analysis of studies published up until 2009 can be found in Vowles (2009).

(⁷) Borman and Golder (2013) define democratic regimes as requiring the election of a chief executive and legislature, more than one party competing in elections, and an alternation in power under identical rules. For this reason, South Africa does not qualify, because it has not experienced an alternation in power since the end of apartheid. South Africa ran the CSES third module in 2009, the only African country so far to participate.

(⁸) Studies in which the CSES has been run under regimes that were not full democracies are not included in this figure.

(⁹) However, India, the world's largest democracy, is yet to be included in the CSES, despite efforts by successive planning committees to encourage its participation.

(¹⁰) One reason for the underrepresentation of majoritarian countries in the CSES is that many of these are small Caribbean or Pacific Island democracies that were former British colonies.

(¹¹) The CSES asks its collaborators to provide a comparison of the educational profile of their sample with that of the population and provides the opportunity for collaborators to include demographic and political weights to correct for biases related to sampling error and nonresponse bias.

(¹²) Australia and New Zealand also offered respondents the choice of completing the survey online, but surprisingly few took up this option.

(¹³) Paying respondents per interview or providing token incentives do not apparently contribute to higher response rates in the CSES, but given the broad thrust of the survey methodology literature indicating that these methods are effective, this is almost certainly a result of endogeneity. Payments and incentives are likely applied in cases where nonresponse problems are strongest, not where response rates are still relatively high.

(¹⁴) For example, at the CSES plenary meeting in Berlin in 2014 that elected the planning committee for Module 5, reports from many election study teams repeated a similar theme that funding remained uncertain and continuation in the field could not be guaranteed.

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