

## **Capacity, Coalitions, and Cooptation: the promises and pitfalls of descriptive research**

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How are methods of descriptive inference applied in comparative political research, and what are some of the common pitfalls? In this short memo, I argue that there are two issues at play: 1) distinguishing between descriptions of form or function; 2. Assessing power relations between political actors. I center on three concepts in comparative political research – capacity, coalition, and cooptation – to discuss each of these challenges of descriptive inference, and the implications for leveraging descriptive research for causal inference. While I concur with Gerring's (2012) diagnosis that descriptive analysis is important in its own right, many challenges remain for the field of descriptive research and its applications for causal inquiry.

### **Capacity: describing and inferring state power**

Understanding the capacity of states and how they emerged historically are at the center of classical comparative work. However, as Berwick and Christia (2018) note in their review of the literature, the efforts at *conceptualizing* state capacity as form have not entirely aligned with the efforts of *measuring* state capacity as function.

Why is this the case? Understanding *state forms*, or in other words the ways in which state power is exercised vis-à-vis society, requires thick descriptions inferred from the rationales and incentives of the state at the heart of the state's institutional apparatus, and the popular reception of state authority on the ground (Mann 1984; Scott 1998). On the other hand, measuring dimensions of *state function* requires a way to standardize description of endowments and outcomes that manifest state capacity in 'resource' terms (Thies 2005). Herein lies the first challenge of descriptive research: deciding what to describe in the first place, or in other words

determining what we consider to be the fundamental and necessary definition of the concept that is to be described. For example, taxation is a common data source that allows for the assessment of state capacity as function (Besley and Persson 2009), but depictions of the structure of the taxation system itself can also help to reveal important formulations of state power (Zhang 2021).

Further complicating this challenge is the confusion over empirical data sources, and their usefulness in lending themselves to descriptions of form and function. For example, data on road infrastructure has been used to operationalize for a state's extension of territorial power (form) (Herbst 2000), but also a way to explain the preconditions for the performance outcome of state (function) (Acemoglu et al. 2015). Data on military expenditure, representing a state's potential ability to wield coercive capacity, can also be conflated with dimensions of bureaucratic infrastructural capacity that render efforts of disentangling these different forms less fruitful (Hendrix 2010; Fortin-Rittenberger 2014; discussion from Hanson & Sigman 2021).

If capacity is defined as the ability to produce, perform, and deploy, then a research program on state capacity necessitates descriptions for both the forms of state power production, and the functions that embody state power performance. In practice, the emphasis on causal inference in the state capacity literature have skewed towards descriptive data on state functions and measurements of state performance, though there has been increased efforts at depicting the different components that constitute the form of state power (Hanson & Sigman 2021; Brambor et al 2020). One potential solution to this imbalance perhaps lies in research that draws data from the quintessential embodiment of state capacity, in both its form and function: the composition of state or state-employed agents themselves, and relatedly their performance of state functions (Soifer 2015; Strauss 2020; Ong 2022).

### **Coalition and Cooptation: describing and inferring power relations**

Coalition and cooptation are also concepts in comparative politics that heavily rests upon descriptive foundations. Yet as I demonstrate in this section, both concepts suffer from the methodological problem of describing and inferring power relations based on empirical data.

Coalition as a concept is heavily utilized in the literature on electoral and party politics (Golder 2006), selectorate theory in political regimes (Bueno de Mesquita et al 2005), and democratization theory (Boix 2003), but operationalized quite differently depending on political contexts. A political coalition in a parliamentary democracy can be easily observed by parties and politicians formally operating under a coalitional government or other intuitional arenas of political participation; a coalition in an autocracy, on the other hand, is difficult to observe given the often-inconsequential nature of representative institutions in these regimes (Gallagher and Hanson 2015). Using metrics such as the presence of an elective legislature alone to account for coalition size can lead to unjustifiable observations (ibid, 375), without taking into account which actors actually take part in these networked coalitions.

The move towards a thicker description of actors can also run into a fundamental problem of discerning power relations within political coalitions. Within the democratization literature, different forms of political coalitions (e.g. class, ethnic, elite) have been found to play significant roles in mobilizing or advocating for political liberalization (Rueschemeyer et al 1992; Chandra 2005; Arriola 2013), usually through the depiction of actions by civil society or professional organizational groups. Yet in comparative contexts where multiple coalitions exist, how does one identify the actual influence of these coalitions relative to each other, particularly considering the fact that many cases of democratization in the third wave were initiated by authoritarian elites themselves (Haggard and Kaufmann 2016; Slater and Wong 2022)? Perhaps the more accessible methodological approach is to describe coalitional effects through the perspective of pro-democracy voters, but it may be equally hard to distinguish which exact coalitional affiliation opposition voters see themselves as being affiliated with (Yang 2007).

Compared with coalitions, the concept of cooptation is particularly wedded to an understanding of imbalanced power relations, although the common usage of the term still suffer from incomplete descriptive inference. The term, which first was popularized in sociology (Selznick 1953), has found immense traction especially among scholars interested in explaining the emergence of political coalitions (Gandhi and Przeworski 2006; Reuter and Robinson 2015; Arriola et al 2021). Yet whereas Selznick's original definition of cooptation as power-laden

relationship that reflects “a tension between formal authority and social power” (Selznick 1947, 15), contemporary usage of the term has been used to simply refer to the act of incorporating or buying off potential regime rivals through quid-pro-quo exchanges, without addressing the particularistic power relations between the coopter and the coopted (See critique in Josua 2016). A causal explanation of cooptation, therefore, needs to be founded on a relational understanding of cooptation as an institutional exchange, not merely as an institutional form – similar to the problem found in the concept of coalitions.

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