

COMPARATIVE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION*

Jörgen Westerståhl
University of Gothenburg

The contents of this paper can be summarized easily. In the first part of the paper I present some reasons for orientating comparative studies in political science towards political communication, suggesting as a tool systematic content analysis and as material for comparison parliamentary records, election programmes, etc. In the second half I give some examples of possible research projects in this field.

It is a commonplace that comparative methods are of major importance in political science. As Gunnar Heckscher says: (Heckscher 1957) "the methodology of comparison is not a self-contained separate subject, but part of the general method of Political Science". It is in fact possible to regard most traditional generalizations about a political system and its functions – whether it is a question of the whole political system or a part of it – as a result of some kind of comparison between one or several types of unique political behaviour.

"The study of comparative politics has been primarily concerned thus far with the study of the formal institutions of governments – particularly the governments of Western Europe" (Research in Comparative Politics, Seminar Report, The American Political Science Review, September, 1953). About this there seems to be general agreement. It simply means that the political institutions are the units of the analysis which have received most attention. The problems associated with comparative studies appear clearly in this connection. We leave aside the epistemological questions which are discussed in this context and which concern the possibility of comparative studies in general, as every special type of political behaviour and every institution is unique, comparisons presuppose some kind of abstraction. The obvious and practical problem with regard to institutional comparisons is whether it is possible to compare a certain institution, removed from the political system as a whole, or whether all comparisons are unsatisfactory as long as the total system, of which the institution is only a part, is not included. If the latter were the case, is comparison at all possible when dealing with questions of special interest for political science? In practice one is – however – concerned with limited comparisons. It appears easier to pursue comparative studies the more limited the comparisons are, e. g. it is easier to compare

* This paper was first presented at an IPSA seminar in Bombay 1964. What is said about the comparative method in general may not be very sophisticated. Nevertheless, I still have a firm belief in the research strategy suggested.

COMPARATIVE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION*

Jörgen Westerståhl
University of Gothenburg

The contents of this paper can be summarized easily. In the first part of the paper I present some reasons for orientating comparative studies in political science towards political communication, suggesting as a tool systematic content analysis and as material for comparison parliamentary records, election programmes, etc. In the second half I give some examples of possible research projects in this field.

It is a commonplace that comparative methods are of major importance in political science. As Gunnar Heckscher says: (Heckscher 1957) "the methodology of comparison is not a self-contained separate subject, but part of the general method of Political Science". It is in fact possible to regard most traditional generalizations about a political system and its functions – whether it is a question of the whole political system or a part of it – as a result of some kind of comparison between one or several types of unique political behaviour.

"The study of comparative politics has been primarily concerned thus far with the study of the formal institutions of governments – particularly the governments of Western Europe" (Research in Comparative Politics, Seminar Report, The American Political Science Review, September, 1953). About this there seems to be general agreement. It simply means that the political institutions are the units of the analysis which have received most attention. The problems associated with comparative studies appear clearly in this connection. We leave aside the epistemological questions which are discussed in this context and which concern the possibility of comparative studies in general, as every special type of political behaviour and every institution is unique, comparisons presuppose some kind of abstraction. The obvious and practical problem with regard to institutional comparisons is whether it is possible to compare a certain institution, removed from the political system as a whole, or whether all comparisons are unsatisfactory as long as the total system, of which the institution is only a part, is not included. If the latter were the case, is comparison at all possible when dealing with questions of special interest for political science? In practice one is – however – concerned with limited comparisons. It appears easier to pursue comparative studies the more limited the comparisons are, e. g. it is easier to compare

* This paper was first presented at an IPSA seminar in Bombay 1964. What is said about the comparative method in general may not be very sophisticated. Nevertheless, I still have a firm belief in the research strategy suggested.

the committee system in two different parliaments than to compare the parliamentary systems. On the other hand the more limited the comparisons are, the less interesting they are.

In this situation one ought to try out a new strategy for comparative research by choosing, from the beginning, a single aspect, which would as far as possible cover the whole political field. Political communication seems to be an aspect of that kind. All that occurs at the political level must be communicated in some form. Therefore all types of political behaviour are more or less mirrored in the communication contents. As political communication seems to fulfil the same general task in different countries, such studies would be located within the framework of a single general function or process. It would also make it considerably easier to put the particular studies in their appropriate places in the system. Thus the problem of limited comparisons does not seem to be as precarious as it is in institutional research.

The fact that all that occurs at the political level has a counterpart in the communication process does not, however, imply that every kind of political behaviour can most profitably be studied from the political communication angle.

Political communication occurs in many forms, it can be between two persons only, it can take the form of a discussion in a closed circle, it can be in the shape of an address to a mass meeting, it can be a newspaper article, it can be a statute, etc. and it can also take place before, during or after a political decision. If attempting a systematic, comparative study of the communication process, it seems practical to limit this study to communication which is official and which is addressed to the general public.

Such a limitation means that certain important elements are put aside. Generally speaking the information about the background data of a political decision will be insufficient or completely missing. When a political party, a newspaper or a person participates in communication directed to the public, the viewpoint is already determined and it may not be necessary to give any information on how the initiative was taken, how the viewpoint was formed, what special considerations were taken into account or what groups were involved. This is an important limitation. Likewise, in the part of the official communication directed to a general audience, questions regarding the application of a decision are only sporadically discussed.

Another limitation may be caused by the taboos that exist in all political systems preventing discussions, in any case the public ones. It may often be the case that the participants in the debate might not themselves be conscious of these taboos. Further, it must be taken into account that in all debates there are certain things that seem too obvious to be taken up for discussion.

On the other hand, by limiting ourselves to the public discussion we do not therefore get a less 'true' picture of the political happenings than if we had proceeded from closed debates and discussions only – which is, however, quite a common illusion. One reason for this belief could be the observation that things are often said in closed debate which do not appear in the public discussion, and that less 'fine' motives are cited there. In reality we can assume that the speaker or writer is giving due consideration to his audience both in public and private communications,

choosing such arguments and points of view as are likely to influence them in the desired direction. When addressing a single person or a limited circle of like-minded people there is much greater freedom, in the sense that you do not have to consider many differing groups, there is a greater possibility of adapting the message to the audience. It is quite common for example in closed debates to employ so-called tactical arguments, which involve arguing that if certain actions are not taken then the other parties will use this against you or certain groups of supporters will be dissatisfied. This way of arguing might in the first instance be aimed at influencing people who have a different view of the matter than oneself; the reference to 'tactics' means here to ask your party friends to change their point of view without saying that they are wrong. When addressing a mass audience more specialised arguments must be omitted and you must rest content with appealing to the common valuations and common experiences of your audience. Such argumentation thus lacks the finer nuances, is smoother and more polished but not therefore less true.

It is, furthermore, good strategy to choose easily available *material* and material which is familiar to all students of political science. It seems natural to pay attention to parliamentary records in the first place. Should you wish to study how representatives from different countries discuss the same question then corresponding documents may be chosen from international organisations such as U.N. A quantitatively very limited but extremely important material consists of general party programmes and election manifestos. Another obvious source of material is mass media, firstly the daily press but also of course radio and television.

It seems fairly obvious that material of this kind is in many respects more ample from countries which have a political system that allows an organized opposition and that in principle recognizes all kinds of public discussion. Several of the research projects mentioned below are, however, applicable to all types of states with a developed political system.

The *method* applicable seems invariably to be systematic content analysis as described in the classical work by Bernard Berelson: *Content Analysis in Communication Research*, 1952. (Cf. also Alexander L. George: *Propaganda Analysis*, 1959 and Ithiel de Sola Pool: *Trends in Content Analysis*, 1959). As a technical method systematic content analysis is considered rather laborious. In certain cases, however, it is possible to get through a very large material quickly and completely. Should you wish to study the reactions of the world press upon the death of President Kennedy to see possible influences on the picture of the U.S.A. for instance, then experience shows that it is necessary only to work with ten to twenty categories or variables, each of which need only take a few values. Such an analysis can be carried out quickly and should far surpass any form of unsystematic compilation of press commentaries as regards both reliability and validity. If small and easily identifiable units of observation can be used content analysis is easy to work with. In most cases, however, more penetrating analyses are both time- and labour-consuming. Furthermore it should be noticed that by working with this method the possibility of formulating prior hypotheses or suitable content categories before studying the material are usually very limited. The normal procedure is instead to start with very general ideas

about how to carry out an investigation and that the necessary definitions can only be determined during the course of the work.

Among possible items of investigation problems common to the whole of the political communication system should come first as they could illuminate the political system at large. It is characteristic of political communication that it contains both evaluations and factual statements. Great political ideologies as well as the simplest contribution to a political debate contain a fusion of both these elements and in just this *combination of the evaluations and the factual statements* lies the core of the construction of the political message. The person who can work out a generally valid classification system in this field will make a lasting contribution to political research. In this connection it seems a matter of course to test the concepts worked out by Lasswell and Kaplan, firstly perhaps demands, expectations and perspectives.

The ratio between evaluations and factual statements in the political communication is in itself of great interest. It is remarkable how different political texts can vary in this respect. It would be highly desirable to be able to create a standard for the *cognitive element* in the communication or what might be called the "information density". It would perhaps be possible to try to classify the factual statements with respect to their testability – the pure evaluations or demands do not enter here. You could for instance differentiate such statements that in practice or in theory at any rate allow immediate testing (you would probably need a special class for statements that can seemingly be tested by anyone), such statements where only the future can show their degree of veracity and such statements where it is in principle impossible to determine the degree of veracity.

As regards the *occurrence of evaluations* I would personally set up the hypothesis that the debates on important political matters, presupposing the political system continues, develop from containing more to containing fewer elements of evaluative judgment. It is in any case a likely possibility when observing the debate which has been carried on in the last hundred years, on the Labour question or social welfare questions, for example. The development seems to have progressed from a strictly moralizing to a more technical debate. Similarly you get the impression that the debate on foreign policy to-day still lies on the more primitive moralizing plane. There is possibly a connection between the stability of the regime in question and the amount of evaluative elements in the debate.

A question which lends itself to a study on a comparative basis is the question of the *legitimation* of political decisions. To what extent are decisions legitimated by reference to common high principles (e.g. justice), to the interests of the nation or the people, or to the interests of certain special groups, etc. A classification of how politics are legitimated in different countries and within different lines of thought in the same country ought to give information of great interest about the political system of the country in question.

The study of the *system of group references* ought to be worthwhile. What types of groups are referred to? Is it a grouping of opposites (e.g. employers and employees) or groups of women and children for instance, where no real opposite grouping appears?

Another problem which is noteworthy in this connection is how the '*party image*' is built up.

A reoccurring question in most of these last-mentioned investigations concerns the degree of *conformity* in the political communications from different parties or groups. To what extent the basic evaluations are the same could be investigated, as well as to what extent the form of attention is concentrated in the same directions, etc.

A simple measure of what politics are about is obtained by a *classification of matters* discussed. The distribution of different kinds of questions can here be compared for instance with the distribution of monies in the state budget on equivalent matters, and the deviations could be thought of as an objective measure of what matters are politically current, in which fields a surplus of propaganda is devoted, etc.

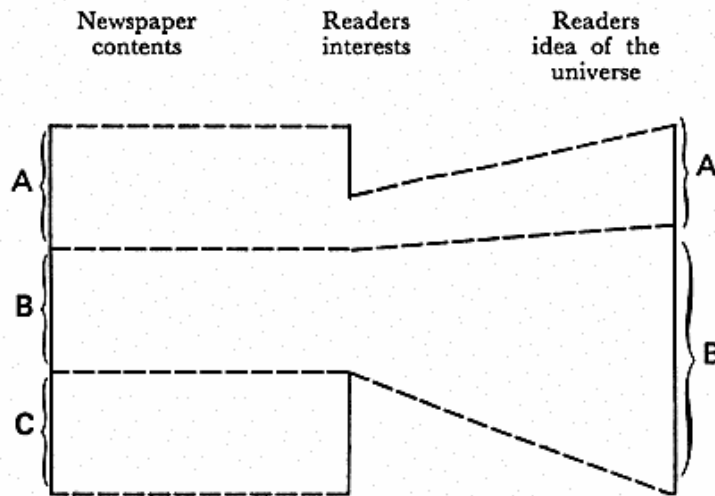
Other measures of the *intensity* in a political campaign can be thought of. As regards party politics such a simple measure as the mention of party names in the political leaders of the newspapers can be quite a good guide. The starting point here is that a debate between different parties, a recommendation of the suggestions of one's own party or a critique of those of others, cannot normally be carried out without mentioning party names and that individual stylistic differences are evened out in a large sample.

When studying the '*style*' and tradition of political debate of different countries the records of the U.N.O. are of great interest. It seems strategically correct to start with this material if you want to obtain a quick overall picture of the differences occurring.

Sometimes the *time dimension* of the political communication can be worth special attention. It can be observed to what extent the debate refers back to what has already happened or is directed towards the future.

Communication material can also be used for the *study of elites*. By investigating the occurrence of individual names in an election campaign as mirrored in the press, what political persons are mentioned and how often, you can get an idea of the relations between local and central political leaders, the composition and size of the top elite, etc. (In an investigation at a Swedish election, for example, it was found that about half of the individual names in the leaders of the newspapers concerned seven people.)

Finally it can be mentioned that a *classification of the total contents of mass media* could in certain cases be used as a measure of the relative importance of the political sector. In countries where literacy is high and there is a lively competition not only between different newspapers but also between newspapers and magazines, books, radio, T.V., etc., the newspapers could be used to give a picture of how the people regard the world around them. Under these conditions the newspapers try to systematically supply the readers' interests in the widest sense of the word and they often have greater opportunities than other media to do so. Furthermore, the press influences the readers' picture of the world around them not least by the way material of different kinds are presented in size, position and heading. If, as in the



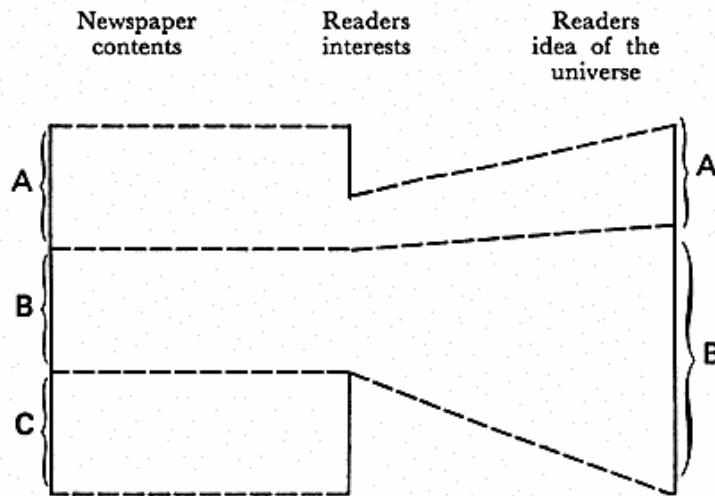
A, B and C represent different kinds of newspaper contents. The reader is in this case interested in $\frac{1}{3}$ of A, all of B and nothing of C. His idea of the universe will then consist of A and B in the above proportions.

diagram above, you combine a classification of the contents of the papers together with the results of interviews concerning the readers' interests in the newspaper contents, you can get a rough picture of the readers' idea of the universe and can use it among other things to determine the role that politics play in this.

The above is only a small and arbitrary selection of possible research projects in the field of comparative political communication. The aim of investigations of this kind is the same as that in other comparative studies. The description of the political system in one's own country can be made more relevant as you get distance and perspective into wellknown and familiar conditions. Comparisons could also be the basis for making partial or general political theories.

References:

Heckscher, Gunnar: *The Study of Comparative Politics*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London 1957.
 Berelson, Bernhard: *Content Analysis in Communication Research*, The Free Press, Glencoe, Ill., 1952.
 George, Alexander: *Propaganda Analysis*, Row Peterson & Co., Evanston, Illinois 1959.
 Pool, Ithiel de Sola: *Trends in Content Analysis*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana 1959.
 Lasswell & Kaplan: *Power and Society*, New York, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950.



A, B and C represent different kinds of newspaper contents. The reader is in this case interested in $\frac{1}{3}$ of A, all of B and nothing of C. His idea of the universe will then consist of A and B in the above proportions.

diagram above, you combine a classification of the contents of the papers together with the results of interviews concerning the readers' interests in the newspaper contents, you can get a rough picture of the readers' idea of the universe and can use it among other things to determine the role that politics play in this.

The above is only a small and arbitrary selection of possible research projects in the field of comparative political communication. The aim of investigations of this kind is the same as that in other comparative studies. The description of the political system in one's own country can be made more relevant as you get distance and perspective into wellknown and familiar conditions. Comparisons could also be the basis for making partial or general political theories.

References:

Heckscher, Gunnar: *The Study of Comparative Politics*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London 1957.
 Berelson, Bernhard: *Content Analysis in Communication Research*, The Free Press, Glencoe, Ill., 1952.
 George, Alexander: *Propaganda Analysis*, Row Peterson & Co., Evanston, Illinois 1959.
 Pool, Ithiel de Sola: *Trends in Content Analysis*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana 1959.
 Lasswell & Kaplan: *Power and Society*, New York, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950.