Overcoming the Crisis of Research Design:
Rethinking Comparison in the Field

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In recent years, political science has seen a welcome increase in guidance on conducting field research. Within efforts to elaborate the ins and outs of fieldwork, scholars recognize the need for adaptability given the messiness and uncertainty of the field research enterprise. Indeed, contributions to the literature on fieldwork frequently discuss the importance of "flexibility" and the prospect of having to "retool" in the field. The ability to adjust and innovate on the ground is both a product of necessity and the logic of social science inquiry itself. After all, field researchers frequently find that their plans are derailed by missing or inaccessible data, deteriorating political conditions, or other unforeseen changes. Inductive discoveries that come through immersion can also invite new questions or shift the focus of data collection and case selection entirely. While existing disciplinary guidance for "retooling" in the field remains useful, its implicit adherence to the standards of controlled comparison has generated unrealistic prescriptions for scholars who lack the funding or access to go different places or abandon predetermined empirical strategies for brand new ones. In the paper, I propose that rethinking the tenets of comparison—what it means to compare, what kinds of things are fit for comparison, and what comparison is good for—can provide a fruitful framework for confronting the fieldwork-induced "crisis of research design" (LaPorte 2014). I posit three strategies for confronting the crisis of research design: 1) rethinking what constitutes a "case"; 2) focusing on the comparison of processes, practices, and/or meanings, rather than outcomes; and 3) rethinking what variation looks like in a research project. By leveraging unconventional comparisons, political scientists facing today's extraordinary constraints on field research can make the most of their empirical discoveries while opening new avenues of comparative inquiry.

In recent years, political science has seen a welcome increase in guidance on conducting field research. Several edited volumes and symposia serve as touchstones for those embarking on fieldwork (Kapiszewski et al. 2015; Krause and Szekly 2020; Ortbals and Rincker 2009; Hsueh et al. 2014; Lieberman et al. 2004), while other articles and research initiatives have unpacked more focused topics, like the ethical, psychological, and physical dimensions of field research in conflict-affected areas (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018; Loyle and Simoni 2017; Parkinson 2021). Importantly, these conversations have extended into the realm of graduate training, where a dedicated module at the Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research (IQMR) and qualitative methods and research design courses train a new generation of scholars (see Emmons and Moravscik 2019).

Within efforts to elaborate the ins and outs of fieldwork, seasoned veterans recognize the need for adaptability given the messiness and uncertainty of the field research enterprise. Contributions to the literature on fieldwork frequently discuss the importance of "flexibility" and the prospect of having to "retool" or "iterate" in the field. Adjusting and innovating on the ground is both a product of necessity and the logic of social science inquiry itself. After all, field researchers frequently find that their plans are derailed by missing or inaccessible data, deteriorating political conditions, or other unforeseen changes. Inductive discoveries that come through immersion can also invite new questions or shift the focus of data collection and case selection entirely.

Whether driven by logistical challenges or new insights, field researchers often confront what Jody LaPorte (2014: 163) calls a "crisis of research design": "when fieldwork questions the appropriateness of the research question, dependent variable, or case selection mechanism." Certain aspects of a project may make it more prone to an eventual crisis of research design. For

example, with lesser-known topics or in "understudied" settings, there is a greater tendency to import theories and concepts from other contexts—a practice also more likely to generate inappropriate assumptions, hypotheses, and empirical strategies (164). But the complexity and capriciousness of contemporary politics also renders most field-based research in our discipline vulnerable to these kinds of challenges and dilemmas (Kapiszewski et al. 2022: 11).

While acknowledging the breakdown of previously held research strategies as quite normal, scholarly interventions on fieldwork have provided less guidance for what to do when a crisis of research design strikes (for an important exception, see the recent contribution by Kapiszewski et al. 2022). Most of the remedies presume that scholars have the time and resources to adjust or reinvent their projects by choosing new cases or reorienting data collection strategies. These options, however, are increasingly hindered by the more limited funding environment, particularly for long stints in the field. In addition, for graduate students in the middle of dissertation research or early-career scholars collecting data for their first book project, monumental challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic may have already induced a crisis of research design because of field site shutdowns or bans on international travel.

Amid this reality, how can field researchers cope with partially implemented data collection plans to still generate meaningful theoretical and empirical insights? What should scholars do when certain research settings, often framed as "cases," become inaccessible, upending their case selection rationale and research design more generally?

This paper proposes that rethinking the tenets of comparison—what it means to compare, what kinds of things are fit for comparison, and what comparison is good for—can provide a fruitful framework for confronting the fieldwork-induced crisis of research design. While existing disciplinary guidance for "retooling" during fieldwork remains useful, its implicit

adherence to the standards of controlled comparison has generated unrealistic prescriptions for scholars who lack the funding or access to go different places or abandon pre-determined empirical strategies for brand new ones. Following recent work on rethinking comparison in political science (Simmons et al. 2018; Simmons and Smith 2021), I posit three strategies for confronting the crisis of research design: 1) rethinking what constitutes a "case"; 2) focusing on the comparison of processes, practices, and/or meanings, rather than outcomes; and 3) reimagining what variation looks like in a research project. By thinking creatively about how to leverage unconventional comparisons, political scientists facing today's extraordinary constraints on field research can make the most of their empirical discoveries while opening new avenues of comparative inquiry.

In bridging the literatures on rethinking comparison and field research in political science, this paper makes two key contributions. First, it advances existing conversations about "flexibility" and "iteration" on the ground to meet the current realities of field-based research, especially for graduate students and early-career scholars in the age of COVID-19. In so doing, it makes explicit something rarely stated aloud due to orthodox methodological norms in our discipline: that given the strictures on time, funding, and travel, the need to "retool" one's research strategy is much more often a need to "salvage" what one has. This paper not only encourages scholars to acknowledge and embrace the process of "salvaging," but further specifies alternative logics of comparison to ground and frame "salvaged" research designs. Second, and relatedly, this paper contributes practical guidance for how scholars might rethink comparison, offering concrete examples from the author's own dissertation project, as well as the work of other scholars in the field. By demonstrating how comparative frameworks were rethought in diverse contexts, this paper supplies current and future field researchers with clear

and actionable strategies for overcoming the crisis of research design amid the challenges of fieldwork today.

Controlled Comparison, Field Research, and the Crisis of Research Design

Field research refers to "acquiring information, using any set of appropriate data collection techniques, for qualitative, quantitative, or experimental analysis through embedded research" (Irgil et al. 2021: 1500). Inherent in this definition is a recognition of methodological pluralism. While we often conflate fieldwork with the collection of qualitative data and the use of qualitative methods (1499), it is, in fact, both compatible with and necessary for a variety of research techniques. Scholars examining political phenomena drawing on positivist or interpretivist epistemologies, utilizing inductive or deductive logics, and focusing on locations in the Global North and the Global South alike rely on embedding themselves in specific contexts to collect empirical material and answer the questions at the heart of their studies.

Yet even this pluralist understanding masks a predominant logic that underlies the design of much field-based research: the logic of controlled comparison. Indeed, controlled comparison, premised on the deliberate selection of cases to leverage certain "convergences" or "divergences" to advance a causal claim, is among the most enduring and widely utilized approaches to social scientific inquiry (Slater and Ziblatt 2013). In the tradition of Mill's methods of agreement and disagreement, proponents of controlled comparison contend that it is not only useful for establishing internal validity, but that "once the researcher has identified the relevant variation of outcomes as well as the 'scope conditions' for testing a theory, she or he can proceed with a case-selection strategy that aims at representative variation," and thus generate external validity (1313). Though many scholars are skeptical of the generalizability of findings

derived from small-*n* controlled comparison (Seawright 2021; Geddes 1990; George and Bennett 2005; Collier et al. 2004; Saylor 2020), there is much more agreement on the methodology's payoffs for theory-generation, exploration, and drawing out causal complexity (Eckstein 2009; Gerring 2004; Seawright and Gerring 2008; Htun and Jensenius 2021).

Despite the limitations, the basic tenets of controlled comparison provide a ready blueprint for scholars designing field-based studies. Because field research requires meticulous planning and the deliberate selection of where to go, choosing cases—whether countries or other subnational units of analysis—based on their degree of convergence or divergence on the explanatory and/or outcome variables of interest serves as reasonable justification for why researchers opt for their field sites. Even when scholars have not fully fleshed out their case selection at the "meso-level" (subnational regions, time periods, sectors, etc.) or the "micro-level" (households, individuals, documents, etc.), those embarking on fieldwork are counseled to at least preliminarily think through "what [they will] need to measure, see, or do, in order to select cases that will offer inferential leverage on the question at hand" (Kapiszewski et al. 2015: 88). Small-*n* comparative designs that control for theoretically-informed explanatory variables or that leverage apparent similarities or differences in an outcome are often seen as shorthand for qualitative inference (for some critiques of this idea, see Saylor 2020; Seawright 2021). In short, controlled comparison lends itself nicely to field-based research designs because it provides clear direction for how scholars should select their cases, and thus the field sites in which they should immerse themselves.

The primacy of controlled comparison is not only present in the initial design of field-based studies; it is also, if implicitly, at the center of scholarly prescriptions for adapting projects on the ground to overcome the crisis of research design. Despite the recognition that seemingly

well-structured comparisons often collapse in the field, guidance on retooling such research designs often privileges the logic of control. For example, in her essay on "Confronting the Crisis of Research Design," LaPorte (2014: 166) suggests that revising one's case selection may be an important step in retooling in the field. Her example of doing so, however, involved recognizing that her three country cases—Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Belarus—did not provide the variation upon which she had initially designed the project. Instead, she redesigns the project as a controlled comparison between Georgia and a new country case, Ukraine. Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read point to a similar strategy of adjusting one's case selection. In their example, a researcher analyzing education in post-conflict Bosnia and Croatia reworks their subnational sampling strategy due to significant differences in population demographics; however, their subsequent adjustments are still driven by the logic control (Kapiszewski et al. 2015: 352).

Even those who advocate reconceptualizing the outcome of interest to confront the crisis of research design do so to preserve controlled comparison. For example, Akasemi Newsome's (2014: 410) reflection on her own dissertation research on how European labor unions respond to immigration discusses her choice to narrow her outcome of interest "to locate more equivalent types of data via interviews with informants and observational and archival research." Recognizing that her initial selection of unions was not the most appropriate for the research questions at hand, Newsome turned from food manufacturing and elder care to metal manufacturing/autos and public hospitals in her original country contexts (Denmark, Germany, and the UK) to enhance the level of control within her study (411). While existing guidance for retooling in the field thus proposes a variety of strategies—reconceptualizing the outcome(s) of interest, adjusting the sampling frame, and incorporating new cases—it most often adheres to the tenets of controlled comparison, implicitly or explicitly.

But strictly preserving the logic of controlled comparison while adjusting during fieldwork overlooks a host of challenges—challenges disproportionately experienced by graduate students and early-career researchers. Sometimes it is only deep into fieldwork that a researcher realizes they have miscoded the values of the independent and/or dependent variables represented by a particular case, upending the divergences and convergences driving their original case selection rationale. In fact, "researchers may not know what is representative of a population when selecting cases," as Collier and co-authors note (Collier et al. 2004: 88; see also, Saylor 2020: 992; Parkinson 2021: 158; Kapiszewski et al. 2022: 10-1). In low-information settings, this problem may be even more acute and not reveal itself until the data collection process is well underway.

At a more fundamental level, researchers may have misjudged what constitutes a unit fit for comparison in the first place. For example, Sarah Parkinson's fieldwork on militant groups within Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon initially took for granted the idea that "camps" were suitable units to compare, only to find that that the different "factions' organizational structures themselves varied geographically," thus calling into question the utility of treating camps as cases (Parkinson 2021: 159).

The difficulties of "retooling" while preserving the logic of control extend beyond the conceptual and methodological and into the realm of the practical as well. Even when the cases initially selected for fieldwork do reflect the convergences and divergences that the researcher anticipated, conflict, instability, natural disasters, and other sudden events can cut off access to people, places, and information at a moment's notice. These unanticipated developments and difficulties can also present new ethical dilemmas that change the calculus of risks and benefits for our interlocutors in the field (Knott 2019). Moreover, in crisis zones, research participants'

interactions with other international actors like security forces, NGOs, and journalists may affect the quality of the data collected (Parkinson 2021), encouraging scholars to rethink their case selection strategy after numerous sunk costs have already accrued.

Amid today's challenging environment for field researchers, overcoming the crisis of research design by selecting new cases to structure a different controlled comparison is more onerous than ever. Funding within the social sciences, particularly sociology and political science, dipped significantly in the 2000s and has never recovered from the 2008-09 economic downturn, which hammered higher education more generally (see Agarwala and Teitelbaum 2010). Following the economic turmoil inflicted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has already squandered valuable time in the field for many, it is possible that these trends will only deepen. Moreover, at times, targeted attacks against political science funding by national government agencies in the United States and Canada (Plazek and Steinberg 2013) have further reduced opportunities for research support. Recently, such efforts have narrowed the scope of the questions and topics that funders are willing to support, placing additional undue constraints on scholarly inquiry in the field (Moustafa 2022).

Even for those who obtain resources to carry out field research, reduced funding amounts often mean that researchers must shorten their time in the field. This not only hinders the "soaking and poking" necessary to achieve deep contextual knowledge, but also poses an obstacle to recognizing the onset of a "crisis of research design" and adjusting to find new "convergences" and "divergences" around which to structure one's study. For graduate students, the challenge of acquiring sufficient funding to support dissertation fieldwork is even more significant. As Irgil, Kreft, Lee, Willis, and Zvogbo note (2021: 1501-2), "unlike their predecessors, many graduate students today have a significant amount of debt and little savings

[…] Not only is in-person fieldwork costly, but researchers may also have to forgo working while they are in the field, making long stretches in the field infeasible for some."

Other structural barriers include funding agency restrictions that preclude the kind of case selection reshuffling often prescribed by guides on retooling in the field. Winning a grant is merely the first step in obtaining funding for fieldwork; following the acceptance of a proposal, funding agencies frequently require extensive information on the researcher's plans, including proof of in-country contacts and institutional affiliations for fieldwork abroad and other ethical review approvals. Grantmaking organizations may prohibit researchers from changing their field sites or adjusting the length of their stay. When changing field sites to rework one's case selection or data collection plan is a possibility, funders may require a lengthy approvals process that sucks up valuable time.

These obstacles are only exacerbated by the mounting pressures to finish one's dissertation and publish ahead of the job market, in the case of graduate students; to increase one's scholarly output amid a heavy teaching load and persistent job insecurity, in the case of contingent faculty seeking tenure-track positions; and to meet the rising standards of tenure, for early-career faculty on the tenure-track. Confronted with these hurdles, "retooling" in the field to meet realities on the ground while adhering to the stringent dictates of controlled comparison is often well beyond researchers' grasp.

Far from a unique experience, recognizing deep into fieldwork that "one's project is either undoable, already done, or not worth doing" is "a universal in our craft" (Schrank 2006: 222). But even as scholarship on qualitative and multi-method research increasingly recognizes that researchers "move back and forth between theory and data […], constantly revising their propositions in response to unexpected discoveries" (Yom 2015: 616; see also, Fairfield and

Charman 2019: 154-5), it has not quite acknowledged another reality: that retooling in the field often looks less like recrafting one's research design around more suitable cases, variables, and data and looks more like finding a way to salvage what one has. The act of "salvaging" is not inherently incompatible with rigorous social science research methods or with meaningful contributions to theoretical and empirical knowledge. But for studies wedded to a logic of control, it does require rethinking comparison—specifically, what non-controlled comparison looks like and what insights non-controlled comparison can produce (Simmons et al. 2018: 1). In the next section, I discuss three strategies for doing so.

Three Strategies for Rethinking Comparison within Fieldwork

As noted above, there has been a proliferation of advice on how to adjust, retool, and iterate in the face of unexpected challenges during fieldwork. These recent interventions are no doubt useful guides on diagnosing problems in the field and weighing strategies for addressing them. But suggestions for facing down one specific, yet common challenge that threatens to upend one's research design altogether—the breakdown of one's case selection mechanism— remain rather vague. For example, Kapiszewski et al.'s (2022: 16-7) valuable recent contribution on dynamic research design proposes "[rethinking the] logic of case selection" as a possible response to "a case not working out" or the "dependent variable (DV) or outcome of interest [seeming] inapt." But what does it mean to rethink the logic of case selection? What does it look like and how might a researcher actually implement this solution?

The remainder of this paper seeks to answer these questions by bridging discussions of iteration within fieldwork with burgeoning conversations on rethinking comparison in political science. As part of an NSF-funded initiative led by Erica Simmons and Nicholas Rush Smith, a

group of scholars from diverse subfields and epistemological traditions have expanded

discussions of comparative research beyond the logic of control. Building on these efforts, I

propose three strategies for rethinking comparison as a means of overcoming a crisis of research

design in the field: 1) rethinking what constitutes a "case" (or the entities one seeks to compare);

2) turning from a primary focus on explaining outcomes to explaining processes, practices,

and/or meanings; and 3) building variation into a research project in new ways.

Among the most common causes of a crisis of research design is the realization that one

has miscoded the attributes of a case (or multiple cases), undermining the logic that drove the

choice of fieldwork sites. For example, based on previous studies, a researcher may enter the

field having chosen cases because of their values on the DV—whether that DV is healthcare

infrastructure, violent crime, human rights treaty compliance, or bureaucratic capacity. But

perhaps significant political, social, or economic developments since the publication of the

earlier studies mask related changes in the outcome of interest, upending previous

characterizations of the case. In low-information settings, characterizations of a case may be

based on biased or incomplete data. In either scenario, the realization that one's case(s) look

substantially different than anticipated undermines the initial case selection rationale by

invalidating the convergences and/or divergences around which the study was designed.

When selecting a new case is too costly, time-consuming, or otherwise unfeasible, what

is the solution? One strategy is reconsidering what constitutes a "case" in the first place. Political

scientists engaging in comparative research are often counselled to purposefully select their cases

before embarking on fieldwork; however, this need not be the order of operations to engage in

rigorous and insightful research. Against a "realist" view, which holds that cases are out there

waiting to be found, we might see the process of "casing"—or "[adopting] a schema of

understanding…that organizes and guides our analysis"—as an ongoing activity within the course of field research, in the words of Joe Soss (2021: 90). With this "nominal" approach, the breakdown of one's initial case selection mechanism is not a crisis only resolved through costly or impractical changes in fieldwork locales to maintain a strict logic of control. Instead, it is an opportunity to step back and think creatively about the kinds of things fit for comparison and the analytical payoff of comparing them.

Relatedly, dispelling the notion that selecting one's *fieldwork context(s)* is tantamount to selecting one's *cases* may be critical to anticipating a "crisis of research design." In her critique of traditional views of the single case study, Thea Riofrancos (2021: 120-1) argues for an approach that centers field "sites" as constitutive of broader phenomena rather than "cases" of a discrete outcome. In this sense, even a single "case" (i.e., a geographically bounded entity) contains multiple *sites* in which political and social processes and meanings can be contested and compared. This approach also offers a strategy to navigate a crisis of research design: looking both *beyond* the case(s) as initially conceived to uncover the broader global phenomena in question and *within* the case(s) to locate the multiple sites that are "politically salient" and reflect contestation among different interests and ideas (120). In putting aside the logic of control, such a strategy does not shirk methodological rigor. Instead, as Riofrancos (2021: 122) notes, the tacking back and forth between sites "[strengthens] both empirical acumen and analytical leverage by honing our concepts and subjecting them to constant tests provided by events, interviews, and archives."

Beyond "re-casing" or "siting" one's study, another strategy for overcoming the crisis of research design is shifting the object of analysis from a discrete *outcome* of interest to a dynamic *process, practice, or meaning* of interest. Convergences or divergences in an outcome to

simulate control very often anchor the rationale by which researchers select their fieldwork

locations and data collection priorities. But outcomes are far from the only entities fit for

comparison. Increasingly scholars in political science compare the concepts and meanings

through which individuals and groups make sense of their social and political worlds, as well as

the practices in which they engage (Simmons and Smith 2017; Simmons and Smith 2021).

Further, political processes—the conjunctions of actions and events that produce an outcome—

are often crucial and underexplored objects of analysis. After all, without uncovering the

mechanisms linking a cause to an effect—mechanisms that often combine in a processual

fashion—we are unable to fully illuminate the phenomena of interest.

In looking beyond outcome-based comparisons, scholars can engage in what Nick

Cheesman (2021: 74) refers to as "unbound comparison," which "zigzags between political

practices and ideas that may seem rather different and unrelated but that on closer inquiry reveal

points of similarity and contact." Throwing off the constraints that often bind field-based

inquiries in political science can help those facing a crisis of research design salvage the legwork

they have already committed to a project. Rather than engage in the costly reselection of cases or

the intellectually disingenuous process of shoehorning one's cases into the categories previously

prescribed, expanding one's analysis beyond the explanation of an outcome can illuminate new

contextualized and politically relevant comparisons based on already collected data.

Benjamin Read lays out an excellent example of such a strategy reflecting on his own

work comparing across regime types. Read's study of local Residents' Committees (RC) in

China and Taiwan was neither meant to explain differences in RC-related outcomes due to the

countries' distinct regime types, nor was it intended to identify convergences due to similar

explanatory factors, in spite of regime variation. Instead, such comparisons "support

conversation across cases from which defensible new insights and perspectives can be gleaned"
(Read 2021: 218). In Read's work, the China-Taiwan RC comparison reframed his object of
study from "mass organizations" to "state-backed neighborhood organizations" that engaged in
"administrative grassroots engagement"—a phenomena not just present in communist regimes
(223). In other words, this unbound comparison contributed both new empirical insights as well
as conceptual developments useful for scholars studying similar phenomena across the world.

Finally, when a crisis of research design is imminent, researchers in the field may find it
useful to think about variation in new ways. Variation between the things one observes in the
field—whether treated as outcomes, explanatory variables, processes, practices, or meanings—
often underpins comparative research designs. Within qualitative comparisons, variation is often
treated as critical to drawing causal inferences. Absent variation (typically in outcomes or
explanatory factors), case study research that aims to inform theory falls victim to accusations of
selectively cherry-picking data points to tell a broader story. Even those who encourage a more
flexible approach to "casing" encourage "[selecting] units…that offer *interesting variation in
whatever you wish to understand more about*" (Htun and Jensenius 2021: 194, emphasis
included).

But what if the variation anticipated by the researcher and which anchors the selection of
field sites turns out to be the product of biased data and/or previous assumptions that no longer
hold? How does the researcher salvage the time and effort they have put into the project? One
solution is to reframe variation as between an empirical process being observed and the "general
claims of an ideal type" (Saylor 2020: 982). Ryan Saylor's generative contribution on crafting
causal explanations lays out this technique. Rather than find the variation necessary to draw
causal inferences, Saylor argues that researchers elaborating political processes to explain the

production of an effect can do so "by considering to what extent an analytical ideal type renders a case intelligible and how case-specific factors affected the outcome as well" (Saylor 2020: 1002). Ideal types, which can be drawn from broader theories, offer "specialized conceptual filters that focus our scholarly attention on particular aspects of actually existing things" (Jackson 2010: 145; qtd. in Saylor 2020: 1002-3).

Because the objective of this approach is causal *explanation* rather than causal *inference*, controlling for key variables or deploying multiple cases that exhibit variation between one another is not necessary. Instead, similar contextual features in reference to the ideal type can justify one's case selection. The "extent to which the ideal type can account for the permutation" of the chosen case and any contextual divergences that shape the presence of relevant causal mechanisms can together help scholars achieve causal explanation.

What might this approach mean for those experiencing a crisis of research design in the field that threatens to upend their initial case selection rationale? Importantly, it suggests that "convergences" and "divergences," which are at the heart of controlled comparison, can be built into research projects in new ways that "embolden unconventional comparisons" (Saylor 2020: 1008). Scholars engaged in theoretically-grounded comparative research have likely designed a study that references some ideal type drawn from previous literature. Whether or not their initial case selection rationale survives the discoveries and uncertainties of field research, that ideal type can serve as a point of departure, a source of similarities and differences. Researchers immersed in the field need not stretch to find a new case that preserves the logic of control, but instead can take stock of the broader theoretical picture and anchor their study in the variations (or lack thereof) from an ideal type to construct causal explanationd.

These three strategies—rethinking what constitutes a "case," turning from a comparison of outcomes to other objects of analysis, and building variation into a project in new ways—are rarely useful in isolation. Instead, for scholars facing a crisis of research design during fieldwork, salvaging the progress already made without sacrificing methodological rigor and theoretical and empirical relevance will likely require a combination of these alterations—possibly in ways that are deeply uncomfortable for those wedded to a logic of controlled comparison. In the next section, however, I illustrate how it is possible to productively rethink comparison in these ways by dissecting on my own fieldwork experience.

What Rethinking Comparison Looks Like: Some Examples and Practical Guidance

To illustrate how these three strategies can be productively deployed to overcome a crisis of research design in the field, I draw on the travails of my own field research for my dissertation project, which forms the basis of my forthcoming book, *Undermining the State from Within: The Institutional Legacies of Civil War in Central America*. During a combined 20 months of field research in Guatemala and Nicaragua mostly in 2016 and 2017, my project on how the institutional legacies of internal armed conflict shape longer-term state development evolved dramatically following the breakdown of my initial case selection rationale—both a product of difficult-to-access data and realizations that I miscoded key attributes of my cases. In stepping back and thinking creatively about how to salvage the time invested and data collected, I undertook a series of modifications that reflect the three strategies for rethinking comparison laid out above. First, I reformulated what constituted a "case" within the study, shifting from the national the institutional level. Second, I centered my analytical lens not on the difficult-to-measure *outcomes* I initially laid out, but on under-explored institutional *processes*. And finally,

I reframed what variation looked like in the project by drawing on conventional theories of war and state formation as an "ideal type" with which to construct contextualized causal explanations.

Discussing such mid-course research design adjustments perhaps remains taboo in a field that continues to associate methodological rigor with the logic of control. But my hope is that this exercise in reflexivity and transparency—one that is certainly far less anxiety-inducing after signing a book contract—will build on recent advances in rethinking comparison and nurture new tools and strategies that graduate students and early-career researchers can latch onto when "lost at sea" in the field, so to speak. In what follows, I draw on my own personal trove of informal memos, formal proposals, and communications with my dissertation committee to illustrate what salvaging through rethinking comparison looked like for me.

Rethinking a "Case": From the National to the Institutional Level

My dissertation project was driven by a deep interest in the legacies of armed conflict in Central America, specifically how Cold War-era counterinsurgent campaigns reshaped state institutions in ways that distorted political and economic development. While this interest developed out of my first bouts of field research in Guatemala as an undergraduate student, it took a new form during my pre-dissertation fieldwork in Guatemala in Summer 2015—a time when an unprecedented anti-corruption campaign waged by the United Nations International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) and the country's Public Ministry (MP) exposed an array of high-profile corruption networks embedded in the state. The revelations included a criminal structure within the tax and customs administration dubbed *La Línea*, which siphoned off an estimated $940 million on an annual basis starting in 2012. The mass civic

movement that ensued helped oust the president and vice president, who allegedly orchestrated the scheme and spearheaded other illicit activities as well (see Schwartz 2021).

In delving into the mechanics of *La Línea* through elite interviews and archival research, I quickly learned that, far from a recent phenomenon, the customs fraud network was an artifact of Guatemala's 36-year internal armed conflict. At the height of the state's counterinsurgent campaign in the late 1970s and early 1980s, elite military intelligence officers infiltrated the Ministry of Finance and customs apparatus, crafting new institutional arrangements for capturing import duties. What role did civil war playing in introducing these new "rules of the game"? And why and how had the practices devised amid conflict survived the transition to civilian rule and peacetime state reforms, including the overhaul of the tax administration?

Beyond the detective story-like intrigue sparked by the case, I thought it also had something important to say about classic theories of conflict and state formation, which have stood at the center of research in comparative politics, international relations, and political sociology. In line with conventional approaches, civil war *did* contribute to the construction of state administrative institutions; however, such institutions do not always enhance the state's capacity to carry out core functions like tax collection. Instead, they may distort and undermine these aims. This is what Guatemala was a "case" of, in comparative terms.

But as with all sound controlled comparisons, crafting a viable research design required finding another case—ideally a comparable national context in which civil war built new institutions that strengthened state capacity. Per Mill's "method of difference," my fieldwork would then seek to uncover the explanatory variable(s) that differed between the two cases and thus plausibly explained the divergent outcomes. I settled on Nicaragua, a country that also experienced a Cold War-era conflict and, in the post-conflict period, was considered Central

America's outlier, experiencing less violence and evincing stronger state presence and capacity at the local and national levels. Beyond representing variation on the dependent variable, I also convinced myself that the two country cases reflected similar historical, cultural, and political conditions that allowed for some measure of control. As I wrote in an early iteration of my dissertation prospectus, both countries had "undergone very similar historical processes of social, political, and economic transformation, particularly until the early 19th century advent of liberal reforms," their civil wars erupted "following dramatic moments of institutional disruption," and a "similar balance of political forces emerged following conflict settlement" (Schwartz 2016: 29, 31-2).

Here, I pushed aside inconvenient, yet crucial divergences in the service of shoehorning my study into the neat boxes prescribed by controlled comparison. These differences included Nicaragua's successful revolution versus Guatemala's failed reformist movement and subsequent counterrevolution; the United States government's support of insurgency in Nicaragua and counterinsurgency in Guatemala; and the incumbent regime's electoral defeat that ended conflict in Nicaragua versus the preservation of elite power within negotiated settlement in Guatemala. But adopting the method of difference had allowed me to craft a series of theoretically-informed hypotheses, and I adopted one in particular: the Tilly-inspired proposition that the mode of waging conflict—whether states marshalled resources from mass actors or in alliance with elites—generated divergent trajectories of wartime institutional development.

I remained optimistic about my research design and empirical strategy during my initial stint in Guatemala (June, September-November 2016). However, a crisis of research design upended the divergences that anchored my case selection once I arrived in Nicaragua, a country in which I had comparatively less experience. For one, the environment of data access was far

different. Finding similar kinds of wartime administrative information, particularly on the fiscal apparatus, was much more challenging. But a more unsettling realization was that, upon immersion, the Nicaraguan context did not look like one in which civil war had generated new, more capable state institutions. Instead, I kept stumbling upon instances in which the counterinsurgent imperative had bred perverse institutional arrangements, which, for example, facilitated wartime drug trafficking and other illicit activities or subverted the state's ability to regulate land tenure. In other words, within select institutional domains, Nicaragua looked surprisingly like Guatemala. I said as much to my dissertation committee chair in early 2017, when I relayed that "I'm struggling to figure out how to frame the overall comparison" given the unanticipated similarities (Schwartz, e-mail communication, 20 January 2017).

With my initial research design buckling under the weight of these unexpected findings, what was my Plan B? And how could I salvage all the time and effort I had invested in these two country contexts while still producing an empirically rich, theoretically generative, and methodologically rigorous dissertation project?

The necessary first step was rethinking what constituted a "case" within my study. The inappropriateness of thinking about these two country contexts as my study's "cases" became very clear, particularly in Nicaragua, where wartime institutional changes had a state-undermining effect in some sectors like land administration and a state-reinforcing effect in others like public security. In other words, approaching my study through a national-level lens obscured critical institution-level dynamics. Not only was this institutional turn in line with growing scholarly calls to disaggregate the state (Brenner et al. 2008; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Giraudy et al. 2019), but it allowed me to unpack the dynamics of institutional change during wartime in a more fine-grained and empirically richer way. After all, it was the wartime roots of

the Guatemalan customs fraud network *La Línea*—the nitty gritty details of its evolution and operation—that first sparked my interest and that I first connected to broader theoretical debates on war and statebuilding. In some ways, rethinking what constituted a case in my study was me embracing the insights that drove me to my research questions and project in the first place.

In confronting the breakdown of my initial case selection mechanism, the first strategy I deployed was to rethink what a "case" was—an adjustment that shifted my approach from the country to the institutional level. But what about these wartime institutions should I compare? And which wartime institutions were fit for comparison? The next section addresses the second strategy in confronting the crisis of research design: rethinking the object of analysis.

Rethinking the Object of Analysis: From Outcome to Process

In moving from the national to the institution-level, I reframed my dissertation project as examining how civil war shaped state institutions—that is, the rules and procedures that structured state activity. But this shift also pushed me to rethink what I was interested in analyzing and explaining, prompting me to turn the study's focus from institutional *outcomes* to institutional *processes*. For one, measuring discrete state institutional outcomes, such as capacity, is rife with challenges at the country-level, as political scientists have long noted (Dargent et al. 2017; Bersch et al. 2017; Hendrix 2010; Soifer and vom Hau 2008). Obtaining the fine-grained institution-level data measuring similar outcomes is just as, if not more, onerous. Second, given my dissertation's focus on institutional development amid civil wars that took place roughly four decades prior to my fieldwork, finding conventional measures of institutional strength and weakness was even more implausible given the absence of accessible and accurate records with

information on wartime tax collection, government spending, and police and military presence, among other potential indicators.

However, my dissertation fieldwork did uncover rich archival sources from the civil war era in each country that allowed me to piece together how institutional structures and practices were transformed amid counterinsurgency. In Guatemala, troves of documentation from the Historical Archive of the National Police (AHPN), criminal court records, and some military intelligence and Ministry of Finance files illuminated the innerworkings of two state sectors in particular: the customs administration and the public security apparatus. In Nicaragua, comparable documentation on these same institutional domains was difficult to track down; however, during my fieldwork, the research arm of the Ministry of Agricultural Development and Agrarian Reform (MIDINRA) made available a wealth of primary documents from the state agencies responsible for the wartime land redistribution campaign.

Though not ideal, I delved into the archival record for these three state sectors across the two conflict contexts to understand how wartime powerholders altered the rules of the game amid counterinsurgency—and with what effects. In so doing, I discovered that, in spite of vast differences in the institutional domains under examination and in Guatemala's and Nicaragua's wartime contexts, the *processes* of institutional change looked remarkably similar in all three cases. Specifically, perceptions that insurgent forces posed an increasingly serious, if not existential, threat led to the insulation of a narrow counterinsurgent elite coalition, which operated with broad discretion and faced few countervailing social or political forces to challenge its authority. To maintain their grip on power and/or accrue private benefits, this elite coalition crafted new institutional rules and procedures that distorted state functioning.

To be sure, the rules-making coalitions and the rules they devised looked different in many respects. In Guatemala, this counterinsurgent elite coalition consisted of high-level military intelligence officers linked through informal ties and a shared hardline counterinsurgent ideology. Meanwhile, in Nicaragua, it was the National Directorate (DN) of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN)—the party vanguard committed to implementing the revolutionary project—that altered the rules of the game. In Guatemala's customs service, the new rules facilitated diverse methods for capturing tax revenue. Meanwhile, in Guatemala's policing institutions, the new rules coordinated extrajudicial killings and subsequent impunity. Within Nicaragua's land reform program, the new rules instantiated hasty, provisional titling procedures that exacerbated property insecurity. In sum, the institutional contexts and outcomes were wholly distinct; yet the processes that unfolded looked remarkably similar.

Further, in focusing on institutional processes, I was not only drawn to examine the coalitional underpinnings of new undermining rules within diverse state sectors, but the conditions under which such rules are reproduced and endure past conflict settlement and postwar reconstruction. Here, I noted key divergences between the two Guatemalan cases, on the one hand, and the Nicaraguan case, on the other. While Guatemala's wartime counterinsurgent coalition maneuvered to bring other sectoral interests into the fold and preserve the wartime status quo following the end of conflict, Nicaragua's rules-making elite failed to do the same, leading to chronic instability within the land and property sector. In other words, similar wartime institutional trajectories diverged amid different coalitional dynamics in the lead up to and aftermath of peace.

Focusing on institutional processes rather than outcomes allowed me to both salvage my dissertation project's initial selection of fieldwork sites as well as pursue an "unbound"

comparison that shed new light on wartime developments that are often difficult, if not impossible, to observe empirically. In so doing, this research design iteration revealed new and productive "convergences" and "divergences" that I never would have noticed had I maintained an orthodox focus on measuring outcomes and preserving the logic of control.

Rethinking Variation: Leveraging the War-State Formation "Ideal Type"

In "retooling" amid fieldwork to overcome a crisis of research design, I shifted my dissertation project in two crucial, yet somewhat unconventional ways. First, I rethought what constituted a "case" within my study, opting to treat state institutional sectors as the things I would compare. Second, I redirected my project from seeking to explain institutional outcomes to elaborating and explicating institutional processes. While these modifications allowed me to salvage the country contexts I had already committed to studying and the data that I had already collected, I landed on a research design that led me to the finding that similar wartime coalitional structures generated similar institutional processes. It was thus reasonable to wonder where was the variation? If I was unable to explain different institutional processes, was I opening myself up to charges of selectively "cherry picking" evidence to construct a unified causal explanation across my three cases where one did not exist?

In stepping back and returning to the broader theoretical motivation of the project, however, I realized that this new research design did, in fact, allow me to take advantage of sources of variation that I would not have recognized had I not "unbound" my comparative framework. In addition to the variation in state policy domains and contrasting regime ideologies, war-making strategies, and international influences reflected by the Guatemalan and Nicaragua conflicts, I was also able to leverage variation between the institutional processes

under observation and an analytical "ideal-type." The theoretical grounding of the project provided a template from which to assess the drivers of wartime institutional change empirically: the classic Tillyan model of war-driven state formation. As cases of statebuilding amid warfare, I could probe whether the sequences of causal mechanisms illustrated in my empirical cases mirrored those laid out in Tilly's ideal type. Such an approach, while not geared toward establishing causal *inferences* (i.e. empirical regularities that allow us to estimate causal effects generally), does allow for case-specific causal *explanations* (Saylor 2020: 995-9).

What did leveraging variation from an ideal-type look like within my dissertation project? The first step was elaborating the causal model represented by the ideal-type, including the sequence of mechanisms—entities with invariant properties that underpin causal processes (Saylor 2020: 999-1002; Waldner 2012). Here, my analytical ideal-type was Charles Tilly's (1990) well-known model of statebuilding amid warfare. According to Tilly's account, which was derived from the study of European polities from the 10th to 15th centuries, as rulers sought to expand their territorial control, they came into conflict with the population from which they needed to extract resources—"men, materials, and money" (Finer 1975: 96)—to successfully wage war. As a result, they needed to build new institutions to subdue internal challengers, conscript soldiers, and levy taxes. In addition, mobilizing the population and its resources induced bargaining between rulers' and their societies, which contributed to administrative institutions that provide services to the population (Tilly 1990: 25). In short, war requires the accumulation of resources, which leads to the construction of state institutions and the bolstering of state capacity.

My fieldwork revealed that, within all three of my case, the process of wartime institutional development diverged markedly from this ideal-type. Instead of building institutions

that bolstered state capacity, I had observed state sectors in which war fashioned new rules and procedures that *undermined* state functions and performance. Understanding how the causal processes that I observed varied from the Tillyan ideal-type was an opportunity not only to uncover underexplored factors and dynamics that may drive the *kind* of institutional logics that emerge in war, but to also—and just as importantly—craft causal explanations for the institutional variants that emerged in the Guatemalan and Nicaraguan contexts.

In comparing wartime institutional development within Guatemala's tax and public security sectors to the Tillyan model, it was clear that the mechanism linking conflict and the accumulation of resources—the mobilization of, bargaining with, and extraction from *mass* actors—was not, in fact, present. Instead, Guatemala's counterinsurgent regime deployed a war-making strategy that relied on resources from economic elites and foreign governments. However, in this respect, the case of Nicaragua's land administration did conform to the Tillyan ideal-type, as organized urban and rural workers stood at the center of the regime's resource accumulation strategy. How did the Nicaraguan case, then, vary from the Tillyan model, therefore setting off a divergent institutional trajectory? Among the mechanisms underpinning the ideal-type is societal bargaining—rulers' need to incorporate civilian/popular input—to acquire resources to fuel the war effort. Despite marshalling wartime resources from popular sectors, Nicaragua's Sandinista government became increasingly insulated, particularly as the economic strains of conflict deepened. The narrow FSLN ruling coalition, rather than incorporate countervailing social and political forces, undertook policies to strengthen peasant dependence on the regime, bolstering its rural control (Schwartz 2022). By placing this empirical institutional process into conversations with the analytical ideal-type, I was able to uncover distinct wartime

state-society dynamics and thus refine the causal explanation for why armed conflict generated different kinds of institutional logics.

In sum, rethinking comparison to overcome the crisis of research design that plagued my dissertation project also entailed rethinking variation and building it into my study in new ways. Employing an analytical ideal-type as my point of departure not only bolstered the theoretical relevance of the project, but strengthened my empirical analysis and the causal explanations that they offered.

Conclusions and Implications

Fieldwork is often the most generative and fulfilling aspect of the research process, illuminating new answers to age-old questions. Yet the intellectual curiosity and wonder that make field research so rewarding can quickly succumb to frustration and dread when a crisis of research design strikes. While it is highly ill-advised to undertake field research without a plan, it is also almost inevitable that one's initial plan will be upended by new insights, unanticipated changes in data access and availability, and the messiness inherent in the political and social world more generally. How do we reconcile the drive for methodological rigor and the uncertainties over which field researchers have little control?

In bridging previously separate conversations on iteration in the field and moving beyond the logic of control within comparative political science research, this paper offered three strategies for how rethinking comparison can help researchers overcome a crisis of research design during fieldwork: 1) rethinking what constitutes a "case"; 2) focusing on the comparison of processes, practices, and/or meanings, rather than outcomes; and 3) reimagining what variation looks like in a research project. I also illustrated what implementing these three

strategies together looks like and how it might restructure a research project in a concrete sense, by drawing on my own dissertation fieldwork and the work of others.

What might this approach mean for how researchers prepare for, undertake, and discuss their fieldwork? I posit that there are three broader implications of rethinking comparison as a means of overcoming the crisis of research design. First, taking these strategies seriously means transforming how we train graduate students to think about and plan for fieldwork. Rather than encouraging burgeoning researchers to put their projects in boxes to simulate a logic of control and anticipate the kinds of data they need to collect, training ahead of fieldwork would position graduate students to anticipate multiple ways of "casing" their project, as well as multiple objects of analysis beyond specific outcomes. In other words, fieldwork preparation would entail a process of *broadening* rather than *narrowing*—a process of anticipating and developing multiple kinds of "divergences" and "convergences" that can be explored in the field.

Relatedly, a second implication is that a so-called "crisis" of research design does not, in fact, have to be a crisis! Instead, it is an opportunity to develop richer and more innovative comparisons that shed new light on broader theoretical questions, as well as context-specific causal explanations that contribute new empirical knowledge. Finally, incorporating these strategies into how we prepare for field research can provide a new language for articulating and providing methodological grounding to the kinds of iterations that often find their way into research projects amid the unpredictability of fieldwork, but are rarely discussed openly. Ultimately, the kind of methodological transparency encouraged by this approach will only nurture scholarly exchange and the production of new knowledge through comparative research.

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