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Of Course Generalize, but How? Returning to Middle-Range Theory in Comparative Politics

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Introduction

All political scientists recognize the importance of formulating general theoretical propositions to advance knowledge. But, how is theory formulation best done? Should our discipline's research energy and time be spent elaborating ever broader conceptual and theoretical schemes, or should we be focused on explaining specific phenomena and puzzles? These questions are neither new nor unique to political science. The pursuit of a single set of rules that might explain all human behavior reflects as long a tradition in the history of social thought as does the contrary idea that progress (both political and scientific) is most effectively achieved in incremental steps. After all, the hedgehog, as Isaiah Berlin reminds us, has always been happiest knowing one big thing, while the fox has thrived knowing many small things.¹

But is comparative politics best done by foxes or hedgehogs? In this

essay, I make the case for a political science conducted by foxes, where less value is placed on the quest for a single grand synthesis of politics and more on a pluralism of middle-range theories that closely engages the real and diverse problems of politics. I also argue that such middle range theory makes its most substantial contributions when scholars do the following: narrowly identify substantive topics, closely specify scope conditions, and meticulously define concepts. The central benefit of middle-range theory, conceived in these terms, is that while aiming at parsimony and generalization, it is not *frightened* by empirical reality.

"I make the case for a political science [...] where less value is placed on the quest for a single grand synthesis of politics and more on a pluralism of middle-range theories [...]"

Why Middle-Level Theory?

Thanks in part to Robert Merton (who first popularized the phrase "middle-range" theory in a frequently reprinted 1949 essay), social scientists have long had a broad area of epistemological ground upon which to construct theory that aims at being general and parsimonious but that appreciates the need to confront empirical complexity.² In his day, Robert Merton was responding to what he regarded as the prematurely ambitious theoretical scheme of Talcott Parsons, whose theory of social action established the terms of sociological research in the United States after World War II. In

retrospect, we see just how powerful Merton's concept of middle-range theory truly was. Indeed, Merton's vision of social science won out, as Parsons' ambitious theoretical and conceptual scaffolding crumbled under the weight of its own effort at universalization; it had become so hopelessly abstract that the theory had less and less relevance to the real world.

Today, social scientists who find themselves working within Merton's still appealingly broad middle range of theory-building face not one, but two challenges. The first comes from one strand of rational choice theory that asserts paradigmatic privilege for a rationalist epistemology and formal methodology. This perspective presumes an unbounded universalism that resonates with Parsons's own aims fifty years ago. But today there is a second challenge, from the other end of the spectrum, that views all social science with a skeptical eye and asks whether social science, no matter how careful, can truly extract itself from its own web of assumptions, language, and bias. Given both of these present-day paradigms, it is worth returning to Merton's concept of "theory of the middle range" to ask whether it offers contemporary students of comparative politics some solid ground upon which to formulate theory.

In his original essay, Merton begins by contrasting his vision of middle range theory with two other types of scholarly enterprises. He writes that middle-range theories, "like between the minor but necessary working hypotheses that evolve [...] during day-to-day research and the all inclusive systematic efforts to develop a unified theory that will explain all the observed uniformities of social behavior . . ."³ But what exactly lies within this middle range? A perspective loosely informed by Merton's concep-

tion argues that theory ought not shy away from generalization but instead should adopt an alternative strategy of generalization. To build "theory of the middle range" is to reject "grand theory's" tendency to formulate theory *before* confronting evidence and then only selectively turn to evidence to illustrate its "analytical power." By contrast, the best middle-range theory begins with real-world empirical puzzles, then weighs the analytical power of competing arguments to explain both process and outcomes, and finally develops broader arguments out of specific empirical findings. More systematically, middle-range theory is marked by three core attributes.

First, middle-range theories have a delimited substantive focus. Their purpose is not to create a theory of politics in general, but rather a theory, for example, of welfare state formation, state-building, or democratic reversals. Grand theory, in either its older structural-functional guise or in its more recent versions, tends to begin with a "unified" and all-encompassing theory of politics. Empirical instances are then selected to illustrate the relevance of the argument across a range of areas. By contrast, middle-range theories begin with specific empirical puzzles relevant to a specific literature, push aside preconceptions as far as possible, and then seriously consider competing arguments to explain some historical or cross-national variation. Take M. Steven Fish's recent work on the failure of postcommunist democracy in Russia.⁴ Fish asks a very specific question: why has Russian politics failed to experience the same blossoming of democracy as many of its postcommunist neighbors? Placed in cross-national context, Fish systematically combines quantitative and qualitative evidence to consider many hypotheses, settling on three core variables: Russia has too much oil, too little eco-

nomie liberalization, and too weak a national legislature, which together block democracy in Russia. The analytical power of this work of middle-range theory comes from the fact that it deploys a systematic methodology to weigh competing arguments to answer a specific empirical question, rather than deploying a single pre-existing world view to develop a theory of politics.

"[...] the best middle-range theory begins with real-world empirical puzzles, then weighs the analytical power of competing arguments to explain both process and outcomes, and finally develops broader arguments out of specific empirical findings."

Second, middle-range theorists self-consciously reflect upon and specify what is often called the "scope conditions" of a theory. Classic works in the field also gain a great deal of their analytical power by having a relatively narrow scope. For example, Theda Skocpol's still classic *States and Social Revolutions* not only provides a theory of revolution, but establishes at its outset that it is intended to apply in contexts of politically ambitious agrarian states that did not experience colonialism.⁵ To test the validity of the argument, one needs to find cases that fit this standard. In this sense, middle-range theory provides a rigorous answer to the question: what are the outer limits or "reach" of

a theory's applicability? With the aim of avoiding the pitfalls of "overreaching," middle-range theories identify the parameters within which a theory can be expected to be valid, thereby establishing a reasonable standard against which the work can be judged.⁶ In recent years, some of the most successful works in comparative politics have developed middle-range theory insofar as they aim at generalization but not universalization, by specifying their scope. Marc Morje Howard's *The Weakness of Civil Society in Postcommunist Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2003) proposes and tests an explanation of the postcommunist decay of civil society (note the spatial scope of the argument). Similarly, in his recent work *Defending Democracy: Reactions to Extremism in Interwar Europe* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), Giovanni Capocchia develops a rigorously tested argument about elite strategies of responding to extremism by focusing on interwar Europe (note the temporal scope) that is relevant, Capocchia points out, whenever the conditions of polarization that he identifies as crucial are present. Overall, we see that the power of middle-range theory comes from generalizing within very well-specified boundaries.

The third attribute of middle-range theory is careful and systematic conceptualization. Middle-range theorists follow Giovanni Sartori's lead to avoid the double-edged challenge of conceptualization. On the one hand, middle-range theorists resist the temptation of "conceptual stretching" that often is entailed in universal theorizing, where the extension of a concept is augmented without diminishing its meaning.⁷ For example, it is important to be sensitive to the fact, as a middle-range theorist might tell us, that the concept of a "political party" or "civil society" might differ in fundamental ways between, say, postcom-

munist Russia and advanced democratic states, making certain comparisons inappropriate. On the other hand, however, middle-range theorists do *not* argue, as some regional specialists might, that cross-regional comparisons are thus *always* flawed.

“Middle-range theory [...] offers [...] a strategy of building general theory that is not unrealistically universal [...] and...] a way of engaging the complexity of empirical reality that is simply avoided with universal claims.”

Indeed, middle-range theory follows Sartori's equally important but less noted call to avoid the problem that he dubs “logical perfectionism,” in which excessive concern with accuracy of denotation generates a form of paralysis where one is afraid to say anything beyond a very narrow and particular context. The very act of conceptualization entails abstraction so that core concepts of comparative politics such as “corporatism,” “social movement,” “welfare state,” or “social capital,” at least *implicitly*, make claims about a broader universe of cases. To act as if one is only narrowly talking about an individual national case while simultaneously using broad concepts is also fundamentally misleading. Thus, while sensitive to the problems of conceptual stretching, middle-range theorists do not remain paralyzed and trapped in empirical settings where a study's findings only *implicitly* suggest broader conclusions. Rather, a middle-range theorist *explicitly* examines

whether and how well a framework actually travels.

Middle-range theory, in this sense, offers two specific benefits for scholars and students of comparative politics. First, it offers a strategy of building general theory that is not unrealistically universal. Second, it offers a way of engaging the complexity of empirical reality that is simply avoided with universal claims. Taken together, middle-range theories offer a reasonable “middle road” that in fact has paved the way for some of the most productive, illuminating, and methodologically rigorous works in comparative politics.

Conclusion: Challenges for Middle-range Theory

None of this is to say, however, that middle-range theory does not face its own set of challenges. In concluding, we can point to two challenges in particular that should be the subject of attention for scholars of comparative politics. First, if scope conditions are so crucial, how do we actually identify them? With one recent exception, this is a question that has not received its fair share of attention from scholars.⁸ All too often, scope conditions have the feel that they are inductively generated in an *ad hoc* fashion to describe the empirical cases that a theory has trouble explaining. This is clearly insufficient. But, how ought we identify scope conditions? To avoid addressing this issue is to fail to take advantage of one of the core benefits of middle-range theory.

Second, if middle-range theory represents, in T.H. Marshall's phrase, “small stepping stones,” should the field be doing more to aggregate theory?⁹ If so, how? In the end, Robert Merton optimistically believed the aggregation of theory was possible; he awaited the arrival of sociology's

Einstein. Even if we reject his optimism, we can still ask how the process of “muddling through” ought best to proceed. At a general level, if we look at instances of theory aggregation in the field, at least two different strategies appear plausible: one, we might call *bridging* and the second, we might call *adding*. By “bridging,” I refer to instances where scholars adopt insights from across research traditions to generate new insights. An example of this is seen in the impressive body of work generated by the “varieties of capitalism” research program.¹⁰ Here we see a synthesis between “historical institutionalism,” with its emphasis on different national arrangements of institutions, and a “rationalist” focus on the micro-foundations of such national configurations. As seen in the research generated by this program, bridging the findings from different middle-range theories from across different research programs clearly is one productive strategy of theory aggregation.

“[...] two different strategies [of theory aggregation] appear plausible: one, we might call *bridging* and the second, we might call *adding*.”

Similarly, the strategy of “adding” offers another route of theory aggregation. In her work on democratic transition, Ruth Berins Collier synthesizes two discrete findings on the determinants of democratic transition that were generated with different empirical bases within a single research tradition.¹¹ Scholarship on democracy's third wave, Collier

notes, emphasizes the role of elites and the literature on the first wave of democracy emphasizes the role of the working class. In a carefully crafted set of comparisons across two centuries of democratic transition across two continents, she identifies multiple pathways to democracy that enrich our understanding of how democracy is created. By adding the mid-range theories of two different literatures within the same research program, she generates broader theoretical claims.

“Middle-range theory offers a

route to generalization built upon an approach that is self-conscious about evidence, concepts, and methodology.”

In short, middle-range theory offers the potential building blocks towards broader theoretical generalization. The idea that scholars of comparative politics must choose between making sweeping theoretical statements or mere descriptive summaries of individual cases is thus a false choice. Middle-range theory offers a route to generalization built upon an approach that is self-conscious about evidence, concepts, and methodology. While the bold single answers of the hedgehog are at times seductive, the fox offers a more realistic and promising route for scientific progress.

Notes

¹ Berlin, Isaiah. 1953. *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

² Merton, Robert. 1968. “On Sociological Theories of the Middle Range” *Social Theory and Social Structure*. New York: Free Press, pp. 39-72.

³ Merton, Robert. *ibid.*, p. 39.

⁴ Fish, Steven. 2006. *Democracy Derailed in Russia: The Failure of Open Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁵ Skocpol, Theda. 1979. *States and Social Revolutions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 33-42.

⁶ The importance of specifying scope conditions flows from the assumption of unit homogeneity that most methodologies presume. By identifying the relevant “universe of study” where the assumption is expected to hold, the scope conditions can be identified. For a discussion see: Bennett, Andrew and Alexander L. George. 2005. *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

⁷ Sartori, Giovanni. 1970. “Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics” *American Political Science Review* 64 (4): 1033-1053.

⁸ Mahoney, James and Gary Goertz. 2004. “The Possibility Principle: Choosing Negative Cases in Qualitative Research” *American Political Science Review* 98(4): 653-670.

⁹ Marshall, T.H. 1963. *Sociology at the Crossroads*. London: Heinemann, pp. 3-24.

¹⁰ Hall, Peter and David Soskice (eds.). 2001. *Varieties of Capitalism: The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹¹ Collier, Ruth Berins. 1999. *Paths toward Democracy: The Working Class and Elites in Western Europe and South America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Complements in the Quest for Understanding Comparative Politics

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Whether individual social scientists choose as their mission to strive for universal generalizations that provide covering laws of politics, mid-range theories that explain limited classes of events, or instead pursue domain-specific explanations of important phenomena matters not at all for whether such covering laws exist and matters only modestly for whether we, as a community, discover such laws or conclude that they do not exist. If they exist – and enough universal generalizations have, in my view, been identified already to give me confidence that more will be discovered – then recurrent patterns across studies that seek domain-specific, heterogeneous findings will be discerned and underlying general principles will be discovered. It is not at all clear to me whether the most efficient path to the discovery of such laws of politics follows from a direct search for them, from mid-range the-