Nested Citizens

Macropolitics and Microbehavior in Comparative Politics

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The focus in the behavioral study of politics is on individuals. As a subfield of political science, it examines actions (e.g., voting and protest) as well as cognitions (perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs); and as a subfield of comparative politics, it examines them in one, several, or many different countries. It encompasses the study of both cognition and action, in large part because we have long believed that attitudes and beliefs explain action, but also because we are convinced that, in addition to formal institutions or processes, cognitive elements of politics such as legitimacy, values, or grievances are important indicators of the quality and nature of democratic and political life.

This chapter reviews the intellectual foundations of the behavioral study of politics, and it does so with an eye to its evolution as a subfield of comparative politics. It also discusses the field's affinities with different theoretical traditions in political science and comparative politics. I discuss both the past and present of how we study comparative mass politics and describe how it has been transformed because of changes in technology and intellectual trends and in reaction to real-world events. I argue that, as a result of these changes, the study of mass politics has become more central to the study of comparative politics through its ecumenical relations with different theoretical traditions in the social sciences and comparative politics.

MIXED ANCESTRY: ORIGINS OF RESEARCH ON COMPARATIVE MASS POLITICS

Two intellectual projects underlie the comparative study of behavioral politics. The older one of these is sociological in orientation and has sought to understand the connection among social structures, voters, and political parties (Barnes 1997). In fact, the field's long-standing concern with social structures and their effects on behavior dates back to the first half of the twentieth century (e.g., Tingsten 1937; see also Elff 2007) and originally focused on the connection between social environments and structures, on one hand, and, political action and cognition, on the other (e.g., Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948; Scheuch 1966; Przeworski and Soares 1971; Sani 1976; see also Huckfeldt this volume).

While political sociology was the birthplace of comparative mass politics, studies growing out of this tradition were not usually aimed at replacing country names with variable names. Instead, they sought to connect social processes and structures within countries to behaviors of interest, such as voting, participation, and the like (see Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978). The study of how political cleavages, and in particular the class cleavage, structure the connections between voters and political parties is closely related to this intellectual tradition, and both are closely connected with the study of electoral volatility and party system change. Perhaps the most famous exemplars of these research traditions are Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) study of cleavage structures and voter alignments in Europe and Bartolini and Mair's (1990) investigation of aggregate electoral change over relatively long periods of historical time.

Although sociology provided the intellectual foundation for the study of behavioral and electoral politics, over time students of mass politics came to pay less attention to sociostructural factors and instead shifted their attention to a second approach rooted primarily in psychological concepts as principal explanations of citizen behavior (Dalton 1984; Dogan 1995; Franklin 1985; but see, for example, Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978). In part, this psychological turn of the field had to do with the apparent decline of the structural power of political cleavages in advanced industrialized societies during the 1960s and 1970s. Class, religion, and region appeared to become less potent predictors of vote choice and political preference, and students of mass politics started to look elsewhere for empirical and theoretical traction (Dalton, Flanagan, and Beck 1984; but see Elff 2007 for a more recent argument and evidence).

The reasons for the growing neglect of structural influences on citizen behavior at the time go beyond the apparent weakness of the sociological approach, however, and almost certainly have had to do with the nature of the behavioral revolution in survey research, its export of a particular model from the University of Michigan to other countries and to comparative politics. By design, the Michigan approach focused attention on the actions of citizens as autonomous individuals whose group memberships and social contexts were

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1 As Sam Barnes pointed out in the first edition of this volume, "(t)here are, of course, many ways to study mass politics, including the analysis of social movements. . . . Still others include the use of electoral, demographic, economic, and related aggregate data; events data; content analysis; extended open-ended interviews; and participant observation and other anthropological approaches" (Barnes 1997: 115). The principal technology used in the field of mass politics in the mass survey, based on a random sample of individuals drawn from the population of interest — typically all adults or eligible voters.

2 I wish to thank Sid Tarrow for asking me whether I was a rationalist or a structuralist. Many thanks also to Alan Zuckerman for his generous and thoughtful comments on an earlier draft.

3 An important question in this research has been the problem of the so-called ecological fallacy and the challenges associated with drawing inferences about individuals' behavior from aggregate data (Robinson 1950; King 1997).

4 These earlier analyses often focused on level-of-analysis questions and very prominently on the so-called ecological fallacy — that is, the difficulty of drawing inferences about individual behavior based on aggregate data (Eulau 1977).
conceptualized as being experienced individually rather than structurally. To be sure, this approach was a first cousin of the sociological one: It originally drew on sociology as an explanation for the origins of voters’ beliefs (in the form of the famous funnel of causality). And while social structure thus continued to be a conceptual part of the overall conception of voter behavior by influencing it indirectly, this approach essentially became synonymous with psychological concepts (such as partisanship) as the most proximate and principal explanatory factors. As a result, researchers came to pay less attention to sociostructural contexts such as neighborhoods, communities, or countries that individuals inhabit and more attention to the cognitive processes underlying the political choices people make.

In the decades that followed, this individualized and cognitive approach to understanding citizen politics became the dominant approach to political behavior and was exported to various areas of the globe, perhaps most successfully to Western Europe (Kittilson 2007). As importantly, the phenomenal success of the Michigan approach and its focus on mass surveys helped to establish both an intellectual and an organizational infrastructure capable of supporting the technology of survey research that was well positioned to advocate the theoretical foundations of the Michigan paradigm.

Thus, the psychological approach was a natural descendant of the sociological one. Although they privileged different explanatory mechanisms, both approaches tended to focus on explaining variation within countries. And the sociological tradition was always lingering in the background, especially among European researchers or researchers interested in explaining the apparent decline in the power of traditional cleavages but during much of the post–World War II period, the psychological approach and the technology of sample surveys held sway.4

This particular intellectual foundation of behavioral politics meant that, despite the international diffusion of survey research, projects aimed at comparing behavior across countries with the help of explicitly cross-national surveys with comparable measures collected at similar points in time were quite rare. Instead, a proliferation of single-country studies were theoretically and empirically focused on psychological concepts like partisanship, alienation, or efficacy, and were intended to probe a concept’s usefulness within a particular country context rather than to model its variability across countries. (Notable exceptions included Almond and Verba’s [1963] Civic Culture study, Barnes et al.’s [1979] Political Action study, and Inglehart’s [1977] work on value change, for example.) As well, a series of national election studies in individual countries were designed to apply the Michigan model of voter behavior to specific elections and countries. Even when researchers made use of cross-nationally comparable surveys, the underlying factors driving behavioral outcomes were frequently assumed to be common to a similarly situated set of countries. Thus, these studies were considered “comparative” mostly because they were conducted outside of the United States or in a set of (relatively similar) countries, not because there were strong theoretical reasons to believe that the individual-level relationships differed across countries. Perhaps the most famous examples of such debates centered on questions of whether partisanship can travel to countries other than the United States (Blais, Girsdengil, Nadeau, and Nevitte 2001) or whether class was universally in decline as a determinant of voter behavior (Evans 1999; Elff 2007).

Given the focus on individual-level concepts whose investigation did not require cross-national variation, this was not surprising. But two of the major downsides of this approach were a tendency of behavioral researchers to focus on variation within populations rather than across countries, and of conversations to focus on quite technical matters of survey methodology and concept measurement. In hindsight, this made it all too easy for scholars working in other areas of comparative politics to overlook insights from mass politics research for their own research agendas, and for behavioral researchers to use their technology and insight to enter major debates in comparative politics that went beyond the study of electoral politics in stable and rich democracies.

This situation started to change as comparative behavior research began to move from a dominant focus on micro-level processes to macro-level manifestations of behavior—that is, on comparing the aggregate attitudes and reported behaviors of citizens across countries with the goal of unearthing their macro-level, cross-national causes and consequences (Inglehart 1983). In part, this development was made possible by the emergence of several collaborative cross-national survey projects in the 1970s and 1980s designed to allow researchers to compare the attitudes and behaviors of citizens in many countries around the world (see also Dalton 2000) (such as the Eurobarometer Surveys, the World Values Surveys coordinated by Ronald Inglehart, or the International Social Survey Project; see Kittilson 2007).

This movement toward more explicit coordination of survey data collection across countries and the ability to systematically compare what citizens thought and did across countries fortuitously coincided with other trends in the real world of politics and inside the ivory tower: the rapid expansion of electoral democracies around the world in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as a renewed focus on both institutional questions in Comparative Politics and contextual theories in the study of political behavior (cf. Hall and Taylor 1996; Zuckerman 2003).5 On the intellectual front, the renewed interest in institutions among students of comparative politics left its mark on behavioral research by shifting attention away from social structure as the major contextual influence on mass behavior to institutions and policy outcomes. At the same time, a renewed interest among students of political behavior in the link between social context and electoral

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4 This classification is admittedly somewhat arbitrary, especially in light of the fact that the study of social psychology—a close relative of behavioral politics—is both sociological and psychological in nature and once upon a time was also formally unified within sociology or psychology departments.

5 Another helpful development entailed significant advances in desktop computing technologies and statistical techniques appropriate for conducting cross-national research (Anderson 2007a).
behavior provided an impetus to view citizens as nested in nonneutral contexts, and it furnished a theoretical model for understanding contextual influences more specifically (cf. Huckfeldt this volume).6 As a result, recent years have seen a clear move toward more systematic cross-national research, increasing attention to the impact of formal institutions on behavior, and the systematic testing of contextual theories of behavior in a broader universe of countries. Taken together, these shifts have opened up opportunities to integrate behavioral politics with institutional politics across a wider range of theoretical concerns in comparative politics.

THE PIECES OF THE PUZZLE: MULTILEVEL MODELS IN COMPARATIVE RESEARCH ON MASS POLITICS

A first consequence of the increased availability of cross-nationally comparable surveys and electoral data was the publication of a number of studies that focused at the macro level across countries, typically by examining the impact of countries’ institutions, structural conditions, or political and economic outcomes on aggregated measures of behavior or attitudes. In this vein, perhaps the most extensively researched country-level institutional feature has been a country’s electoral system and how it shapes voters’ choices to turn out to vote or which party or candidate to support.

For instance, a small industry of researchers has investigated the cross-national correlates of turnout in modern democracies, including several features of the electoral rules, such as registration requirements, the frequency of elections, compulsory voting, the timing of balloting, the proportionality of the electoral system, or district magnitude (see Gray and Coub 2000; Franklin 2004; Powell 1986; Jackman 1987). As well, a plethora of studies have found that different electoral rules produce systematically different election outcomes, measured by the effective number of parties, electoral volatility, or the success of parties and candidates with particular characteristics (see, e.g., Duverger 1954; Rae 1967; Pedersen 1983; Riker 1962b; Bartolini and Mair 1990; Lipset 1990; Cox 1997).

The models of behavior underlying these streams of research usually imply that the effects of institutions (or other macro-level characteristics) are direct—that is, they presume that citizens’ decisions are directly affected by the incentives that the rules or context provide. Thus, higher levels of turnout in countries with less frequent elections, for example, are accounted for by the fact that the structural features that individuals are exposed to — election frequency — directly affect the incentives people have (in this example, the costs of going to the polls). At first glance, many comparative studies of political behavior resemble such a simple “direct effects” model, at least empirically. The studies of aggregate voter turnout mentioned earlier or the study of electoral volatility are examples of such models. Yet, upon closer inspection, many turn out to be based on theoretical models of indirect or conditional effects, even if the empirical analyses investigate the impact of institutional features on behavior as if it were direct.

Theoretically speaking, indirect effects imply that structures affect some intervening variable, which, in turn, is the actual proximate cause of the dependent variable. We could hypothesize, for example, that the degree or kind of ethnic heterogeneity in a country affects citizens’ identification with their ethnic group, which, in turn, affects whether they engage in peaceful or violent political action. Or particular cleavage structures lead voters to develop strong class identities, which, in turn, shape their attachments to political parties. In these examples, theoretically and empirically speaking, structure has consequences — here, how heterogeneity shapes individuals’ ethnic identification or how social structure affects class consciousness — and these consequences, in turn, have secondary effects on behavior.

In addition to such indirect effects, the impact of structures can and should often be viewed as conditional. Conditional effects models imply that the effect of some structural feature on voter behavior is strengthened or weakened, depending on the presence of a third variable, such as voters’ priorities or preferences. For example, while electoral rules may increase the costs of voting across all voters, these costs have effects of differing magnitude on individuals’ decisions to turn out to vote because individuals with different levels of resources are differentially able to bear these costs. Alternatively, structure can be the intervening variable that helps determine the relative strength that an individual-level independent variable may have on behavior. To use the electoral system example once more, individuals’ resources should affect the odds of turning out, but this connection may be particularly strong in countries with electoral rules that make turning out more costly.

It is important to note that conditional or indirect models, on the one hand, and simpler direct effects models, on the other, are not necessarily at odds with each other. But the former go beyond the simpler earlier models in that they represent a more finely grained theoretical and empirical specification of the underlying causal mechanisms at work. Thus, direct effects that institutions or structures are shown to have on a behavioral outcome — say, turnout — may simply be an average for the population as a whole that hides significant heterogeneity in people’s behavior. Similarly, the connection between an individual-level variable and individual action may be differentially strong across countries for reasons that could be specified theoretically and modeled empirically.

Recent years have seen a surge of research using so-called multilevel models,7 which seek to model these more complex and heterogeneous relations by combining different levels of analysis: the macro level across countries and the

6 For an excellent introduction to the politics of context, see Huckfeldt (1986).

7 These models are also sometimes referred to as “hierarchical models.” I prefer the term “multilevel” or “contextual” to “hierarchical” in part because the former indicates the focus on different levels of analysis (individual and country, for example) and because the latter has specific connotations in the context of recursive regression analyses, and because it requires that some variables are exogenous and some endogenous.
micro level of citizens' attitudes and actions (Anderson 2007a). This means that such models of citizen behavior go beyond simple cross-national studies that correlate countries' macrocharacteristics and aggregated responses to survey questions of interest or aggregate election statistics. Multilevel models are particularly well equipped to integrate what we know about citizens' political behavior with what we know about macro-level differences across countries because they connect the individual-level experiences people have as participants in the political process and how they interact with the constraints any particular political system or situation provides in the form of structural, institutional, or cultural contextual parameters (Kedar and Shively 2005). Such models constitute a major step forward in the comparative study of behavioral politics because they allow us to specify this heterogeneity both theoretically and empirically.

**Some Examples: Representational Structures and Voter Behavior**

One area in which the role of cross-national macro-level variables has been examined extensively is in research on economic voting. In recent years, students of electoral politics have addressed the puzzling finding that the economy does not exert consistently strong, and sometimes even counterintuitive, effects on election outcomes across countries or at different points in time (Paldam 1991). To explain this empirical inconsistency, a number of recent studies have focused on how the nature of a country's representational structures interacts with voters' willingness to punish governments for bad economic performance to produce different election outcomes. Most of this literature argues that the impact of a bad economy hinges on the ability of voters to assign responsibility to governments for economic performance. This ability has come to be thought of as being affected by structural features of polities, which act as institutional barriers that make it difficult for voters to obtain the necessary information about the representative's activities and the connection between their activities and economic outcomes.

At its core, this understanding of the connections among economic outcomes, political institutions, and voter behavior is based on a theoretical model of conditional relations. For example, institutions are complex and allow representatives to avoid blame—a model like the frequent practice of coalition government in the continental European countries—and this makes it difficult for voters to figure out who is to blame for a bad economy. In this case, institutions act as a moderator by facilitating or hampering the relationship between citizens' motivation to reward or punish governments and their vote choice. As a result, the impact of the economy—in the form of individual voters' evaluations of the economy, for example—on voting behavior for or against the government will vary in strength and perhaps even in direction, depending on the institutional context. And we can also imagine that macroeconomic performance—a macro-level variable—affects voters' choices to different degrees, depending on their sophistication or their ability to discern policy responsibility. In this latter example, individual heterogeneity in sophistication moderates the impact of a macro-level variable on individual vote choice.

Demonstrating and disentangling these relations has been the subject of a growing body of research in comparative electoral politics (see Anderson 2007b for a review). In revising the traditional model of economic voting, attempts to incorporate representational structures more explicitly were pushed along by the publication of a paper by Powell and Whitten (1993), who classified political systems into those where responsibility is clear and those where it is not. This classification is based on formal institutional and structural characteristics of countries such as one-party versus multiparty rule, whether there is bicameral opposition, decision-making powers for opposition parties in parliament, or party cohesion. Their analysis found that economic effects were stronger in those countries that had clearer levels of responsibility. A complementary perspective on how differences in political context may moderate the relationship between economy and government support views clarity of responsibility as variable over time within (and across) countries because of election outcomes that change the balance of power and elite bargaining, both of which periodically reshape the political context in which voters seek to affix credit and blame (Anderson 1993a; Nadeau, Niemi, and Yoshinaka 2002). Thus, even when formal institutions do not change or vary, the extent to which voters are able to assign responsibility to political actors changes from one election to the next and in between because of the political dynamics created by electoral systems, party systems, the process of government formation, and the like (Anderson 1993a, 2000).

Finally, this new contextual branch of economic voting research has documented that the ability of voters to retain or throw incumbents out of office is also contingent on the presence of credible alternatives. Yet, unsurprisingly, perhaps, the extent to which voters have or perceive such choices varies considerably (Anderson 1993b; Bengtsson 2004). For example, fragmented party systems, volatile party systems, or party systems dominated by one dominant party should make it more difficult for voters to identify a clear alternative to the incumbent government (Anderson 2000; Paldam 1991). In such countries, there tends to be greater uncertainty about the likely shape of an alternative future government that will form after the election has been held, and this results in a

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8 This puzzle was foreshadowed in Eyal and Lewis-Beck (1985) and Lewis-Beck (1988).

9 The story I tell here can easily be made more complex. For example, an additional factor has been added by Page and Radvilff (1995), who find that more extensive welfare states cushion the impact of a bad economy on the vote. In addition, scholars recently have begun to examine the impact of the international economic environment on economic voting (cf. Hellwig 2002), and Duch and Stevenson (2005) have introduced the notion of competence signals as a factor that makes voters more or less likely to punish and reward governments. Finally, Samuels (2003) recently has pushed the Powell-Whitten classification to include the distinction between presidentialism v. parliamentarism (as well as the existence of concurrent or nonconcurrence presidential and legislative elections).
diminished likelihood that voters will turn out the incumbent government even when economic conditions are bad (Anderson 2000).

While the different approaches to understanding contingent effects from an institutional or contextual perspective differ – some focus on formal features of a political system while others focus on the dynamics of the macropolitical context of the day, some focus on incumbents while others focus on the alternatives voters have, some are based on a combination of macro-level and individual-level data and others use exclusively cross-national aggregate data – they are based on similar theoretical models that combine cross-national institutional differences with individual-level differences to produce individual-level outcomes. They all view voters as willing to reward and punish, but as being thwarted by contextual conditions inherent in processes and institutions of representation.

The basic insight of this work – namely, that a country’s democratic design affects voters’ behavior – has been pursued in other domains of electoral behavior as well. For example, Huber, Kernell, and Leoni (2005) examine the relationship between institutional features and partisan attachment across 25 new and established democracies around the globe. They find that institutions that encourage retrospective clarity of responsibility foster the formation of party attachments. Moreover, institutional context has differential effects: Features of political systems that make it more difficult to form party attachments have their biggest impact on individuals with the fewest cognitive resources.

While she follows a different empirical strategy, a similar theoretical model underlies Kedar’s (2005) work on how institutional context conditions the relationship between voter goals and voter behavior. Comparing two highly majoritarian democracies and two very consensual ones, Kedar finds that voters incorporate the way institutions convert votes on policy into their choices. Since policy is often the result of institutionalized multiparty bargaining, which waters down the translation of policy preferences into policy outcomes, voters compensate for this by supporting parties whose positions differ from (and are often more extreme than) their own.69

To give yet another example of the kinds of insights multilevel approaches can generate, electoral institutions and the outcomes they produce can lead to reinterpretations of what we know about the effect of macro-level institutions and structures on voter behavior. For example, Brockington (2004) and Justo and Shively (2006) reexamine the effect of party systems and coalition government on voter turnout to see if the impact of party systems differs for different kinds of voters. Consistent with much research on the effects of proportional representation on turnout reviewed earlier, they find that, for high-information voters, participation in elections rises as the number of parties in the system increases. Thus, among these voters, more choice improves participation rates. However, for citizens with more limited political information, increases in the number of parties in party systems depresses voting turnout. This leads to the ironic conclusion that proportional representation, which is normatively intended to lead to a more fair representation system, increases the information gap by complicating political choices and thus disenfranchises the less informed relative to the better informed.

These examples demonstrate that the systematic incorporation of well-known institutional features into models of political behavior can produce novel insights and help resolve well-known theoretical puzzles or empirical debates – Why does a bad economy sometimes lead voters to throw governments out of office but sometimes does not? Why is turnout higher in some proportional representation systems than others? Why do scholars find support for both proximity and directional models of voting? – and they add a richness that models based on direct and unconditional effects do not possess.

THE TIES THAT COULD BIND: NESTED CITIZENS AND STRUCTURALISTS, RATIONALISTS, AND CULTURALISTS

The building blocks of multilevel models that integrate context and individual behavior are familiar to structuralists, rationalists, and culturalists, and the implicit assumptions that underlie them are put in relief when considered in light of other theoretical approaches. These assumptions suggest that the behavioral study of comparative politics in fact has much in common with structural, rational, and cultural approaches and holds the potential for even further cross-pollination in the future.

When thinking about the ways in which multilevel models view the interaction of structures and individual characteristics to produce behavior, it is useful to start by construing “context” or “structure” broadly. We can think of these as encompassing the immediate social environment as well as macro-level structures at the level of countries or even beyond. And following the definition of an institution as any socially imposed constraint upon human behavior or the “rules of the game” for human interaction (North 1981), they do not have to be formal or written rules – or so-called parchment institutions (Carey 2000) – but can also include informal constraints, such as widely accepted norms of behavior that have long been the focus of cultural theories of politics.

Returning to the origins of behavioral politics for a moment, it is clear that the sociological approach for many years held a dominant position in part because it provides a unifying framework for studying voters, parties, and government behavior. It takes context seriously and seeks to generalize, but it also focuses – at least conceptually – on individuals as the ultimate decision makers. Viewed in this way, the affinity between structuralists and multilevel behavioral researchers is thus long-standing and obvious: They share an interest in generalizability, they combine an interest in social and political institutions with an

68 In related studies, Klingemann and Wessels (2000) and Gschwend (2007) examine the likelihood that individuals will vote sincerely or strategically. They find that voters’ tendency to vote sincerely or strategically depends on institutional characteristics, such as district magnitude, proportionality, allocation rules, and the party system (supply). In particular, they argue that sincere voting is more likely among individuals living in countries with electoral systems characterized by large district magnitude and a high degree of proportionality.
interest in behavioral outcomes, and they examine the connections between voters, parties, and governments in institutional contexts.

And like rationalists, behavioral researchers, who, for the most part, use sample surveys to collect their data, are committed to methodological individualism and assume that people act to maximize their advantage. At a minimum, they presume that actors employ reason to achieve their goals and that people’s actions can be explained by the motivation to pursue goals. For example, the research on economic and strategic voting reviewed earlier assumes, sometimes explicitly, that voters seek to reward and punish governments in ways that are consistent with their own (or others’) well-being, or that they seek to maximize the odds that their preferred policy packages will be implemented. In addition, the multilevel approach instinctively looks for institutional (and other) constraints on goal-directed behavior. Rationalists would have little to quibble about with this model of human behavior (see also Levi this volume).

Finally, while the kinship with culturalists is less well developed and perhaps less obvious, there is no doubt that behavioral researchers have long been interested in political culture, values, identity, and, more fundamentally, the subjective dimension of politics. One way to connect culture and multilevel models is to think of culture as a kind of structural variable that constrains choices by circumscribing what individuals can imagine. As Barnes noted in the first edition of this volume, “Culture can constrain behavior as much as institutions can. It rewards some behaviors and sanctions others. Like institutions, it conditions behavior, it conditions choice” (Barnes 1997: 119). Such an understanding is not all that far removed from the idea of informal institutions (Helms and Levitsky 2006). If viewed in a structural way, then, culture is easily integrated into multilevel models, at least conceptually. And to the extent that values are the individual-level manifestations of culture, then they, too, are easily assimilated into multilevel models of politics in that they can be seen as moderating the impact of structures or self-interest.

While potential and actual ties between comparative mass politics and the different theoretical traditions in comparative politics are thus real or at least apparent, it is easy to take the metaphor of analytical kinships too far, however. There clearly are important differences between pure versions of culturalists, rationalists, and structuralists, on the one hand, and the way mainstream behavioral political science is practiced, on the other. For example, the kind of rationality that presumably underlies political behavior is clearly a soft form of rationality as goal-directed action, broadly defined. And self-interest is not completely exogenous to behavioral models; traditionally, behavioral researchers have conceptualized self-interest as arising from structures (think class and other cleavages) or with regard to material self-interest, which itself is a product of social, economic, and political structures, historical events, and thus ultimately human choices.

What is more, there is plenty of evidence that voters frequently do not act to maximize their own narrow and short-term self-interest, and instead behave in ways that emphasize collective well-being and other-focused concerns (see also Zuckerman this volume). Ironically, this is even the case in studies of economic voting, which have found that people’s evaluations of the nation’s well-being are more potent predictors of vote choice than evaluations of personal material well-being (Anderson 2007b). Similarly, in studies of spatial models of voting, the puzzle to be solved often is why, in apparent violation of narrowly defined self-interest, voters do not consistently choose parties or candidates that are closer to their ideal position (cf. Kedar 2005). And finally, comparative behavioral research goes beyond the narrowly rational choice sort focused on behavior as revealed preferences, which has little use for attitudes and perceptions or the origin of tastes and the formation of preferences.2

Returning, for a moment, to research on economic voting to illustrate the difficulty of employing a strictly rational perspective, there are reasons to doubt that a simple version of rationality is sufficient to account for variations in economic voting that appear in the data. Aside from the fact that voters’ behavior is not always obviously self-interested, recent behavioral work in political science rooted in behavioral decision making (at its core, a combination of psychology and economics) (Lupia, McCubbins, and Popkin 2000) would have trouble swallowing some of the assumptions of what voters know when they engage in economic and strategic voting. For example, a basic assumption underlying the studies reviewed earlier is that voters are generally informed about the state of the economy, that this information is unbiased (at least in the aggregate), that they have a sense of the processes by which government action relates to micro- and macroeconomic outcomes, and that they judge electorally accountable decision makers mostly with an eye toward the performance of the (objective) economy. Given existing evidence about voter sophistication and political interest, these are truly heroic assumptions (for a more extensive discussion, see Anderson 2007b).

To begin with, accurate “objective” information about the economy is frequently difficult to come by for the average citizen, and the interpretation of “objective” facts about the state of the economy is frequently contested (Keech 1995). Most people learn about the national economy indirectly from mass media, which tend to overreport negative economic conditions (Goedl and Langley 1995). These negative reports heavily condition voters’ economic perceptions (Hetherington 1996), and economic evaluations consequently derive to a greater extent from the way in which the media present economic developments than they do from objective changes in the real economy (Sanders and Gavir 2004; see also Nadeau et al. 1999).

It should not be surprising that all this makes it difficult for voters to form an accurate perception of actual economic conditions in the country. In addition, aside from biases and limits in accurate information, citizens’ cognitive limits reduce the extent to which objective information is likely to be coded accurately (Krause 1997; Krause and Granato 1998; however, also see Sanders 2000).

14 To be fair, an increasing number of economists are becoming interested in going beyond revealed preferences, but they still constitute a minority of scholars.
Moreover, citizens do not learn about different aspects of the macroeconomy in the same way or at the same pace (Nannestad, Paldam, and Rosholm 2003; Weatherford 1983). For example, differently situated voters are exposed to systematically different economic experiences that help determine how they perceive the state of the economy (Duch, Palmer, and Anderson 2000; Holbrook and Garand 1996; Weatherford 1983; Welch and Hibbing 1992). As well, lag times in citizens’ learning of economic trends differ significantly for inflation and unemployment, for example (Conover and Feldman 1986), and significant proportions of voters are predominantly static and myopic in their evaluations of economic conditions (Paldam and Nannestad 2000). What is more, citizens’ own political biases and values work against a close relationship between perceptions of economic conditions and economic evaluations at the individual level. For example, partisans form evaluations of the state of the economy to be consistent with their previously held beliefs (Anderson, Mendes, and Tverdova 2004; Evans and Andersen 2006; Wlezien, Franklin, and Twiggs 1997). Moreover, in contrast to the image of a coolly rational voter, affective reactions to personal and national economic conditions have been found to shape economic evaluations (Conover and Feldman 1986).

All these facets of how voters think about the economy have important implications for how we think about rational voters. At a minimum, this research undermines the assumption that significant portions of the electorate judge a government’s record based on what occurs in actuality. And this is at odds with narrow rational models of voter behavior, and it also is plausibly consistent with competing theoretical approaches. Thus, even in the area of economic voting, the affinity between students of mass politics and rationalists, while apparent, is not entirely tight-knit.

The same can be said about the connection between structuralists and multilevel behavioralists. Both view social and economic structures and institutions as important elements in shaping behavior, but behavioralists emphasize the probabilistic nature of this connection, while pure structuralists make it difficult for individuals to escape the constraints that structure dictates. Thus, behavioralists interested in individual-level heterogeneity are slightly less mechanistic or deterministic than simple versions of structure might imply. Students of comparative mass politics have only recently rediscovered the long-standing connection between structural and behavioral approaches in a way that eschews the conceptual determinism of some earlier approaches. Here, Zuckerman, Dascović, and Fitzgerald’s (2007) work on families and partisanship or the comparative studies of social networks and electoral behavior (see also Huckfeldt this volume) are representative of the promise inherent in this research agenda.

Behavioral scholars share with structuralists and rationalists the tendency to stress generalizability. Although this stands in contrast to culturalists’ instinct to shy away from generalizing beyond the single case, it does not necessarily imply a kind of natural antipathy between behavioral and cultural researchers. In fact, there is a good deal of common ground on which to build. The connection between students of behavioral politics and those engaged in cultural studies is that they privilege the subjective dimension of politics through the study of perceptions, attitudes, and shared understandings. At the individual level, culture is a subjective phenomenon and is concerned with interpretation and understanding of self and others. The subject of identity, for example, comes to mind as something that both behavioral and cultural researchers can and should reasonably claim.

To think about the connection between culture and voter behavior in the context of a concrete example, recall the research on economic and strategic voting reviewed earlier, which is based on arguments that draw on the themes of rationality and (political) structure. This literature assumes that voting (and related activities) are instrumental acts of rational, self-interested citizens. But suppose, instead, as a culturalist might argue, that voting (and other acts of participation) are expressive acts. If that were the case, then voters, depending on their perceptions of where they “belong,” might not seek to punish the poorly performing party or might not care if the party performed well (as it is the “other” party or not “my” party).

There is, in fact, behavioral evidence to suggest that this is what happens. Citizens’ evaluations of the economy often do not translate into a vote for or against the government because people do not necessarily attribute responsibility for economic conditions to the incumbent government. As it turns out, citizens are often motivated to make the wrong attribution. In particular, voters attribute problem-solving competency and responsibility for good performance to the party they support and blame opposite parties for inferior economic performance (Rudolph 2003; see also Peffley, Feldman, and Sigelman 1987; Peffley and Williams 1985; however, see also Basinger and Lavine 2005; Norpoth 2001).

Or suppose that voting is not based on self-interest (cf. Meehl 1977; Blais 2000). Instead, it may reflect cultural scripts that are enacted through ritual behavior in elections and designed to remind members of a political community of their shared values and shared communal responsibility for self-government (McLeod 1999). How would this shift in theoretical perspective affect the analyses? At a minimum, it would lead to different interpretations of the data and perhaps different normative implications of our findings. While I doubt that it would take a great deal of persuasion to convince comparative behavioral researchers that culture is “real,” and that it can act powerfully in ways that are similar to those of formal institutions or other structures, the key question is whether a different theoretical perspective produces a compelling alternative story that can be validated with solid data.

Despite these potential affinities between culturalists and behavioral researchers, and despite Almond and Verba’s and Inglehart’s pathbreaking work on culture and changing political values, culture remains the stepchild of comparative behavioral politics. On occasion, as in Putnam’s work on civic life in Italy, cultural categories are successfully employed as analytical tools by behavioral researchers, but by and large, these efforts remain the exception that proves the rule. To the extent that culture and changing values are part of the comparative mass politics paradigm, they enter via the back door of structure – that is to
say, because structure (in the sociological sense) appears to have become a less powerful determinant of action (Dalton 1984).

I suspect that part of the relative neglect of culture in mass politics research also has to do with the difficulty of communicating across the cultural-behavioral divide. And, to be fair, significant obstacles to a closer relationship do exist. While behavioral researchers, like culturalists, are interested in the subjective dimension of politics, they tend to be less focused on working out the mechanisms and tracing the processes by which culture works to constrain behavior. Part of it has to do with the technology of sample surveys, which do not easily capture intersubjective and cross-cultural meanings. Here, a critical obstacle is the problem of equivalence. The utility of cross-national surveys rises and falls with the ability to capture equivalent meanings across countries or individuals (van Deth 1998; King, Murray, Salomon, and Tandon 2003). To take some simple but vexing examples, what the terms “democracy,” “corruption,” or “human rights” mean, and whether they mean the same thing across countries and different people, is certainly debatable (and debated).

This need not be an obstacle to forging closer links between cultural and behavioral researchers. One relatively unexplored but potentially fruitful way of connecting culture, rationalism, and behaviorism is in how psychocultural interpretations (Ross 1993a) shape behavior. In particular, both behavioral and cultural researchers have an interest in capturing how people make sense of the world around them (see also Ross this volume). Part of this sense-making, in fact an essential first step in this process, is the formation of perceptions. And differentially situated individuals often form vastly different perceptions of the same phenomenon or fact: “The same factors that push actors to make sense of a situation also lead to cognitive and perceptual distortion, because the desire for certainty is often greater than the capacity for accuracy. Not only are disputants likely to make systematic errors in the ‘facts’ underlying interpretations, but the homogeneous nature of most social settings and cultural amplifiers reinforces these self-serving mistakes” (Ross 1997: 69). I doubt that most political psychologists would disagree with such an argument.

These systematic errors in perceptions and self-serving mistakes are easily recognizable in the work of behavioral researchers. For example, as mentioned earlier, people will see the state of the economy as they, perhaps unself-consciously, wish to see it or because of the self-reinforcing nature of homogeneous social environments (Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004). To take a different example, recent work in comparative behavior has sought to investigate the determinants of people’s perceptions of and attitudes about human rights, democracy, or corruption — often thought to be culturally laden and contested concepts — and the extent to which such perceptions are shared across and within countries (Anderson, Paskeviciute, Sandovic, and Tverdova 2005; Seligson 2006). As it turns out, there is significant heterogeneity across differentially situated individuals, and this heterogeneity is often the result of cognitive biases.

To date, an important assumption underlying existing multilevel models concerns the stability of contextual features over time. Relaxing this assumption could offer the opportunity of bridging the interests of culturalists, structuralists, and behavioralists in the endogeneity of institutions (see also Rodden this volume) and political processes generally. Institutions are hard to divorce from culture and can be thought of as reflecting culture (unless exogenously imposed). They are also endogenous to mass and elite behavior, and can thus be seen as being created and modified by (rational) strategic actors. While the studies of strategic voter behavior — as they examine the interaction between voters and electoral rules or the number of parties, for example — assume passive political parties, voters are clearly not the only actors when it comes to institutional change. It is plausible, if not likely, that parties also work to create preferences, during political campaigns as well as at other times (e.g., Farrell and Schmitt-Beck 2006). Political parties and governments are also heavily and often primarily involved in crafting new institutional solutions, and the fluidity or stability of structures — and concomitantly the exogeneity and endogeneity of institutions — is particularly likely to differ systematically in old versus new democracies, with the presumption of greater endogeneity or at least the potential for it in newer democracies. Alternatively, vote choice influences the number of parties (some win and do well; some do poorly or lose) and the parties’ campaign appeals. All these processes interact so that vote choice, party behavior, and electoral rules are all potentially endogenous (see also Rodden this volume). The questions of institutional stability and endogeneity are thus critically related to basic assumptions in multilevel behavioral work.

If we think about comparative politics as a set of islands of study, as some have argued (Dalton 1991), the affinities discussed earlier suggest that the comparative study of mass politics is in the position of playing an important bridging role across theoretical and substantive islands. To use the language of social networks, behavioral politics is the approach that can fill structural holes in comparative politics by linking up with a variety of theoretical and substantive concerns, such as the study of democratization, mobilization, welfare states, or representation, to name just a few examples, via the connection of citizens’ preferences and actions and macro-political outcomes and vice versa.

Some have traveled down this path. In addition to the research on economic voting reviewed earlier, recent years have seen systematic investigations of the links between corruption and subjective outcomes such as regime legitimacy and happiness (Anderson and Tverdova 2020; Tavits forthcoming), political institutions and regime support (Anderson and Guillory 1997; Anderson, Blais, Bowler, Donovan, and Listhaug 2005), religion and preferences for social insurance (Scheve and Stasavage 2006), processes of domestic representation and support for European integration (Rohrschneider 2002), income inequality, trust in government, and voter turnout (Anderson and Singer 2008; Anderson and Beramendi 2008), and the link between welfare state institutions and policies to citizens’ preferences and attitudes about work (Iversen and Sosske 2001; Anderson and Pontusson 2007), to name only a handful of examples (see Anderson 2007a for a more extensive review). The point is that students of
behavioral comparative politics have started to take full advantage of the new world of better theories, data, and multilevel statistical techniques.

But inherent in the good fortune of occupying, or potentially occupying, this central space in comparative politics is the risk of being stuck in the nowhere land of not being central to any one theoretical or substantive debate in different subfields. On balance, my own sense is that the evolution of comparative behavioral researchers toward ecumenism is fruitful and exciting. Instead of prizeing one theoretical perspective—culture, structure, or rationality—over another, creative thievery allows the construction of an intellectual framework that is broad but theoretically grounded. What is more, given that much of political science is aimed at explaining behavior—the decisions taken by governments, political actors, groups, organizations, parties, and the like—behavioral politics is extremely well positioned to interrogate basic assumptions scholars make about how individuals come to make particular choices, under different conditions, in different contexts, and at different points in time:

Even where variables are not explicitly nested, they will be implicitly so in theory, as in questions about the relationship between democracy and economic development, though these are both macro-level variables, all arguments about their relationship involve assumptions about how various subsystem players (labor, capital, the military, etc.) interact under varying system-level conditions. Comparative Politics, dealing as it does with how politics operates in varying political systems, appears by its very nature to be multi-level. (Kedar and Shively 2005: 297)

SOME LAST WORDS: LOOKING FOR A GRAND THEORY OF MULTILEVEL POLITICS?

Comparative politics has long been dominated by macro and meso approaches. While countries and their cultures, structures, and institutions are obviously important and legitimate scholarly concerns, relatively few comparativists have focused on understanding the behavior of individuals as political actors. What is more, research focused at the macro level and research into the behavior of individuals for many years have existed in separate worlds. This is unfortunate, as people—in their roles as voters, citizens, consumers, union members, party leaders, activists, protestors, taxpayers, workers, parents, farmers, and policymakers—are at the heart of politics. What they think and do (or do not do) is critical for understanding such central and oft-investigated phenomena as elections, revolutions, regime stability, legitimacy, political culture, ethnicity, corruption, redistribution, and welfare states—or any number of subjects that link citizens' desires and government action.

I have reviewed a number of reasons for these trends, but an important part of the story is that this situation has begun to change in recent years as a new generation of comparative researchers has started to take behavioral politics seriously and to develop ways to connect individual behavior and cognitions and scholarship in comparative politics more broadly. In contrast to much behavioral research in American politics, this research starts with the simple and perhaps obvious recognition that people do not live in a vacuum. Instead, they are nested citizens insofar as they form attitudes and make choices in variable environments—be they formal (institutional) rules, informal rules, such as norms of behavior and cultural scripts, or differential structural conditions. These environments vary systematically across countries or regions, and they are theorized to powerfully shape what people do and think. Put simply, the comparative study of mass politics is in the process of becoming the study of nested citizens.

The study of nested citizens is broadening the substantive repertoire of mass politics research from one focused on social structures and electoral behavior in the rich democracies to one that combines a (potential) multitude of macro-level factors and individual-level behaviors in most countries around the world. Thus, compared to only a decade ago, when Barnes (1997) was writing his review of mass politics, newer strands of research and availability of data have opened up the possibility of going far beyond the advanced industrialized societies that have traditionally constituted the core of scholarship on comparative mass politics, as well as going beyond the narrow focus on electoral behavior and conventional politics to include questions of legitimacy, values, and political economy—and, as a result, the possibility of occupying a central place in the study of comparative politics.

But this opportunity is not entirely risk-free. A particular risk lies in the indiscriminate and theoretically unreflective proliferation of studies examining macro–micro connections in the absence of an overarching theoretical framework. At the same time, such a framework is hard to construct. For example, modeling the interactive effects of structures and individual differences on behavioral outcomes and the analytical strategies underlying the examples of studies of voter behavior described earlier presumes that macro contexts are exogenous and static—or at least sufficiently so in the short term to allow for a systematic examination of structures and behavior. Needless to say, this is unlikely to be the case in the long run and less likely to be the case in some contexts, such as democratizing or rapidly changing societies.

This recent wave of comparative political behavior is rooted in long-standing research programs in comparative politics and mass politics through their focus on institutions or social structures. Studies of voter behavior that emphasize variations in structures (formal rules and/or political parties) also link easily to other substantive concerns prominent in comparative politics today, and especially to analyses of cabinet formation, the impact of government partisanship on policy outcomes, and our understanding of the role of elections and institutions of representation in shaping the quality of democracy. These concerns link to multilevel analyses in straightforward ways; in contrast, the single-country

12 Notable exceptions in American politics include, for example, Huckfeldt (1986) and Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995).
13 Another way to think about this is to say that the relationship between citizen behavior and context is assumed to run from context to behavior and to be in equilibrium.
studies that are derived from the Michigan model are on the margins of comparative politics. As a result, the study of mass politics has become more central to the study of comparative politics, perhaps in unanticipated ways, through its ecumenical relations with different theoretical traditions in the social sciences and comparative politics.

In the end, it is important to welcome the current wave of multilevel comparative behavioral research that seeks to integrate what we know about macro-level politics, which comparative politics has long specialized in, with micro-level cognition and action. To be sure, behavioral politics, as currently practiced, is weak on process and mechanisms, but it explicitly recognizes that contexts matter, that they are variable across space and time, and that they are commonly the product of social choices human societies make. Moreover, they are seldom neutral in that they usually have differential costs and incentives for differently situated individuals. And because these environments have non-neutral consequences for different kinds of people, they provide individuals with incentives and conditions for viewing the world and behaving in particular and distinct ways.

Such a picture of the interaction between structures and behavior views politics as the interaction of people’s values and the rules and conditions that govern the implementation of those values. These interactions occur at different levels of analysis, and they connect various elements of explanations in a complex causal chain with many moving parts. This world is fundamentally different from early studies of political behavior, which assume direct effects between rational calculations or self-interest; or culturally based preferences; or structurally derived preferences and citizen action. Thus, they take up Zuckerman’s challenge (see Zuckerman this volume) to develop models that apply to “stochastic, multilevel, and reciprocal phenomena, not only simple one-directional causal claims.”

A couple of years ago, when I was presenting some research I had done using a multilevel modeling framework, a colleague asked me whether I saw myself as a structuralist or a rationalist. At the time, I didn’t quite know what to say. He told me that the answer was simple: He thought I was both, and in hindsight I think he was right. I would only add that I think cultural approaches and questions should be part of the agenda of multilevel behavioral politics as well. Such a perspective of citizen politics recognizes that the rules and realities in which citizens make choices are themselves a function of people’s values (Riker 1982). If it takes this perspective, multilevel behavioral research is well positioned to connect the hitherto disconnected and allow behavioral researchers to engage with and be engaged by long-standing but unresolved debates in comparative politics.

13

Back to the Future

Endogenous Institutions and Comparative Politics

Jonathan Rodden

Like a fashion trend traveling from New York to the heartland, soul-searching about causality has made its way from empirical research in economics to that in political science with the usual lag. Gone are the days when it was enough to have a nice theory, a conditional correlation, and some rhetoric about the implausibility of competing explanations while implying but assiduously avoiding the “c” word. Editors, reviewers, and search committees are beginning to look for more explicit and careful empirical treatments of causality. That is, following a definition of causality tracing back to Mill (1848), researchers are expected to lay out a set of possible outcomes, or counterfactuals, generated by a set of determinants, and demonstrate that holding all possible determinants except one at a constant level, the manipulation of that determinant is associated with a specific change in outcome, which can be deemed a causal effect (Heckman 2005).

It does not take much soul-searching to realize, however, that the observational studies that make up the vast majority of empirical explorations in comparative politics are deeply flawed when held up to the experimental ideal. Where does this leave us? In the extreme view, if we cannot do randomized field experiments or perhaps survey experiments, we should do nothing. The opposite extreme position holds that this would remake comparative politics into an arid subfield of program evaluation, turning a blind eye to the interesting and important questions that animated the field in its golden era (definitions vary). In this view, there is a steep trade-off between “interesting” and “provable,” and the best way forward is to maintain a more casual approach to empirical explorations of causality given that the basic problems are intractable for the questions at the heart of the subfield. As one colleague put it, it is better for the field to suffer from omitted variables than omitted questions.

Rather than entering an abstract debate about the philosophy of science, this chapter opts for an admittedly rather onhand descriptive empiricism. How are empirical researchers in comparative politics grappling with problems of causality in their work? To put it bluntly: Is comparative politics getting less interesting? Does our newfound concern with causality turn us away from