



Researching Politics in Africa: Reflections on Comparative Design Using Written Materials in Understanding Identity Politics Within the Context of African Societies

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Abstract

Comparative politics is a linchpin of understanding systemic politicization of identities. The motivation to study identity politics in the context of Africa was generated by the general view that situates ethnic politics as being messy in mainstream scholarly debates. The comparative approach was applicable in determining conditions that explained the divisive nature of ethnicity in Kenya and stabilizing effects of tribal party politics in Zambia. To meet the study's objectives, a comparative design using written materials was employed. The research followed a descriptive and interpretative design in comparing the two countries' political history and social spheres. Generally, principles that guide comparative research design are flexible. Comparative methods in politics as a field of study are often binary as they are used to demystify linear ways of studying societies which are neither homogeneous nor static. The discrepancies and consistencies in the cases studied were helpful in the process of integrating and interrogating literature. The practicalities of using comparative case analysis in the study of politics for African nation-states are based on both the diversity and shared sense of settings.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Define comparative research design
 - Explain the advantages of using written materials as data
 - Understand the process of deploying variables and analysis of findings based on written documents
 - Highlight some of the probable challenges and possibilities of applying a comparative research design
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Overview

The aim of this method case study is to reflect on the procedural elements and significance of comparative case analysis. The case draws examples from a project that was done in 2014 and subsequently published in the journal *Politikon* in 2017. This case is an exposition of comparative design using written materials in the study of multi-ethnic societies and the interaction of identities in electoral politics. The case is divided into four main sections. The first section provides context to the case method under discussion. The second part characterizes comparative design and the use of written materials as data in this design. The third part discusses the research technicalities that made the utilization of the method feasible. In the fourth section, lessons are drawn about the application and process of using the comparative design through analyzing written materials. In conclusion and final analysis, this case suggests that comparative design is a fulcrum upon which students and researchers in politics or international relations must, should, and can conduct

Context

The intersection of theory and empirical evidence is often contested. Studies that have shaped thinking about ethnicity in Africa appear to be highly theorized. Uncovering effects of identity politics in multi-ethnic societies of Africa requires the merging of abstract knowledge and reality. There is a high dedication of scholarly work in mainstream debates that have generalized and portrayed identity politics, especially in Africa, as being messy and retrogressive for civilization. Thus, the core objective of the project upon which this case is based was to explore the extent to which ethnic identities can be divisive in Kenya and stabilizing in Zambia, two African nations that share a history of ethnic electoral practices. The two country cases were examined for possible differences and similarities especially the politicization of ethnicities in electoral practices.

Understanding Comparative Framework and Contextualizing Content as Data

Comparative politics is about comparing two countries along a range of issues from political process to social events. These can be based on findings which are both good and bad for societal harmony—in the presence of ethnic diversity.

Comparative research method is a strategy for studying both similarities and differences that characterize political and social entities. These units of study can be referred to as “cases” because they help in comprehending human actions and conditions of life. Thus, “comparative politics” is concerned with comparing trends in and between countries, societies, political associations, and many more (Bryman, 2016). Comparing occurrences enables researchers and policy makers to predict the pattern of events, for example, wars, breakdown of rule of law, and the rise of “rule by man” in some countries.

To further study an issue, a researcher can search, describe, engage with, and evaluate written records or content. Both qualitative and quantitative elements of such records can be collected and reviewed. These sources can be (contemporary or archival) electronic, print, audio, and visual—all with significant applications in specific research context within politics and other fields. Content survey presents a multi-dimensional perspective of data collection that widens the scope of the findings and makes possible comparisons of trends across complex variables (Evera, 1997).

My analysis was governed by the idea that studies in politics are comparative when cause and effect are determined in relation to and within cases and variables (Marsh & Stoker, 2010). My project juxtaposed and analyzed cases separately before making comparisons. Thus, the study embraced both a descriptive and interpretive strand, aiming to create a clear picture and reveal some salient features, such as how African societies are structured. The design was coupled with some illustrative elements of historical facts. Thus,

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analysis of secondary and primary data in the form of written documents was necessitated.

However, descriptive approaches if not combined with interpretative designs may fail to make predictions and are less likely to determine cause and effect (Johnson & Reynolds, 2016). The descriptive strand of my project had both the observation and case study elements of interpretation. However, the countries I focused on cannot be seen as “samples” because they were not selected using statistical means from which the frequency of a particular phenomenon will be calculated and inferences about a larger population drawn.

There is explanatory power in using more than one case in a study. Both Zambia and Kenya in this comparative design embodied a “presence” of distinct and similar factors which I interpreted in relation to political theories. The interpretative case studies approach provided a basis for examining specific sociopolitical and historical moments of unique interest and questioned some of the common assertions on identity politics. Zambia and Kenya offered an illustrative analytical framework because the two countries constitute interesting but different cases of identity politics (Hulterstrom, 2004). Consequently, I decided to use them as typical cases that expose new ideas and offer opportunities for strategy learning.

The design of comparative study presents researchers with considerable amount of flexibility on many fronts. For example, the method enabled me to decide which cases as well as which factors to consider to ascertain whether an antecedent is extant or lacking in a given condition relationally. However, in most political science studies, it is possible to compare issues on a subject using other methods like experimental or longitudinal designs (Halperin & Heath, 2017). The comparative approach offered practical means of being mindful of unforeseen similarities and differences that explained causality of events and effects of process through the lens of variables, which are discussed later in this case.

Research Practicalities: Data Collection and Analysis

The practicality of employing comparative method in research demands that the source of data collection be carefully considered. The nature of my research goal—to explore the extent to which ethnic identities can be divisive in Kenya and stabilizing in Zambia—determined the means of collecting data. Conducting fieldwork in both Kenya and Zambia would have been time-consuming and expensive; however, data on each country were easily accessible and readily available online. So, rather than traveling to these nations to interview millions of voters, I simply looked at patterns of voting in regions that are home to specific ethnic groups and correlated results for the top three candidates based on their ethnic origins and political parties in Kenya and Zambia, respectively. Surveying such materials allowed me to apply several variables across the cases, and by looking at various antedates, uncover past structural issues in both countries while domiciled in the United Kingdom. However, the convenience of data sources should not just be in their accessibility but also in their ability to address the research question and theoretical framework.

Similarly, I also relied on primary sources of information such as official government publications and secondary sources identified through a literature review. I reviewed a composite of documents, statistics,

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manuscripts, and reports drawn from assorted fields and sectors. For example, I searched for election results for both Zambia and Kenya for the period 2001–2011. I delineated this time period so as to have a more focused analysis and to standardize the findings under the same time-span of investigation.

For the analysis, I started by identifying some preliminary links between the cases either through “most similar” or “most different” elements (Przeworski & Teune, 1970, in Burnham, Lutz, & Grant, 2004). Although the primary focus was on difference, the whole process of analysis consequently led to the discovery of most similar elements which played a significant role. These were then used to ascertain causes of variance and points of conjunction in the two countries. Thus, both similarities and differences were advantageous in the analytical sense. [Table 1](#) illustrates some of the variances and complementing factors that were part of my analysis.

Table 1. Combining similarities and differences.

Kenya	Zambia	
A	A	Similar
B	B	
C1	C2	Variant
D = 1	D = 0	
E = 0	E = 1	
Negative effects of ethnic politics	Positive effects	

Source: Halperin and Heath (2017, p. 220).

A, ethnic voting patterns; B, tribal clans; C1, ethnic leadership and C2, regional party politics; D, societal stability postelection (0 = present, 1 = absent); E, institutional capacity (0 = present, 1 = absent).

The variables as shown in [Table 1](#) were generated from the written material gathered from a single case or both cases. Thereafter, I applied each of these variables to each of the two countries. For example, Variable A was used to assess the presence of ethnic voting patterns or the lack of ethnic voting patterns in selected presidential election results in each country.

After collecting and analyzing data on ethnic voting patterns, I then examined why there was violence in Kenya but not in Zambia. The shared variables, A and B—ethnic voting patterns and tribal clans—lead to further probing of causation around Variables C and E: ethnic leadership/regional party politics and

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institutional capacity. The comparative method enabled me to trace the extent to which the cases had same or distinct backgrounds in terms of class structures, and political and cultural histories.

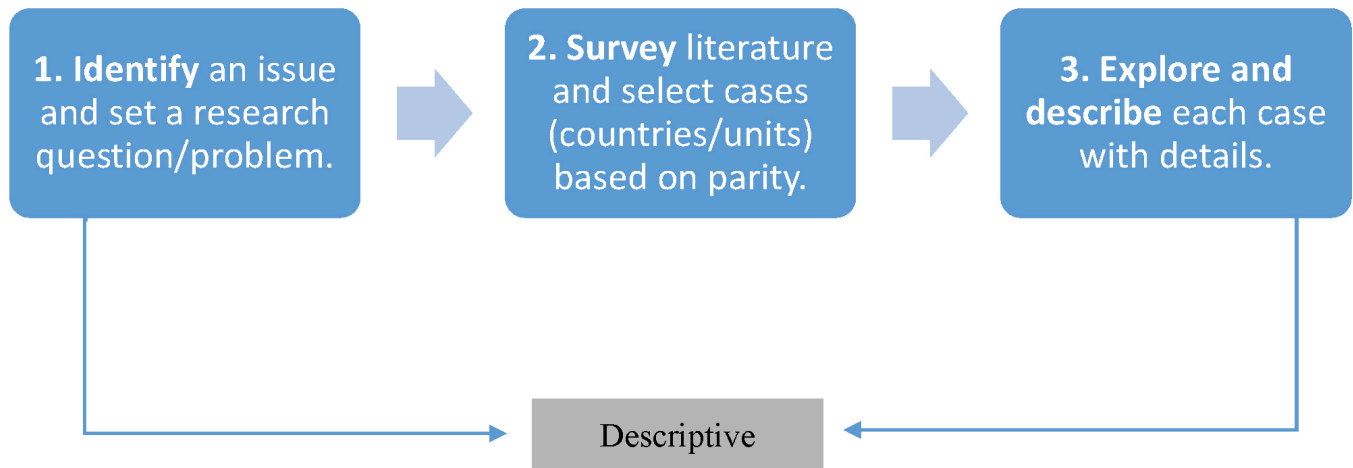
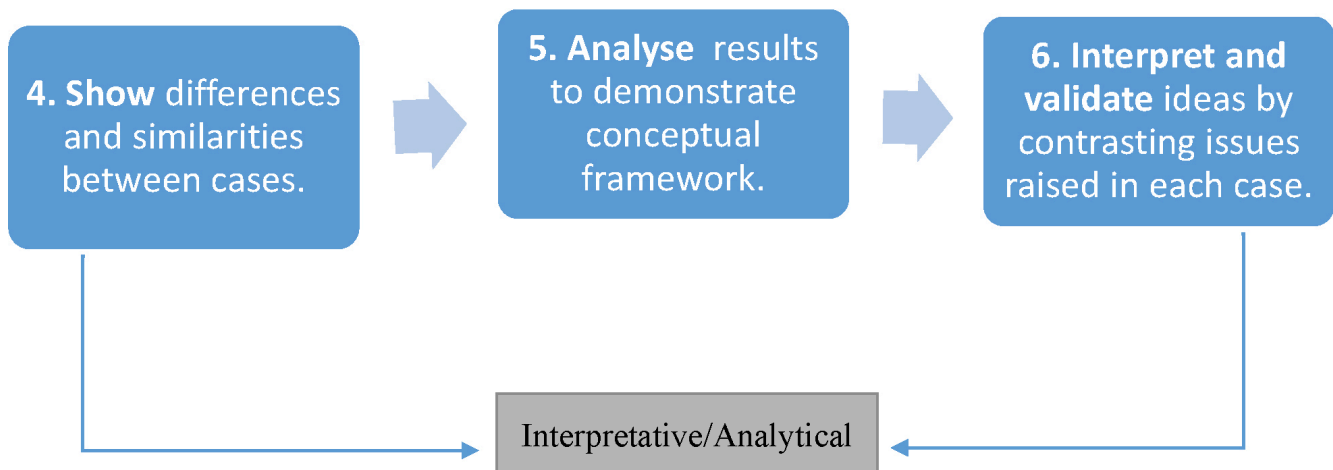
For cases of study to be meaningful, though, they ought to be more or less identical. Focusing on one country would have limited and prevented making inference on system-level traits. Because some of the variables listed in [Table 1](#) describe the countries' whole systems, I could examine their effects comparatively with each other as well as with other nations which were not the main focus of my research.

As I had two country cases and enough variables, the evaluation of my findings did not oscillate away from giving specific details of a single case (Zartman, 2005). In the section that follows, generic steps that must be adhered to before and when using comparative design are highlighted and discussed.

Comparative Framework

There are no fixed rules when using the comparative method. However, some key issues must be considered if the comparative design is to be effective. [Figure 1](#) depicts a two-phase plan of action in comparative design. These steps are flexible because, for example, Steps 1 and 2 can be swapped—instead of starting with identifying a subject matter that affects countries, one can begin with choosing countries and looking at some of the political events and process which can either be interesting or problematic.

Figure 1. Key steps of using a comparative framework.

Phase One**Phase Two**

My study started with some descriptive accounts of concepts, historical as well as current situation of the two countries. For example, I described how ethnic societies were organized before Zambia gained independence in 1964 and I also illustrated Kenya's regional compositions of ethnic groupings in post-independence era. The project description is the illustrative process that ultimately shows how variables interact and function in either similar or distinctive ways within and between cases (in my project, countries). This means mapping out the extent to which different theories apply or can be replicated across different contexts. For instance, I used Kyle Stanford's (2006) instrumentalism model (the idea that presupposes "identity" as a tool used by

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political leaders to promote group or class supremacy, mainly through manipulation): on one hand, it helped to ascertain the extent to which political elites capitalize on ethnic identities to create a support base; on the other hand, it helped reveal the causes of societal upheavals in diverse communities of Kenya and Zambia, national states that embrace democratic forms of electoral practices. My project assessed the extent to which different social and political phenomena occurred in both countries. For example, accounts of institution reforms and political participation worked better in Kenya than in Zambia. That is why engaging and testing theories was the premise upon which the differences were explained.

Two cases (small n) with several variables gave an in-depth knowledge that could have been less intensive in many (large N) cases. In addition, by focusing on two countries only, I was able to relate variables and identified some causal effects of specific occurrences, such as postelection violence in both countries. A small number of cases enabled what Sandra Halperin and Oliver Heath (2017) called “process tracing,” defined as the observable direct relationship among variables and use of theory to describe and interpret that relationship. Where theory fails to explain the connection of cause and effect, then breaking new ground for theory construction and contribution is inevitable (Johnson & Reynolds, 2016). Comparative research is about a search for adequate data on small n cases; if the data required are few then multiple (large N) cases are necessary (Halperin & Heath, 2017).

Comparative politics has its own limitations. Despite the advantages of applying the comparative approach, the study of politics using a comparative design has multifaceted challenges which range from procedure to epistemology. For example, if analysis was inadequately positioned in a theoretical framework and without a well-framed open-ended research question that captures the nature of cases and variables to be used, the flaws of comparative analysis are magnified. Among them is the issue of identifying cases and variables that are comparable. Prior to commencing the analysis of the project, I had to familiarize myself with several elements which were later treated as independent variables, and this led to discerning micro and macro differences in the cases being compared.

In addition, the choice of selected cases in comparative studies requires justification. There are many reasons behind my choice of Zambia and Kenya, some of them being prevalence of ethnic trends in national politics, testability of theoretical framework, access to information, exploration of causation, and correlation. Any rationale given for the use of a specific case must be carefully done and convincingly discussed with details.

Absences of specialized data sources can be time-consuming due to having to search and gather information from many sources. Direct sources of data collection on the subject gives a researcher more power over the sampling of information even though it might create standardization challenges of data set formats which might differ across nations or case units.

Thus, materials may lack a uniform format in countries being researched. To deal with different patterns of how, for example, election results for regions were presented (as they differed across electoral commissions of both countries), I had to synchronize the data on a neutral ground upon which comparison could be made. For example, at the first level of analysis, the 2011 presidential elections in Zambia were presented on the

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basis of political party vote share and at the second level, voting patterns from regions were compared against each presidential candidate's ethnicity. I faced further difficulties regarding the accuracy of the data due to incomplete, out-of-date, and lack of digitized archival details on, for instance, previous election results prior to 2001. The scarce nature of the preserved data that are under public domain (especially on the web) was a disadvantage in that it limited the in-depth tracing of some incidents that appeared to have had some political trajectories before gaining sovereignty in Zambia and Kenya. I resolved these limitations by paying attention to details of specific election years that are fully documented, such as that of 2007 in Kenya and 2011 for Zambia. For themes that required sufficient empirical evidence in the analysis, I referenced more on election outcomes that were held after 2005, as I had sufficient access to electronic data of all elections held after that year in the two countries. However, I continued to make use of any written materials that captured electoral-related happenings in the two countries' elections from 2001 to 2011.

Lessons Learned

The use of comparative method has challenges and possibilities. Five main issues were learnt during the process of utilizing this method. In the following subsections, without following any order, positive and negative lessons are drawn on utilizing a comparative approach in the study of politics.

A Firm but Flexible Theoretical Framework Is Needed

It is essential to conceptually frame and problematize the research question. Hypothesizing the problem in the research made the demonstration of empirical findings through theories inclusive (Burnham et al., 2004). The application of theories such as Kyle Stanford's (2006) instrumentalism on both country cases was due to a flexible conceptual framework. Incorporating themes on leadership through the instrumentalist model lead to one key argument, which is that "identity" in politics is a tool used by political leaders to promote group or class supremacy, mainly through manipulation. A good theoretical framework allowed me to situate the differences and similarities among cases through elements of other theories such as primordial, hegemonic, and nationalist approaches.

The primary role of theoretical backing is to refine existing knowledge. Developing new theoretical perspectives makes the comparative method a means by which generalization of findings can be made in social scientific data, especially when many (large *N*) cases are involved (Marsh & Stoke, 2010). Historical accounts did not just reveal political happenings in Kenya and Zambia; they also grounded evidence on the course of events. However, my concern was to search for which factors explained the trajectory of these events in each country.

I used comparative analysis to assess the value of theory, and it greatly complemented the theoretical implications of empirical evidence. Thus, the conceptual framework one decides to use must be flexible so as to draw from other fields. This avoids bias of conforming to findings alone, as even non-conformity can be a great contribution to theory critiquing. Researchers of comparative politics must be aware of how meaning

and conceptualized situations are influenced by cultural forces that can either be similar or different.

Comparative Inquiry Thrives on Elements of Differences and Similarities

The pivot of comparative research is that the same phenomena can have different meanings. Preliminary interest must be in exploring both differences and similarities on cases or units within a case. The choice of Zambia and Kenya as case studies were important because ethnicity as a form of identity is relevant to politics in both countries. Furthermore, the cases were chosen because of data availability for theoretical and empirical testing and for reconstructing previous negative notions of identity politics in multi-ethnic societies under one political authority.

Through a comparative method, my research project addressed the “what and how” of identity politics. It may be practically impossible to make decisions by chance when using comparative design. Students of politics ought to thoughtfully justify what is unique about the cases for the topic they intend to investigate. Researchers in comparative politics hardly make decisions randomly about, for instance, the framing of the core research question, case selection, variables as well as theoretical framework. Comparative case analysis ought to have some relevance, salience, and wider applicability of arguments—all this need reflection beforehand.

My project affirmed that political behavior can be observed through written records. It is possible to compare sociopolitical issues through observation without fieldwork. In this study, it was done by offering contexts of events as reported in the literature and in the media. Hence, paying attention to points of divergence and convergence in cases and variables has the potential of informing policy reforms and making possible insight of new knowledge (Marsh & Stoke, 2010). By intensively engaging a comparative approach on a small number of cases, a researcher is able to verify whether a political issue under study is just a domestic issue or a much wider trend that can be found in other countries and situations.

Small *n* Cases Increase Focus and Rigor of Inquiry

My research was a diagnosis of the shortcomings of most broad non-comparative and explanatory case studies which have led many to believe and conclude without proper realistic foundations that identity politics is messy. It is often feasible to have a limited number of cases and more details, although it can be argued that the larger the number of the cases, the higher the possibility of generalization of research outcomes. But when interest is on solving a country-specific question, then it is better to sacrifice generalization in terms of statistics for a fuller discussion that has a wider appeal in theoretical terms. Having many cases in a study can make it too descriptive, whereas fewer cases increase explanatory power. Again, balance between having too few cases with many variables or many cases with few variables needs to be considered. To set the study against mainstream works, use of few cases—two, in my project—was essential because it allowed having

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several variables which were focused and rigorous in terms of detail. Large N or multiple cases are relevant when dealing with surveys or census studies, for example.

Having few as opposed to many cases was important in my research. By narrowing the number of countries to two, I was able to reveal in great detail issues around causation. My study was about quality of accounts given on each case and understanding the backgrounds through the interplay of several independent and dependent variables in the analysis of findings. To avoid being bound by cultural factors, when selecting cases, attention should be paid to and focus must be on most similar and different systems among countries or within units of a single case, which allows for making examples from other nations that are not being studied. When data for selected cases are limited, one can make inferences on data from other nations. Reliance on and citation of other cases increased the scope of my project's data sources on issues that might not have wider publication.

Many variables for few cases can hinder generation of new theoretical insights. The problem of depending on existing concepts to explain results can be heightened when the empirical data do not conform to the theoretical framework selected. The significance of important variables must not be crowded by other control factors that are not primary. However, using many cases, as denoted by large N , increases the chances of replicating the results for different purposes. Use of one or both large N and small n case designs depends on the nature of research problem, time, and resources availability. The choice between many or few cases in a study leads to issues about generalization of findings and analysis, which in many instances is a pedigree of numerical studies.

It Is Possible to Generalize Findings Based on Theoretical Framework

Comparative research cannot have conclusive proof on an issue. However, it can help explain some cause and effect by comparing a number of countries that have diverse political systems. In my study, I was cautious when considering the levels of generalization, especially because my project was not quantitative and it involved a limited number of cases and variables. Having a single country is limiting due to cultural traits that have the potential to affect interpreting the findings accurately. It is important for researchers to also pay attention to personal values which might influence their analysis of the findings. By using comparative case study, the chances of using valid but not generalizable conclusions was high in my project.

Comparative study is useful in tracing the process of political reforms. By comparing nations, ideas about the merits and demerits of specific political regime practices can be revealed and need for sociopolitical transformation is understood. Generalization of findings appeared possible as theory was used to validate conclusions beyond single country context. Sometimes, though, generalizability is limited due to the nature of the cases used. Comparative politics allows a researcher to test theory for wider implications on a given political system.

Information Sources Beyond Political Science's Purview Can Be

Tapped

A project in politics is objective and subjective when inter- and intra-exploration of diverse materials are involved. That is why the research question must invite a comparative description and analysis of data from a multi-disciplinary point of view. Although my project involved politics, materials in history (about key people in formation of political parties), sociology (on how tribesmen interacted with each other), and other fields were helpful in meeting the research objectives. The idea of gaining insight from other disciplines lies in the fact that comparative designs in politics requires a rich conceptual backing and empirical evidence not only within political science but also outside the area.

Appropriation of diverse materials is an essential part of the comparison process. Effective operationalization of comparative study depends on paying attention to the sensitivity of dependent and independent variables. All the variables I decided to utilize were independent and equally measured against the same conceptual framework of cases through comparative evaluation. The intent of using comparative approach was to examine different and similar country case contexts using the same theoretical undertones which had peculiar features that enriched the project's outcomes.

The researcher has total discretion regarding data presentation and analysis. By looking at existing information as sources of data, the comparative method was limiting in that I found myself using some variables, such as ethnic voting patterns, that were selected by other people for research on an issue that was totally distinct. But I had total control, based on data, over what to include or capture in the project work. It was easy to collect information on some general aspects and hard to locate data on specific events, individuals, and time. Political science is a highly comparative field. Even studies that employ a single country use comparative analysis by virtue of looking at concepts that may not necessarily be political theories but may have been developed and used for a different and specific country.

Conclusion: Final Thoughts

This case has discussed some of the strengths and limitations of using comparative research design using written materials for researching a specific issue in the context of African political and social systems. These materials were analyzed so as to be presented as research findings. For instance, data on electoral outcomes were contrasted and interpreted for both countries based on identified variables (see [Table 1](#)) that were grouped thematically.

Although the format and procedure of comparative approach described in [Figure 1](#) is contextually distinct, it can be applied in the study of different countries and diverse subject matters to both test and create new theory.

Based on my experience, the difficulties of employing this method revolve mainly around balancing interpretations of country- or unit-specific findings across any given theme. Although the various levels of

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data synthesis and analysis coupled with procedural stages of my project were complex, some of the issues I encountered could have been avoided by reflecting on few primary variables across the two countries. Nonetheless, comparative design through content analysis remains an attractive, relevant, and convenient method of researching politics in Africa and around the globe.

Exercise and Discussion Questions

1. What is comparative design and why is it important in the study of politics?
 2. Critically discuss the advantages of using written materials as a form of data in the comparative design?
 3. State and explain the demerits and merits of deploying thematic analysis of written records in comparative research.
 4. Discuss the key things to consider when selecting cases in comparative politics. Which do you feel are the most important? Explain your answer.
 5. Explain some of the conditions under which the use of comparative case analysis can be flawed. How do you propose mitigating such conditions or flaws?
 6. Discuss the appropriateness of using few cases (small n) with many variables in comparative studies.
 7. Why is theory such an important part of comparative design in politics?
 8. Discuss the factors that make comparative design a suitable methodological approach for conducting politics studies.
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Further Reading

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