

María José Canel & Katrin Voltmer (Eds.)

Comparing Political Communication across Time and Space. New Studies in an Emerging Field

One of the most fundamental truths of political communication research is that context matters. Political communication campaigns differ between countries, political news coverage is dependent on journalistic culture and media landscape, and the effects of political communication on citizens vary between electoral contexts and countries. Comparative research is thus one of the most important aspects of the field of political communication, and without it no theory in the field is truly meaningful. What is more, comparative research is also becoming ever more socially relevant in times of globalisation, transnational media markets and multinational political entities. All this has led to a recent surge in comparative research, and this edited volume substantially adds to this literature.

This book is useful to comparative scholars, because it is mindful of the practical, methodological and conceptual challenges that plague comparative political communication research. As is acknowledged by the book editors, María José Canel and Katrin Voltmer, the substantive costs and time needed when conducting a large-scale comparative study no longer restrains the field. Consequently, the book contains chapters that address the topic of comparative political communication research in all its (necessary) breadth. It comprises both chapters on methodological challenges, as well as solid empirical studies conducted in a variety of countries, and over long periods of time. It presents the readers thus with a peephole into current developments in the field of comparative communication research.

The book is structured into three main parts. The first part focuses on methodological challenges in comparative research. Interestingly, Frank Esser (Chapter 2) poses the question, whether country comparisons should really still be the driving unit of analysis in comparative research. Taking into account a 'globalised world', would it not be more meaningful to take media markets or multinational political entities into consideration? Esser concludes that, so far, there is only limited evidence that national borders are no longer a meaningful basis for conducting comparative research. However, he also acknowledges that comparative research has become more complex, and that future studies benefit from adaptations such as allowing for additional, external, variables into analysis that take into account transnational or globalised changes in the relationship between media and politics. Along these lines, the idea of country comparisons becomes more meaningful as soon as researchers replace country categories with substantive variables that can explain between-country variation (one example of such comparison is applied in Chapter 8, where Ruth Kunz and colleagues compare political participation among young voters in the Netherlands and Switzerland; two similar countries that only vary in the presence of absence of direct democracy initiatives).

The second part of the book presents empirical studies focusing, in one way or another, on election campaign coverage from a comparative perspective. This section also introduces over time comparisons: In Chapter 5, Bengt Johansson presents results from an analysis of one hundred years of negative campaigning on election posters in Sweden. Johansson's results cast a new light on a number of concepts in political communication that are closely connected to comparative research. His results regarding the ups and downs of negativity in election posters in Sweden, initially, question the idea of negative campaigning as an 'American' concept that has swept across the rest of the world during recent decades. Rather, negativity is described as a basic political and social concept, and as an important aspect of journalistic newsworthiness, which closely connected to social and political challenges happening within a country. In this sense, a study such as this with a broad time frame can both thus deepen our understanding of the current state of election campaigning and political communication.

The third part of this book offers a broad insight into comparative journalism studies and the relationship between journalists, news content and political actors. This section contains studies based on large-scale data collection, such as a study by Thomas Hanitzsch and Rosa Berganza on political trust among journalists from 21 countries (Chapter 9). Interestingly, the section also offers insights from contexts that are often neglected: In Chapter 10, Katrin Voltmer discusses results from a study on journalists' perceptions of press freedom in Eastern Europe (Poland and Bulgaria) and East Asia (South Korea and Taiwan). In line with some of the thoughts expressed in earlier chapters, her findings suggest that journalists from emerging, post-transitional countries that have undergone fundamental political and social change gravitate towards universally accepted standards of press freedom that "resonate with the philosophical and ethical premises of Western discourses" (p. 168). Interestingly, however, Voltmer also observes a domestication of press freedom in light of specific cultural views within the studied countries. This thus suggests both a globalised and localised approach towards journalistic norms.

By definition, one of the most insightful chapters of this book is the conclusion, written by Barbara Pfetsch (Chapter 14). Pfetsch pulls together the methodological challenges expressed in chapters two to four, and applies them to the empirical studies reported in the rest of the book. She concludes that the studies presented in this book highlight both the progress and the challenges visible in the research in this book. Most importantly, however, she reveals the normative standpoints that support research such as presented in this book. In a sense, comparative research is more than anything based on the "implication that free media and political information are indispensable resources for politicians, citizens and - foremost - for a viable democracy" (p. 238). Along these lines, comparative research ascertains a positive worldview of liberal and free media, but quite often ends with pessimistic notions of "eroding trust in political institutions, political cynicism and decline of social capital" (p. 239) among audiences and journalists. Given this most fundamental view on comparative research, many readers might even benefit most from starting their reading of this book with this final chapter.

So, this is a varied and insightful edited book that offers both methodological and empirical insights into comparative research. It features work from some of the 'heavyweights' in the field, who critically present and discuss their own work. In this sense, this book is a meaningful starting point for those wishing to learn more about communication across time and space.

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