

Structure, Agency, and the Design of Social Inquiry

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Abstract

An enduring debate in comparative politics concerns the degree to which structural factors or collective/individual agency determine political outcomes. This paper argues that the structure vs. agency debate does not necessarily reflect divergent ontological perspectives – rather, it is usually a byproduct of methodological choices made by scholars when designing social inquiry. Specifically, the more a scholar seeks to explain variations in outcomes across an extended span of time and space (as when a scholar conducts a cross-national study using time series data), the more he/she will tend to study structure rather than agency. Correlatively, if the subject of inquiry lies within a compressed span of time and space (as when a scholar seeks to explain an outcome in a particular context and at a specific point in time), then a focus on the contingent actions of agents becomes more critical. The paper delivers this argument as follows: First, Part I elaborates how the structure vs. agency debate is often a byproduct of study design; Second, Parts II and III illustrate the argument via a review of studies of democratization and regime change that are either more structure-focused (Part II) or more agency-focused (Part III); Finally, Part IV concludes.

Introduction

An enduring debate in comparative politics concerns the degree to which structural factors or collective/individual agency determine political outcomes. Works that emphasize agency are criticized for ignoring the ever-present causal impact of structural variables; conversely, works highlighting the explanatory power of structure are perceived to eradicate human action from the study of politics. How should we make sense of this disagreement? This paper argues that the structure vs. agency debate does not necessarily reflect divergent ontological perspectives – rather, it is usually a byproduct of methodological choices made by scholars when designing social inquiry. Specifically, the more a scholar seeks to explain variations in outcomes across an extended span of time and space (as when a scholar conducts a cross-national study using time series data), the more he/she will tend to study structure rather than agency. Correlatively, if the subject of inquiry lies within a compressed span of time and space (as when a scholar seeks to explain an outcome in a particular context and at a specific point in time), then a focus on the contingent actions of agents becomes more critical. The paper delivers this argument as follows: First, Part I elaborates how the structure vs. agency debate is often a byproduct of study design; Second, Parts II and III illustrate the argument via a review of studies of democratization and regime change that are either more structure-focused (Part II) or more agency-focused (Part III); Finally, Part IV concludes.

Part I: Agency vs. Structure as the Byproduct of Study Design

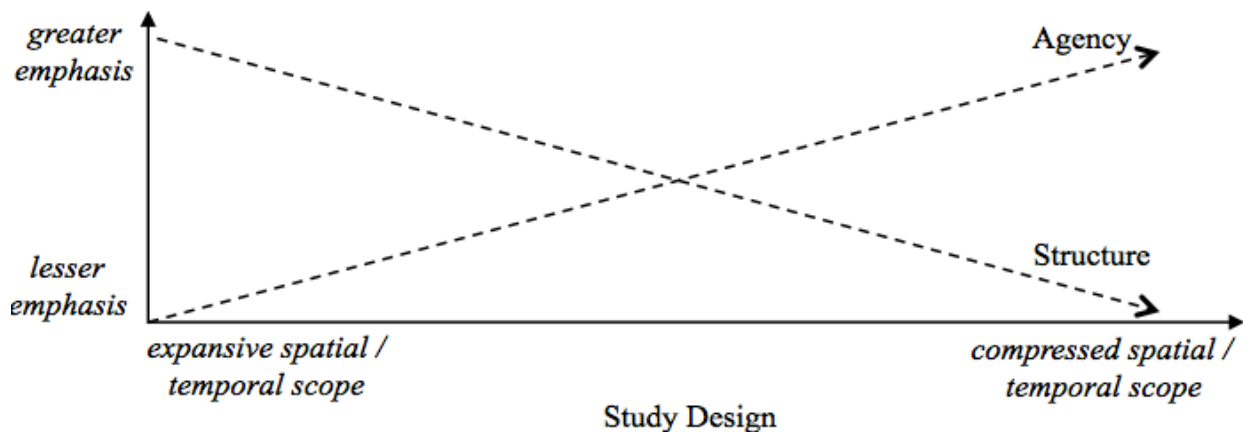
The underlying ontological assumption of my argument is that both structure and agency matter in comparative politics. As a result, I posit that the degree to which comparative political scientists emphasize either structure (such as geography, economic structure, and class structure) or agency (the choices made by, and actions of, individual or collective agents in response to their environment) is a byproduct of the scope of their social inquiries – from analyzing a single case at a one point in time to assessing multiple cases across a wide stretch of time. Thus the degree to which a scholar will focus on structure or agency is largely determined ex-ante by his/her study design.

When a single or a small set of outcome(s) need(s) to be accounted for, the actions of the relevant political actors become crucially important. While structural variables delimit the scope of what is possible (i.e. they constrain the set of possible actions and outcomes) in any given case, they

are rarely, if ever, determinative. What ultimately determines political outcomes is how collective or individual agents respond to their environment via the choices they ultimately make. It makes little sense, for example, to argue that economic development caused a particular democratic transition; rather, it is more appropriate to argue that economic factors facilitated the actions of institutional, class, and individual actors who ultimately brought about regime change. Such studies can generally be described as engaging in “explaining-outcome” causal inference.¹ In other words, case study designs focused on a compressed span of time and space tend to treat structural variables as background conditions while emphasizing the role of individual/collective action.

Conversely, large-N studies seek to uncover causal associations among variables understood in probabilistic terms.² The focus is not on explaining individual outcomes (such as the impact of the 2005 Italian electoral law on the 2006 election) but on assessing generalizable causal relationships (such as the impact of electoral rules on party system dynamics). Since the actions of political actors tend to be contingent and context-specific, scholars conducting large-N studies will instead focus on structural factors that tend to predictably favor certain outcomes over others. Here, collective/individual choices are either treated as stochastic – as noise – or they are thinned by treating them as stylized mechanical responses to structural stimuli, thereby leaving structural variables to account for systematic variations. Thus studies whose scope extends across time and/or space tend to emphasize structure over agency. This argument is summarized in Figure 1:

Figure 1: The Emphasis on Structure vs. Agency as a Byproduct of Study Design



¹ On “explaining outcome” causal inference, see Beach and Pedersen (2013: 18-24).

² On probabilistic/correlative vs. deterministic/set-theoretic causal inference, see Goertz and Mahoney (2006: 41-86).

As an analogical illustration of this argument, let us distinguish between the musicologist studying the factors that contribute to higher quality opera performances and the opera critic reviewing a single performance. The former would be well advised to gather data on a large number of cases and to consider the impact of, *inter alia*, the size and shape of theaters, their technological capabilities, and their layout of the stage and orchestra pit. These are structural factors. For the opera critic, however, it is more important to assess how the artists' performances on a particular opera night elevated or depressed its overall quality. The focus is consequently on agency.

Is there evidence supporting the foregoing argument in the comparative politics literature? The following two sections provide a tentatively affirmative response via a literature review of select canonical works of comparative politics. To focus and restrict the scope of our inquiry, I have selected works dealing solely with the subject of democratization or regime change.

Part II: Structure-Focused Studies

Many studies analyzing whether economic conditions have an impact on regime type emphasize the causal role of structural variables. To consider whether their emphasis on structure is shaped by their study designs, this section focuses on three important studies from the literature: Lipset (1959), Przeworski and Limongi (1997), and Boix and Stokes (2003). It then briefly notes how more recent research (namely the work of Acemoglu and Robinson (2005)) largely employs a similar approach. Table 1 provides information on the three studies that will be the main focus of this section:

Table 1: *Three Studies of the Relationship between Regime Type and Economic Development*

Study	Study Design	Spatial Scope	Temporal Scope	# of Observations
<i>Lipset (1959)</i>	Synchronic (large-N)	48 countries	N/A	48 (country)
<i>Przeworski & Limongi (1997)</i>	Synchronic (large-N) & Diachronic	135 countries	40 years	4,126 (country year)
<i>Boix & Stokes (2003)</i>	Synchronic (large-N) & Diachronic	135 countries	140 years	6,500 (country year)

It is only natural to begin with Seymour Lipset's 1959 article, "Some Social Requisites of

Democracy,” for it is this literature’s pioneer. Lipset’s structural focus is explicit from the beginning: “This paper is primarily concerned with explicating the social conditions which serve to support a democratic political system” (1959: 72).³ Here Lipset measures economic development via indicators of wealth (ex. like per capita income), industrialization (ex. percentage of employed males in agriculture), urbanization (ex. percentage of people living in cities with over 20,000 and 100,000 inhabitants), and education (ex. literacy rates) (ibid: 75). Lipset then conducts a synchronic, cross-national analysis of 48 European, “English-speaking,” and Latin American countries (ibid: 74). He finds that indicators of wealth, urbanization, and industrialization correlate with democracy, though results for education are more mixed. Lipset concludes that “increased wealth “ is “related causally to the development of democracy” (ibid: 83). Importantly, at no point does Lipset specify an agent-based causal mechanism that may underlie the correlations he uncovers.

Recognizing the methodological shortcomings (namely, the assumption that correlation implies causation) yet substantial theoretical fertility of the causal relationship posited by Lipset, Przeworski and Limongi’s 1997 article, “Modernization: Theories and Facts,” seeks to improve upon and test Lipset’s intuitions. Most importantly, Przeworski and Limongi partition Lipset’s structural theory into two by conceptually distinguishing between “endogenous” democratization (“democracies may be more likely to emerge as countries develop economically”) and “exogenous” democratization (“[democracies] may be established independently of economic development but may be more likely to survive in developed countries”) (1997: 156-157). The authors use available GDP per capita data from 1950 and 1990 across 135 countries (resulting in some 4,126 country year observations) to discern the relationship between economic development and democracy. In short, in addition to broadening the spatial scope of their analysis vis-à-vis Lipset, they also incorporate longitudinal data spanning 40 years of the postwar era (ibid: 159). With this expansive dataset, the authors find evidence against endogenous democratization and in favor of exogenous democratization: “the causal power of economic development in bringing dictatorships down appears paltry [...] In turn, per capita income [...] has a strong impact on the survival of democracies” (ibid: 165). It is curious that while Przeworski and Limongi favor interpreting

³Indeed, on page 105 Lipset (1959) provides a schematic diagram of the possible connections between democracy and various explanatory variables, where all of the concepts listed are some subtype of social structure.

democratization as “an outcome of actions, not just of conditions” and decry the “deterministic” nature of modernization theories, their own approach exclusively focuses on the explanatory power of a single structural variable (GDP per capita) (ibid: 176-177).

An attempt to introduce a greater appreciation for agency and to test Przeworski and Limongi’s findings is made by Boix and Stokes’ 2003 article, “Endogenous Democratization.” Unlike Lipset and Przeworski and Limongi, Boix and Stokes formalize an agent-based causal mechanism using game theory (2003: 545-549). The authors leverage it to posit that economic development should both destabilize authoritarian regimes and consolidate democracy. Yet their formal model is based on a thin understanding of agency, where hypothetical actors respond mechanically to changes in structural conditions (namely increases in GDP per capita). In other words, Boix and Stokes’ model simply provides the microfoundations underlying a posited probabilistic causal effect of their structural variable of interest (GDP per capita). Further, the core of Boix and Stokes’ article analyzes data on structural factors (including growth rate, religious fragmentation, and the proportion of democracies in the world (ibid: 536)) to unearth key “threshold” levels of GDP per capita where the relationship between economic development and regime type changes. To do so, the authors extend Przeworski and Limongi’s data to yield “a panel of over 6,500 country-year observations for the period 1850 to 1990” for 135 countries (ibid: 528-529). The authors find that when incorporating pre-1950 data and running a more sophisticated battery of statistical tests, “economic development both causes democracy and sustains it,” supporting both endogenous and exogenous theories of democratization (ibid: 545).

It should be noted that more recent studies on the relationship between economic structure and regime change have also mirrored the foregoing approaches. Most prominently, consider Acemoglu and Robinson’s 2005 book, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. Although the authors leverage a rational-choice framework to model how social actors respond to their economic environment, as with Boix and Stokes (2003) this approach is used to justify the causal priority of structural factors: “In essence, the different political outcomes occur because these societies differ fundamentally in their underlying economic structures” (2005: 43). Specifically, the authors posit a generalizable causal impact of economic inequality: when inequality is low, “the

poor are sufficiently content” and thus do “not rock the boat;” when inequality is high, “revolution is a threat to nondemocracy,” and what ends up making the difference is the “cost of repression” (if the cost of repression is sufficiently high, democratization occurs) (ibid: 44). Here, agents are lumped into two homogenous categories – “citizens” and “elites” – whose preferences vis-à-vis democratization (where democracy is understood to be a mechanism for redistribution) are mechanically derived by the former being “relatively rich” (and thus opposed to democracy) and the latter being “relatively poor” (and thus supportive of democracy) (ibid: 15; 22). Agents are therefore reduced to being no more than the voice boxes of economic structure.

What unites the foregoing studies? First, they all either ignore agency altogether or limit themselves to a thin understanding of agency. Second, they rely on a probabilistic understanding of causation to focus on the explanatory power of structural variables (primarily measures of economic development). Finally, they all conduct large-N cross-national analyses (often combined with substantial time-series data). The argument forwarded here suggests that the pre-eminence of structure in these studies was largely determined ex-ante by how their authors designed their social inquiries and does not necessarily reflect the view that agency is irrelevant or unimportant. Indeed, the fact that Przeworski and Limongi (1997) make a point of emphasizing the importance of agency and that Boix and Stokes (2003) and Acemoglu and Robinson (2005) ground their argument in agent-based models supports this view: the authors do not dismiss individual or collective actions, but their choice in favor of an expansive study scope necessitate a heavier focus on structure.

Part III: Agency-Focused Studies

Agency-focused studies highlight that structure is not deterministic and that agents have the discretion and capability to spur and shape political outcomes. To explore the relationship between an emphasis on agency and study design, this section overviews four works employing an agency-focused approach: Rustow (1970), O’Donnell (1989), Huntington (1991), and Svobik (2009).

We begin with Dankwart Rustow’s 1970 article, “Transitions to Democracy.” Here, Rustow seeks to move beyond the synchronic, cross-national work of Lipset in favor of a more diachronic and contextual treatment of democratic transitions. Rather than analyzing democratization across time and space, Rustow seeks to understand how agency and context contribute to significant

political changes occurring within short spans of time. Nevertheless, Rustow emphasizes that he is not opposed to a probabilistic understanding of causation – rather, he seeks to elaborate a more balanced, “skeptical view that attributes human events to a mixture of law and change” by exploring “the margins of human choice and [...] clarifying the consequences of the choices in that margin” (1970: 343). For Rustow, the tendency to focus solely on “the “superstructure” of political epiphenomena” risks eliminating politics – which he implicitly understands to represent human agency – from the study of regime change (ibid: 342). Indeed, even Rustow’s sole necessary condition for democratization – national unity – is conceptualized by emphasizing the subjective beliefs of individuals rather than the objective role of social structure⁴ (ibid: 350). Democratization is then “set off by prolonged and inconclusive political struggle, often emerging as a result of a new elite arising” (ibid: 352). Thereafter, political leaders must make “a deliberate decision” to negotiate with the opposition and to “accept the existence of diversity in unity” by institutionalizing some preliminary democratic reforms (ibid: 355). Human behavior is not treated as uniform or mechanical; rather, “democracy, like any collective human action, is likely to stem from a large variety of mixed motives” (ibid: 357). In light of the structural functionalism that predominated the 1960s and 1970s, Rustow’s more agency-focused approach must have seemed rather heterodox.

Rustow’s framework gained more widespread influence when it was leveraged and developed by Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe Schmitter in the late 1980s. In “Transitions to Democracy,” O’Donnell summarizes his dual effort with Schmitter to follow Rustow in devising a heuristical framework to make sense of temporally brief and context-specific periods of regime change. To dispel any assumption of structural determinism, O’Donnell quickly opens by noting that “[t]ransitions do not have inevitable outcomes” – indeed, “they are extremely uncertain” (1989: 62). The source of the uncertainty lies in the multiple contingent actions and alignments of various social actors crucial to bringing about a democratic transition. These actors include:

- *Members of the ruling coalition* (divided into hardliners, who “believe that the perpetuation of authoritarian rule is possible and desirable,” and softliners, who are more disposed to introducing “certain freedoms” (ibid: 64)).
- *Members of the opposition* (grouped into opportunists, who are “ready to accept any offer made by the softliners,” maximalists, who oppose any form of negotiation and advocate a

⁴ Specifically, Rustow that “national unity [...] simply means that the vast majority of citizens in a democracy-to-be must have no doubt or mental reservations as to which political community they belong to” (1970: 350).

“revolutionary route,” and democrats, understood as the “genuine, valid opposition” whose moderate temperament leads them to advocate a less radical democratic transition) (ibid: 65).

- *Members of civil society* (ibid: 67).

For O’Donnell, the democratic transition often begins with the “resurrection of civil society” (ibid: 66). The first signals of popular dissatisfaction usually come “from journalists, from other intellectuals, and from some leaders in the popular arts” (ibid). If popular protest becomes substantial, it is possible that softliners will break off from the ruling coalition and negotiate with the democratic opposition. Thereafter, a highly fragile and uncertain “transition game” begins, often resulting in the softliners and opposition agreeing to hold relatively free elections (ibid: 68-70). At any point, the hardliners may stage a coup and upset the entire process, but even in the absence of a coup, any democracy that emerges is likely to be “fragile” and vulnerable to a relapse into authoritarianism (ibid: 72). In this framework, structural indeterminacy and uncertainty provide individual and collective actors with the opportunity to shape political outcomes.

Samuel Huntington’s 1991 article, “How Countries Democratize,” employs a relatively similar approach. Like O’Donnell, Huntington focuses on the role of various social actors with their own diverse interests, including the members of the ruling coalition favoring democratization (the “democratizers,” “reformers,” and “liberals”) and those opposing it (namely the “standpatters”) as well as members of the political opposition (divided into “radical extremists” and “democratic moderates”) (1991: 588-589). Huntington then develops three subtypes of democratization:

- *Transformations*, where regime reformers subdue the standpatters, co-opt the opposition, and bring about gradual regime change from above (ibid: 591).
- *Replacements*, where the opposition overwhelms the standpatters in government and brings about a revolution from below (ibid: 602-603).
- *Transplacements*, where both regime reformers and moderates need to combine their strengths in order to facilitate a democratic transition (ibid: 608-609).

What solidifies Huntington’s approach as agency-focused is the fact that he rather unconventionally provides “guidelines” – or advice – to the actors involved in each of the foregoing types of democratization (where the recurrent theme is to “be moderate” and “when in doubt, [to] compromise” (ibid: 616)). This move demonstrates that Huntington perceives democratic moderates

and regime reformers to be capable of shaping the process and outcomes of regime change.

Finally, lest we be led to the false conclusion that agency-focused narratives lie exclusively within the purview of qualitative social inquiry, it is worthwhile to highlight Milan Svobik's contribution in his 2009 article, "Power Sharing and Leadership Dynamics in Authoritarian Regimes." Svobik's focus is not so much on democratization but on the overarching concept of extra-constitutional leadership transitions within authoritarian regimes. His study of intra-regime dynamics is motivated by the fact that nearly 64 percent of all authoritarian leaders who are removed from office are ousted in a coup staged by members of the ruling coalition (2009: 477-478). For Svobik, a coup is most likely if members of the ruling coalition believe that "the dictator is in fact attempting to acquire more power" (ibid: 478). Crucially, the presence of imperfect information engenders uncertainty and complicates monitoring the dictator. Indeed, whenever the dictator acts, the "ruling coalition observes an informative yet imperfect signal of whether the dictator is attempting to strengthen his position" (ibid: 480). Ultimately, if the dictator successfully makes a couple of power grabs, then he will be able to prevent future coup attempts and to transition from a "contested to an established dictatorship" (ibid: 478). It is essential to note that as Svobik models the strategic behavior of a dictator and his ruling coalition, he largely ignores the role of structural variables. Indeed, the "game" begins when the dictator attempts a power-grab and his ruling coalition interprets an imperfect signal of his actions. As a result, Svobik concludes that "variation in both the concentration of power and the duration of leader's tenures in dictatorships" is best understood by considering the actions of a relatively small set of individuals (ibid: 479).

What qualities are shared by the foregoing studies that render them more agency-focused than structure-focused? First, their primary concern is to explicate the political dynamics of regime transitions within a compressed span of both time and space. Second, within each framework it is the actions of a particular individual or collective actor that spurs the process of political change. Third, actors are modeled as responding more so to one-another's actions than to structural stimuli. Finally, each framework assumes that regime or leadership transitions are inherently uncertain events. Although these qualities distinguish the foregoing approaches from the structuralist frameworks in Part II, there is evidence that this is a result of their choice to study context-specific phenomena within a compressed temporal span. We should recall that Rustow advocated for a

greater appreciation of how structure interacts with agency, not to disavow the former altogether. We should also note that Svulik has proceeded to write a book that treats institutional-structural variables (such as constitutional structure and legacy of military involvement in politics) as proxies for the agent-based dynamics in his model to facilitate a series of large-N statistical analyses (Svulik 2012). The foregoing authors are thus unlikely to dismiss the causal role of structural factors, but their use of smaller scope, finer-grained studies inherently magnifies the importance of agency.

Part IV: Conclusion

It is important to conclude this paper with two points of clarification. First, my argument should not be taken to imply that ontological disagreements are absent from the field of comparative politics. Indeed, in many cases different perspectives about the state of the empirical world will underlie studies that stress the role of structure or the impact of agency. My purpose is rather to highlight that in many cases it is the *ex ante* choices made by scholars when designing their studies – particularly with respect to the temporal and spatial scope of their social inquiries – that necessitate a greater focus on either structure or agency. Second, I do not mean to imply that it is impossible to accommodate both structure and agency within a single piece of scholarship. Historical institutionalist (HI) approaches may be particularly well-suited to this integrative endeavor. Specifically, HI’s dual focus on critical junctures (understood as institutional outcomes that are “overwhelmingly the result of events or decisions taken during a short phase of uncertainty”) and subsequent path dependency (where said choices may “entrench power relations” and set “the parameters for future strategic interactions”) combines a focus on agency within individual critical events with a more structural focus on institutional entrenchment (Capoccia and Ziblatt 2010: 942; 944). Yet it should be noted that the HI approach does not undermine the claims made here. This is because HI scholarship merely combines the study of a compressed span of time and space (to uncover critical junctures) with a more expansive, macro-level study that may stretch over a significant amount of real estate and a lengthy period of time (to assess path dependency). In other words, HI mediates the structure vs. agency divide via the clever use of a nested study design. In short, for comparative political scientists seeking to overcome the structure vs. agency debate, a greater appreciation of its underlying methodological, rather than ontological, dimension would prove particularly constructive.

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