**Why and how to compare deliberative systems**

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**Abstract**

The systemic turn in deliberative democratic theory presents empirical researchers in this field with a problem. Deliberative systems are complex, porous, and shifting in nature. These features cannot be adequately assessed by existing tools for measuring deliberative and democratic qualities. Such qualities only become apparent when set against practices in other systems. Meaningful analysis rests on *comparison*. However, in turning to the comparative politics literature for inspiration, we caution that the two dominant traditions in this subfield—rigidly systematic comparison or thickly descriptive area studies—are of only limited utility. On the one hand, rigid comparative analysis will map uncomfortably on the systemic account. On the other, there is a need to move beyond idiographic accounts produced in thick descriptions. Instead, we emphasise the value of two alternative traditions in comparative political analysis. The first is through the use of ‘family resemblances’ in comparative research design. The second is through post hoc comparisons which draw together eclectic affinities between systems. Both approaches are sensitive to the contextual complexities of deliberative systems in practice. Both can tell us a great deal about why and how deliberative practices and institutions emerge, flourish, or fail, and how they enable, enhance or undermine the democratic and deliberative qualities of the system overall. We draw on promising examples of these two approaches to emphasise their value in understanding deliberative systems in practice.

**Key words**

Deliberative systems; comparative political science; Lijphart; Anderson; area studies; family resemblance; eclectic affinities

**Introduction**

The systemic turn in deliberative democratic theory presents empirical researchers in this field with a problem. Deliberative systems are complex, porous, and shifting in nature. Deliberative democratic qualities are seen to come and go across differentiated but interconnected venues, over time. This shift in conceptualisation is appealing, for a range of reasons outlined by key proponents of this revised account (see Dryzek 2009; Mansbridge et al. 2012). But while theoretical discussion moves apace, empirical study is much less developed.

Much of the earlier empirical work on deliberative democracy focused on discrete fora—established institutions or innovative mini-publi designs—that provided a more-or-less controlled environment amenable to intensive and detailed study from a variety of methodological angles (see Delli Carpini et al. 2004; Leighninger 2012). Researchers, often taking Habermasian discourse ethics as their yardstick, could identify reliable indicators against which to rigorously assess the real against the ideal. The new systemic account is proving harder to get to grips with empirically. Deliberative democratic qualities are not so readily identifiable nor reliably measured in a systemic sense. They are distributed across settings and over time, coming and going in ways that can be opaque and unpredictable, and that are not always clear in advance of in-depth research (see Parkinson 2012). Given these challenges, the research that has emerged in response to the ‘systemic turn’ thus far is innovative and promising, but it remains limited to mere components of systems or else isolated systems. In this paper, we argue that a vital complement to this emerging body of scholarship is comparative research that can deliver rich and meaningful assessments across context.

The most obvious tools to turn to in this pursuit are those associated with the study of comparative politics. Efforts are already afoot to embark on an ambitious, rigorous new analysis of deliberative systems across comparative political contexts; the systematic study of deliberative systems (for statements of intent, see Coppedge et al. 2011; Niemeyer et al. 2016). Yet, as some of the leading proponents of the conceptual shift in deliberative democracy maintain (see especially Dryzek 2009; Parkinson 2012), such systematic comparative analysis is likely to be very difficult in practice. Deliberative systems are hard to pin down. They involve a vast array of overlapping and interacting sites and practices. While a rigid focus on differences in institutional design can isolate and assess key variables, it also risks failing to account for the contingencies that bleed across, underpin or condition deliberative sites and practices. In practice, the naturalist (and often quantitative) work that has emerged thus far exemplifies these strengths and limitations. It can usefully shed light on patterns of connectivity between deliberative sites (eg Beste forthcoming) or identify the prevalence of particular deliberative features across different sites within systems (eg. Pedrini 2014), but it seems less equipped to elucidate the qualities of the *overall* system in a way that adequately matches up to the normative ideals of deliberative systems theory. The essence of this point is that deliberative systems must also be studied richly in context, with an eye to the overlaps and interactions across sites that enable and sustain, or undermine and challenge, the broader norms and goods associated with deliberative democracy (see Ercan et al. 2015).

Yet we do not simply call for scholars of deliberative systems to seek refuge in single-n case work, in which they can carefully unpack these confounding complexities. The problem that looms here is not so much one of overstating inferences about deliberative systems, but understating them. The analogy in comparative political studies is the long-standing alternative to naturalist systematic science: interpretive area studies. Like the dilemma facing many scholars of area studies, the risk is that such richly qualitative work is merely idiographic—of significance to scholars with an interest in the specific or substantive area of focus but impenetrable or uninteresting to scholars of deliberative systems more broadly. Certainly, some of the richer, more interpretive studies of deliberative systems that have emerged have effectively identified and assessed these holistic qualities (eg. Stevenson and Dryzek 2014). Their broader applicability, though, remains uncertain—something seemingly underpinned by the skills and profiles of exceptional researchers. This tendency towards idiography is especially important given the complex context-specificity of how deliberative systems can be seen to manifest in practice. The germane point is that learning about how deliberative systems work in practice, and how they might be enhanced, requires comparison across cases.

Given the limitations of mainstream approaches, in this paper we highlight two alternatives on the margins of comparative politics that appear more promising for the task of assessing deliberative systems. The first is to design comparative projects according not to rigid institutional similarities and differences but instead out of appreciation of ‘family resemblances’ (see Rhodes et al. 2009; Goertz 2006, 7). In this approach, governing institutions and practices represent familiar ‘traits’ that come and go across different deliberative systems. The second, building on Benedict Anderson’s (2015) account of ‘surprising’ comparison, is to build on in-depth case research by identifying, and mapping out, ‘eclectic affinities’ with other deliberative systems. Both approaches, we argue, are ideally suited to unpacking complex context specificity in ways that speak to the broader interests and concerns of scholars working on deliberative systems elsewhere. Both can greatly assist in the task of providing meaningful insights about how deliberative practices and institutions emerge, overlap, and interact in democratic systems.

The argument builds over five sections. In the first, we outline the systemic turn in deliberative democracy, with a view to highlighting the need for comparative research in coming to grips with deliberative systems in practice. In the second, we background the two leading approaches in the comparative politics scholarship, naturalist comparative political science and interpretive area studies and foreshadow their limitations. In the third, we emphasise two qualities essential to the empirical comparison of deliberative systems—reflexivity and fluidity—that neither tradition is equipped to provide. In the fourth, we turn to two alternative approaches in the study of comparative politics that can better realise these qualities and highlight promising examples of this sort of research that are relevant for the comparative study of deliberative systems. In the final section, we illustrate the utility of these two approaches through extended reference to a key facet of deliberative systems theory—the notion that non-deliberative acts can have positive deliberative consequences—and a detailed account of how this nebulous idea might be made tractable for meaningful comparative analysis. The conclusion then pushes forward a new research agenda in the empirical response to the systemic turn.

**Getting to grips with deliberative systems**

Deliberative democracy is popularly equated with the Forum. It is understood in this sense as a process of contained, rational dialogue aimed at consensus, manifesting in practice through experimental minipublics of randomly selected citizens. Yet this perception is increasingly disconnected from the shape and direction of contemporary normative theorising. Indeed, contemporary deliberative theorists typically eschew the goal of consensus (see Mansbridge et al. 2010). Many are critical of the notion of structured deliberation in isolated minipublics, disconnected from mass politics (see Chambers 2009). The Forum is no longer the orthodoxy. Instead, support is crystallising around the notion of a System, in which different features or qualities of deliberation occur across a range of differentiated but interconnected venues (see Dryzek 2009). The deliberative system reconnects deliberative democratic theory to its initial macro ambitions – to enhance and understand democracy at the large scale. The shift has been away from finding one ‘ideal speech situation’ and towards seeing different sites as enacting different features of deliberative democracy. The key to the system is that these sites overlap and interconnect in ways that enable and sustain a more deliberative and democratic whole. The hope is that whole macro political systems—scalable from the local to the global, from the sectoral to the whole polity—might produce debate, decision-making and political action that, overall, exhibits the epistemic, ethical and democratic ideals long at the core of deliberative democracy (as outlined in Mansbridge et al. 2012). That is to say, the hope is that configurations of governing practices and institutions enable informed and sustained consideration of relevant reasons (Mansbridge et al’s epistemic function), promote and safeguard mutual respect among citizens (their ethical function), and elicit a plurality of voices and claims (their democratic function).

The normative appeal of this account is clear. It makes space for a range of apparently non-deliberative and non-democratic sites and practices that most deliberative democrats nevertheless see as vital to the functioning of a healthy democracy (a point we revisit later). It also has the potential to shift the gaze of democratic reformers away from designing ever-more sophisticated innovations and towards reimagining established democratic practices so that they can better enable deliberative democratic norms at the broader scale (Burrall 2015).

However, not all are so taken with the emerging orthodoxy. The main issue that critics identify is a lack of empirical specification (eg. Hejny and Anderson 2016): Where are the boundaries of a deliberative system? How can we measure the deliberative effects of non-deliberative acts? Might we end up with a deliberative system which in fact contains no deliberation whatsoever? For some, the inability of proponents to account for these questions makes this recent move a wrong turn (see Owen and Smith 2015).

Yet the lack of empirical specification is precisely what makes the systemic account relevant to a variety of real-world political contexts (see Mansbridge et al. 2012). The systemic account makes space for, rather than imagines away, the confounding features of contemporary democratic practice in practice. It recognises the multiplicity of venues through which democratic politics occurs, from mass media communication, to the complexities of existing institutional architecture, through to embedded elite networks (Papadopolous 2012). It can confront the convoluted processes through which democratic will is developed and executed, from the forming of agreement, to its administrative and technical translation, through to the discretion involved in implementation (Boswell 2016). The systemic account recognises that these components can be more or less prominent, feature different deliberative qualities (or pathologies), interact with other components in different ways, and occur in different sequences (see Parkinson 2006). It provides a flexible conceptual framework for understanding the way in which these features might contribute to, or detract from, deliberative democracy in context. It is a complex ideal for a complex world. This is not to ignore the questions that sceptics raise about the systemic ideal, but to say that answers cannot be designed into the model. They are questions of empirical judgment in context, as scholars embark on studying deliberative systems in practice (Dryzek 2016).

Thus far empirical researchers have struggled to grapple with these difficulties in practice, though promising work is now emerging. As outlined in the introduction, one strand has focused on identifying and quantifying connections among deliberative sites and the differential deliberative qualities enabled across sites (eg Beste forthcoming). Another strand has entailed rich and detailed case work on deliberative systems at various levels (eg. Stevenson and Dryzek 2014). Both have strengths, but also limitations. The former can tell us in great detail, with a great deal of robustness, about certain aspects of deliberative systems, but it struggles to provide the holistic account that matches the normative ideal. The latter can tell us about the holistic quality of deliberative systems, but with the risk that it might only do so in idiographic detail.

One approach currently being trialled to move beyond these limitiations is to combine the two strands of systems’ research in creative ways. Another hitherto overlooked approach—and one we wish to stress here—is to embark on deep comparison of deliberative systems, drawing in the process on the sophisticated tools already available in the comparative politics literature. Comparative research must be a vital part of broader, plural efforts to examine and assess deliberative systems in practice. Doing so can combine richness and broad applicability, providing the sort of detailed, theoretically engaged empirical assessments that can speak directly to, and further inform, evolving normative accounts of deliberative democracy.

**Bridging the ‘two worlds’: what deliberative democrats can(’t) learn from mainstream comparative politics**

We are, of course, not the first to promote dialogue between deliberative democracy and comparative politics (see Dryzek 2009; Sabl 2015). Deliberative democrats have long bemoaned the ‘two worlds’ that separate their normative project and the comparative politics scholarship on democratization and democratic quality. Believing that the sophisticated tools for measuring democratization and democratic quality remain rooted to an overly simplistic understanding of democracy—one far removed from normative ideas about what democracy should entail—the call has been to recalibrate these tools in order to better capture the deliberative qualities of political systems as an essential element of overall democratic quality. We concur with this sentiment. Our priority here, though, is in emphasising the need for any dialogue between these ‘two worlds’ to also work the other way. Just as comparative politics scholars should engage with deliberative democracy, deliberative democrats must now engage with comparative politics to gain a better understanding of deliberative systems in practice.

Below, we outline the two dominant models of comparative politics—naturalist comparative political science, with its emphasis on rigid, systematic analysis, and interpretive area studies, with its emphasis on idiographic ‘thick description’. We do so in order to foreshadow the limitations that the norms associated with both traditions pose in the aim of shedding empirical light on the key questions confronting deliberative systems.

*The problem with systemacity: naturalist comparative political science and its limits*

The main problem that deliberative democrats face when seeking to approximate approaches from naturalist comparative political science relates not so much to data collection – the preference for quantitative studies, for example – but rather to the particular commitment to a way of operationalizing concepts. In simple terms, to answer questions like why some countries are democratic and others are not, comparative political scientists have typically sought to precisely define exactly what they mean by democracy. Typically, these definitions revolve around a version of Dahl’s proceduralism: the presence of elections, elected bodies and so on (e.g. the Freedom House rankings). For example Huntington’s famous conceptualisation of democratization as occurring in a series of waves relied on an electoral definition of democracy as embodied in his famous ‘two-turnover test’ (power must change hands between rival parties twice). He would further note that ‘fuzzy norms do not yield useful analysis’ (1991: 9).

From the outset, this poses an obvious challenge for deliberative democrats who are committed to a more expansive definition of democracy. But the problem actually runs much deeper because, even if we expand the definition so that it accords with deliberative ideals, the naturalist approach common to mainstream comparative political science – the idea that fuzzy norms do not yield useful analysis – cannot account for the nuanced ways in which deliberative components and qualities wax and wane across systems. The approach to concept formation common to mainstream comparative political science is thus antithetical to the key normative tenets of deliberative systems.

To substantiate this point, we need to first briefly explain something of the history of comparative political science. Typically, comparative political science is said to be an American pursuit developed in service of Cold War objectives in particular (for review see de Velo 2016). Defining and explaining democratization has always been central to this enterprise and there has been considerable debate over the decades about exactly how this should proceed. For the most part, however, this debate has taken place within a ‘naturalist’ paradigm: that is, the aims of comparative political science are to develop law-like causal generalisations that explain the presence or absence of particular phenomena. To do so, successive generations of scholars have sought to classify countries and observe regularities across cases, using both quantitate and qualitative data.

At the heart of this endeavour is an attempt to solve the problem of conceptual ambiguity. Scholars recognise that democracy means different things in different contexts but this ambiguity is typically cast as a barrier to the types of comparisons they prize. That is, if specific practices and beliefs about democracy differ across contexts, then the whole process of naturalist comparison starts to break down. Traditionally, the answer to this conceptual problem in comparative political science has been built on a version of Giovani Sartori’s famous “ladder of abstraction”. Put simply, Sartori argued that the more particular the concept the less cases it could explain. The key is thus to have different levels of concepts with those at the top of the ladder relatively open or minimalist and those at the bottom more specific. Take for example Arend Lijphart’s classic study *Democracies: Patterns of Majoritarian & Consensus Government in Twenty-One Countries* (1984; cf. 1999) which revolves around two concepts: proportional representation and majoritarian representation. By making this distinction between types of democracy Lijphart was able to classify countries, and having done so argue that the former are less likely to produce artificial majorities than the latter (and are therefore more democratic). Subsequent work in this tradition has further nuanced this approach, but the logic underpinning the endeavour is the same: components of democratic systems are variables out there to be classified, measured and explained.

The Lijphartian approach to systematic qualitative comparison is not entirely foreign to empirical work in deliberative democracy. Indeed, it has underpinned perhaps *the* key contributions to the development of this field from beyond the mini-public laboratory: the work on the deliberative qualities of different legislative systems. Drawing inspiration from Lijphart, Steiner et al. (2004) categorise legislatures according to key institutional rules to identify which characteristics are more likely to engender deliberative quality within legislative discourse. The temptation is to turn further to Lijphart’s approach to systematic qualitative comparison in the task of better teasing out the discrepancies between deliberative sites and systems, applying the tools developed by Steiner et al. to measure different components across broader systems. Such an approach certainly ensures that the core norms of deliberative democracy do not get lost in the analysis, as would seem likely in any attempt to simply inflect large-n work on comparative democratization with some deliberative flavour (eg. Bohmelt et al. 2016).

Another key problem looms, however. That is the mismatch between the analysis of institutional types and rules, on the one hand, and the complex network of overlaps and interconnections in the systems’ account that defy such rigid categorisation, on the other. The initial forays into measuring deliberative quality rigidly across systems exemplify these limitations (see e.g. Pedrini 2014). They can successfully map out basic discrepancies between institutions and across institutional architectures. But they fail to tell us much about what practices can connect or disrupt, enable or undermine systemic deliberation at the large scale. The broader limitations of a systematic approach to comparative democratization are exacerbated in their application to deliberative systems. The whole is lost in the inevitable focus on component parts.

*The problem with idiography: area studies and its limits*

The main alternative to the American tradition of comparative political science has been the British-European tradition of area studies. Area studies has its roots in the colonial project and the need for administrators to understand how their new subjects saw and understood their worlds. It is typically multi or interdisciplinary in nature, borrowing concepts and methods from anthropology, history, economics and political science. Deep immersion in local culture, language and tradition is often prised in this tradition. Or at least that is how area studies is commonly conceptualised today. Historically, disciplines like anthropology employed similar naturalist techniques to codify and compare cultures, for example. Such work has typically been overtaken, however. Context specificity rather than law-like generalisations is generally the goal.

The strengths of this approach correspond largely to the weaknesses of systematic comparative political science. Rather than attempting to impose rigid categories over inherently messy terrain, such work typically places conceptual ambiguity at the centre of its analysis. The clearest example is the ethnographic work of Frederick Schaffer (1998). Schaffer starts from the observation that the democracy concept is so widely stretched that it rarely appears without a modifier: participatory, representative, or even deliberative. He therefore sets about asking how democracy was understood in ordinary language in Senegal and among Wolof speakers in particular. He finds that the common language use of “demokaraasi” revolved around patronage, community solidarity and expectations of material rewards from winning candidates. The point, Schaffer argues, is that differences in the way democracy is understood are likely to shape particular institutional outcomes.

The obvious trade-off associated with this quest to unpack the context-specific meaning of democratization in practice is a lack of broader relevance for those working in different regions and countries; idiographic richness comes at the expense of broader applicability, let alone generalisability. A few highly skilled technicians are able to craft rich, context-specific stories that somehow resonate—Schaffer’s account outlined above is a good example, despite his own deep reservations about drawing any comparative relevance from intensive case work (see Schaffer 2015). But the influence of most is confined to their own area specialisms.

There are obvious similarities between area studies and the long-standing tradition of ethnographic case work in empirical studies of deliberation. Indeed, it is possible to draw a clear lineage of inspiration from area studies for deliberative democracy scholars who adopt this approach (the clearest crossing of paths being genuflection to celebrated anthropologist Clifford Geertz). The crux of both is an emphasis on rich storytelling and context specificity. So, the logical step for scholars who favour this approach is simply to apply the tools of ethnographic single-n scholarship to systematic concerns. And, perhaps due to the emphasis placed on induction and flexibility in this type of work (see Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012), these scholars have been quicker to react to the systemic turn in deliberative democracy than their more naturalist counterparts. Some have sought to track public deliberation on a topic through a wider range of settings across a deliberative system (see Parkinson 2006; Stevenson and Dryzek 2014), or to an especially crucial space of interconnection within it (see Hendriks 2016). Certainly, such an approach is well-placed to shed light on the nuances of how practices interact and overlap in deliberative systems—and the particular studies listed above do this very well, in ways that have resonated, or have the potential to resonate, broadly across scholars of deliberative practice. Yet the risk, as with area studies, is that such resonance appears to be a result of a rare, mysterious and unpredictable alchemy. The vast bulk of this rich work may not travel to other political contexts. It may therefore fail to inform broader ideas and debates about deliberative systems in practice.

**Towards *comparing* deliberative systems**

As the discussion implies, our sympathies lie closer to the tradition of area studies than that of comparative political science. Yet we see neither, on their own, as particularly useful in the task of comparing deliberative systems. The tools of naturalist comparative political science are not suited to providing purchase on whole deliberative systems; the tools of area studies are not suited to providing meaningful comparison. In this section, we highlight two concepts fundamental to the comparison of deliberative systems; reflexivity and fluidity. We do so with two aims in mind. One is to clarify the limitations of the dominant traditions in comparative political studies. Two is to foreshadow the potential of the two, more marginal approaches to comparison that we promote: family resemblances and eclectic affinities.

*Reflexivity*

Empirical researchers of deliberative democracy have long grappled with the fundamental purpose of their pursuit—as advocates in a normative movement or as agnostic testers of a falsifiable theory (Mutz 2008). Most end up sitting somewhere ambiguously in between. We concur with Bevir and Ansari (2012) that scholars who adopt a consciously interpretive approach are best positioned to reconcile the empirical and the normative. Indeed, it is no surprise that researchers of an interpretive bent have been among the key figures in the systemic turn (see especially Parkinson 2006). The key enabler is a commitment to reflexivity.

The bulk of emphasis on reflexivity among interpretivists (nowhere more so than in area studies) has been to focus on the researcher’s positionality in the *political* field within which they conduct research. The aim is to acknowledge privileges, challenges, biases and blindspots that drive motivation, impact material access and colour interpretation. In practice, this refrain to reflexivity typically serves as a way of signposting the experiences and beliefs of the researcher as they pertain to the political phenomenon in question.

In recent times, though, this notion of reflexivity has been augmented by growing appreciation of the researcher’s dual positionality within the *academic* field (see Hay 2011; Boswell and Corbett 2015a). This is a move to acknowledge, and legitimate, the desire to make insights that resonate broadly. As we have said elsewhere, the point of publishing academic work is to ‘make an impression’ (2015b). This side of reflexivity runs contra to the typical identity assumed by area studies specialists. It opens up the prospect of making broader conjectures that go beyond the tight confines of one’s particular research context.

Both sides of reflexivity, we hold, are essential to providing broadly resonant findings about deliberative systems in practice. Acknowledging positionality within the *political* field enables the production of rich, nuanced, subtle insights into the nature of deliberative practice in context that are essential to the task of unpacking how deliberative systems operate. Acknowledging positionality within the *academic* field, in turn, encourages researchers to advance bold claims based on these insights. It urges them to draw out and explore broader patterns that might be of interest and relevance to the entire community of scholars and practitioners engaged in the study of deliberative systems.

*Fluidity*

The systemic turn entails a shift to an account where the qualities and components of deliberative democracy are spatially and temporally distributed (see especially Goodin 2005). Indeed, underpinning the systemic turn has been a growing sense of dissatisfaction with the emphasis on isolated spaces of democratic deliberation at the expense of deliberative democracy in the macro sense (Chambers 2009). With the systemic turn, it is the whole that matters, not the component parts (or at least not in isolation). Once again, such a shift accords with a distinctively interpretive approach. Bevir and Ansari (2012) make the point that the interpretive commitment to ‘meaning holism’ makes it ideally suited to unpacking how deliberation is constructed in practice—something further reinforced by the systemic turn which implies a much more fluid conception of deliberation as well (Ercan et al. 2015). The qualities and components of deliberative democracy appear fluid in two senses. One is that they flow across the system. This is the corollary of distributing deliberative goods across space and time. The other is that their shape is inherently unstable. Because of their complex, ongoing interaction, they cannot manifest in exactly the same way in different contexts. But we should still be able to recognise these qualities and components when we see them.

As we have already intimated, the rigid tools of naturalist comparative political science are ill-equipped to capture these dynamics. They can provide some important insights into how different components and qualities of deliberative democracy move across the system (eg Beste forthcoming). But because naturalist approaches are founded on a need to reduce conceptual ambiguity, they struggle to account for fluidity of shape.

The tools associated with area studies might at first glance appear better suited to the task. Deep attentiveness to context can help unpack the ways in which deliberative democratic qualities emerge and unfold across different sites and over time within a confined debate. However, the commitment to context-specificity can also be limiting. It enables a rich appreciation of fluidity in one sense—tracking the flow of deliberation within a system. But it stifles it in the other, in that it presents a context-bound shape to deliberative qualities and norms. It risks asserting a singular interpretation (or more likely set of interpretations) that cannot transcend system boundaries.

The task of comparing deliberative systems, however, requires acknowledgment of fluidity in both senses. It requires an appreciation of how aspects of democratic deliberation move across sites and over time. But it also rests on the capacity to link the shape and flow of these components in spite of their subtle differences and intangible qualities. It requires, in essence, something between rigid categories and ephemeral interpretations.

**From rigid variables to family resemblances**

One approach is to reinterpret the Lijphartian categorisation of rigid institutional variables across systems. It entails a comparative design based on family resemblances. The notion of family resemblance explicitly draws inspiration from Wittgenstein’s ‘language games’, without taking it to the extremes of area studies scholars like Schaffer who see all political action as bound within a contextual language web. At its centre are recurring ‘traits’ that come and go, to varying degrees, across units within the same broad family. Such traits might include institutional variants, but they tend to entail a decentred, interpretive account of these institutions—one that sees them not as given, but as constructed and continually reproduced through social interaction. Traits also extend beyond institutions and institutional rules to encompass informal beliefs, customs and practices, too. A pioneer of this approach to comparative design is Rhodes et al.’s (2011) account of *Comparing Westminster*. *Comparing Westminster* treats the largest so-called Westminster systems as a broad family, associated with key traits (a unitary state, a strong executive, Parliamentary sovereignty, a neutral civil service, etc). No political system exhibits all of the traits but they recognisably recur across the family. Most do not recur in precisely the same way but they are recognisably similar enough to operate as a starting point for fruitful comparison.

Adopting this approach to the design of comparative research on deliberative systems accords with the need for reflexivity. The approach acknowledges the researcher’s positionality in the political field. It requires some pre-ordained notion of the deliberative systems in focus and how they operate, while being flexible enough to admit of the prospect of surprise. But perhaps the particular strength of this approach is that it acknowledges positionality within the academic field. Adopting a family resemblance design signals from the outset an unwillingness to settle for context-bound insights. It signals a desire to tell a story that impacts the way deliberative systems are understood more broadly, across the whole family.

Approaching comparative research design in this way also provides a means of capturing fluidity. The focus is not rigidly on components of deliberative systems with the holy grail of deciphering the impact of slightly different systemic architectures. It stretches across the traits of different deliberative systems to get a better sense of the features and qualities that these complex configurations enable and sustain overall. Tracing loose family traits accords better with the endeavour to uncover the ‘meaning holism’ essential to explaining deliberative practices in systemic terms. But it also provides a means of comparison. Traits remain flexible enough in their particular manifestation that patterns can be observed across systems. They keep their shape enough to enable meaningful comparison.

We can trace a family resemblance approach to comparison in earlier influential work on deliberative democracy in the micro sense. The best example is the pioneering work of Fung and Wright (2001) on Empowered Participatory Democracy. Indeed, it is instructive that Fung and Wright refer to the diverse practices in their account as ‘a family’. Their focus is not on comparing or contrasting institutional rules within these practices or measures of political culture in the contexts surrounding them. Instead, their focus is on appreciation of a particular set of recurring resemblances across these practices. Their effort in doing so is not to point to or isolate a single (or even subset) of enabling conditions or characteristics for EPD. Instead, they point to conditions and characteristics that come and go to varying degrees across these cases, and the interaction of these features with each other and broader contextual factors. The result is an account that speaks to the broader debate on deliberative practices and innovations.

Some work foregrounding the new zeal for comparing deliberative systems exhibits some of the characteristics of this approach as well. A good example is Parkinson’s (2012) book on the role of public space in democratic deliberation across polities. Though Parkinson makes some effort to justify his comparative design in naturalist terms, in fact we can detect a more unconventional design that relies on family resemblances. His analysis looks across a range of democratic spaces across different countries and zooms in on particular manifestations or variants that typify these spaces. The key is that the different countries do not exhibit stable variation in the nature of their spaces—there are broad features that recur more or less across them. His analysis takes into account these resemblances, but always with an eye to an holistic understanding of how these features interact with each other and broader contextual factors. The result is an account that sheds new light on a key but understudied feature of democratic practice. It helps both further the systemic account conceptually and extend the empirical research agenda in this field.

**From idiosyncratic insights to eclectic affinities**

Given our closer sympathies for idiographic research in the tradition of area studies, we do not want to be interpreted as being in any way dismissive of the value of this work. Instead our point is that this work might be allowed to reach a far greater audience through creative comparison with other systems. We draw here in particular on the late Benedict Anderson’s (2015) account of comparative politics, and his preference for ‘surprising’ comparison. Anderson began his career as an ethnographer of Indonesian politics and saw a key part of his task as being to render this deeply foreign context both intelligible and important to a broader audience of scholars in politics and beyond. He did so by drawing out the affinities between the contexts of his fieldwork and completely different contexts with which a broad readership might have more familiarity. The aim, and effect, was to ‘surprise’ readers, encouraging them to see both contexts in a new light. In the case of Anderson’s (1983) most celebrated work, *Imagined Communities*, this novel strategy had a profound impact on the field. Although of course this attention-grabbing comparative strategy represents a high risk in a competitive funding and publishing environment, at its core is a crucial insight: very different sorts of deliberative systems—in different parts of the world, focused on different issues, with very different sites, practices and actors—might bear striking similarities and contrasts. There are eclectic affinities across cases that are worth parsing out.

For empirical scholars of deliberative systems, pursuing such eclectic affinities requires reflexivity. Indeed, the most obvious strength of this approach is its capacity to respond inductively to in-depth engagement with empirical material: a sensitivity to one’s positionality within the political field. Deliberative systems are highly complex. Apparent features can melt away on closer inspection. Drawing inspiration from Anderson, however, suggests that comparison need not be designed into the project to begin with. Instead, eclectic affinities between contexts can emerge through experience and analysis. Yet being willing to pursue these affinities requires reflexivity in the other sense we stress above. It entails acknowledging one’s own positionality within the academicfield. Actually exploring and explaining the affinities across diverse cases involves consciously reaching beyond an audience interested in the substantive detail to provide vital new insights into deliberative systems more broadly.

Doing so also enables this form of research to capture fluidity in both senses discussed above. The rich single-case work in the model of area studies—the work that necessarily underpins the pursuit of eclectic affinities—is very well placed to track deliberative qualities and components as they move across spaces and over time within the confines of that case. In searching to other cases for similarities and discrepancies, pursuing eclectic affinities also requires acknowledgment that such qualities and components have analogues elsewhere, including unlikely or surprising ones. The presumption underpinning any such attempt is that the qualities and components of deliberative democracy that emerge across deliberative systems over time can manifest in different forms in other cases without necessarily losing analytical purchase.

Once more, we can turn to important foregrounding work in empirical studies of deliberative democracy to show the advantages of using this more marginal tradition of comparative research. A pertinent example is Wedeen’s (2007) account of deliberative practices in Yemen. Wedeen asks a deceptively simply question: Given the fragility of the state, “what makes a Yemeni a Yemeni?” Using Yemeni qat chewing as an example, she highlights how in the absence of strong institutions political activism and critical debate nevertheless occurs during these gatherings. While not conforming to the typical definitions of democracy common to the comparative political science literature – free and fair elections and so on – they nevertheless display many of the precepts that deliberative democrats in particular consider to be ideal, especially in the macro systems account. Qat chewing generates deliberative capacity in Yemeni society. It serves to inform and draw together a broad base of local knowledge on matters of common concern. It encourages the practice of mutual respect in dialogic exchange. It engenders widespread (though in important respects of course still limited) inclusion. In short, it enhances the epistemic, ethical and democratic qualities of the deliberative system. Importantly, while largely focused on Yemen, Wedeen’s account stylistically invokes a comparison between qat chewing and Habermas’s Parisian salons. The effect is to recall this famous account of the organic emergence of the public sphere, and to point to intriguing affinities with developments in Yemen. The point of this subtle move, of course, is to bring her rich understanding of the Yemeni case into conversation with a much broader audience of politics scholars, well beyond regional specialists.

While Wedeen’s move here is reminiscent of Anderson’s ‘surprise’ strategy – and indeed she draws on Anderson throughout the text – there are less creatively demanding but equally valuable ways in which case study researchers might draw out eclectic affinities of interest and use to deliberative systems more broadly. Perhaps the most obvious is simply to draw out the affinities between different cases examined as part of different projects. Take Maarten Hajer’s (2009) account of *Authoritative Governance* in contemporary democracy as an interesting example. To be clear, *Authoritative Governance* only touches tangentially on deliberative democracy in broader, macro terms. As a template for doing comparison in a way that is sensitive to reflexivity and fluidity, though, it remains extremely useful for empirical researchers looking at deliberative systems. Hajer’s account links together seemingly disparate crises in contemporary democratic governance all occurring at different times, in different countries, with different institutions and actors involved—the aftermath of a political assassination, the wake of a food safety scare, and the rebuilding of the World Trade Centre towers. But from these disparate in-depth case studies he identifies eclectic affinities that allow him to build a theory of democratic dramaturgy.

The alternative is for case study researchers in the field to collaborate, pooling their findings to draw out broader insights of value. This can engage many of the scholars already explicitly focused on deliberative systems in practice. Some of the emerging empirical research in this field adopts this strategy explicitly. Boswell et al.’s (2016) recent analysis of transmission in deliberative systems is a good example. This paper draws together the three separate authors’ insights on their three distinct projects—one on honour killing, one an innovative institutional arrangement on energy policy, and one the political debate on obesity, all across a range of settings. The point of the analysis is not to draw out rigid similarities and discrepancies but to identify affinities that can shed light on this crucial but understudied and undertheorised aspect of deliberative systems. The pooling of insights ensures that the findings speak beyond the immediate audiences on multiculturalism, institutional innovation and public health, respectively, and resonate with a broader range of scholars working on deliberative systems.

**Comparing deliberative systems: assessing the systemic effects of non-deliberative acts**

To demonstrate the utility of these two approaches—and in particular their capacity to shed light on deliberative systems in ways that existing approaches do not—we show what our approach might look like. To do so, we sketch a practical illustration of what research based on family resemblances or eclectic affinities might look like, and spell out what benefits it brings in comparison to conventional comparative research.[[1]](#footnote-1) As an exemplar, we turn our attention to a key and controversial facet of deliberative systems theory, the notion that non-deliberative acts can have important beneficial consequences for deliberative systems. This issue has already attracted much discussion among skeptics and supporters of the systemic turn alike (see Mansbridge et al. 2012; Smith and Owen 2015; Smith 2016). Critics, in our mind quite rightly, complain that the conditions under which such benefits might accrue remain underspecified. We have chosen this point to illustrate the utility of our proposed approaches because it is in precisely such an area that detailed, theoretically-engaged empirical research is needed, as part of the valuable ongoing dialogue between deliberative democracy as theory and empirical examination of deliberation in action.

Though none to our knowledge yet exist, it seems likely that naturalist studies on this issue would follow the clear pattern established in mainstream comparative political science: taking a concept, operationalising it in precise terms, measuring its presence/absence, and assessing its effects. In this case, then, such studies would seek to specify particular non-deliberative acts (eg. protest, boycott, testimony, satire, etc), identify their prevalence in particular systems, and assess their impact on deliberative quality within key democratic institutions. Indeed, seen in such terms, the prevailing work on protest in democratic politics could easily be adapted to address the deliberative systems’ literature. It seems likely that such analyses might provide a rigorous account of broad trends across each category. This is of course useful. However, echoing della Porta’s (2006) insightful critique of broader work on democratic protest, such analyses can flatten important contextual factors that are key to capturing and assessing multi-dimensional dynamics. Specifically, the risk is that empirical assessments become disconnected from the normative goods underpinning the systems account. They are hardly well-placed to examine or explain the dynamics through which each non-deliberative act attains deliberative traction, nor to capture the complex interaction as actors perform across sites of deliberation. We might find, for example, that boycotts tend to lead to more reflective and inclusive deliberation about a particular issue in the national press than do protests. But we would need to know about the obstacles and enablers of such outcomes for either activity, their broader impact beyond and across deliberative practices, and the feedback effects on those engaged in non-deliberative activities.

Emergent interpretive studies on this issue focus on particular non-deliberative acts and richly explore their consequences in deliberative practice across settings. When undertaken with an appreciation of fluidity, such studies can help unpack in rich detail the mechanisms by which non-deliberative acts deliver favourable (or unfavourable) deliberative consequences throughout the broader system (see for example Parry 2016). But the insights are limited to the particular intervention at hand (ie. a particular act or set of practices in a particular deliberative system), such that the impact on the broader question—getting greater specificity on how and why particular non-deliberative acts have deliberative consequences—remains weak. We learn a great deal about how the particular non-deliberative intervention feeds into and across other specific deliberative practices, but we remain unclear about how different sorts of non-deliberative acts might fare, let alone how such effects might recur in any deliberative system with a different constellation of institutions, actors and ideas. Such broader resonance might in fact occur—as scholars and practitioners read the in-depth material and draw parallels to their own experiences—but that is left to chance.

*Drawing on family resemblances*

We suggest that an approach to this issue based on capturing and understanding ‘family resemblances’ could provide a vital accompaniment to these studies. Not only could it make up for these weaknesses and limitations, it could in the process provide an essential bridge between these divergent approaches.

One variant would be to look at the same kind of intervention across a ‘family’ of deliberative systems. Mendonca and Ercan’s (2015) provide the makings of a fruitful model in their comparison of anti-government protests in Brazil and Turkey. They trace a similar set of traits in the macro-contexts of protest action, the particular events triggering the action, the composition of the groups involved, and in the organization of protest activity. Their backgrounding of these broad family resemblances allows them to trace patterns and parallels across these intricate deliberative systems. Yet a true family resemblances design would need to go further. It would, in the tradition of comparative case design, have to be embrace the researcher’s positionality within the academic field, underpinned by a desire to position empirical insights in relation to theory so as to maximise the impact on contemporary academic debates. Embracing such reflexivity would rest on a more explicit exposition about the ‘family’ under investigation and the traits that can be seen to characterise it (see Goertz 2006, 7). It would need to spell out these traits in greater detail, and elucidate more clearly their interaction with non-deliberative acts. It would also include a broader range of cases, or members of the family, in order to unpack the particular traits (and combinations of traits) that shape the epistemic, ethical or democratic effects of non-deliberative acts.

An alternative approach could be to conceptualise different sorts of non-deliberative acts as a ‘family’ of practices within the same deliberative system. Such an approach would rest on an appreciation of fluidity—an understanding that each non-deliberative act has its own idiosyncratic qualities and characteristics, but that there remains enough in common to make comparison meaningful and fruitful. It would seek to understand and study each member of this family both in isolation and as a collective. It would focus on identifying and assessing the broader impact of various non-deliberative acts.

*Drawing on eclectic affinities*

Given the emergence of insightful case studies tackling this topic already, perhaps a more straightforward approach would simply be to draw across patterns and disjunctures in this rich, idiographic work to unpack the effects of non-deliberative acts across contexts. Doing so looms as especially important because a key part of disentangling how and why non-deliberative acts have beneficial deliberative consequences comes from comparing interventions with different outcomes. Put simply, when and why does a non-deliberative act do broader deliberative good, and when and why does it do broader deliberative harm? The problem is that the success, or otherwise, of a non-deliberative intervention is hard to ascertain in advance of detailed study. It is an evaluative judgment that has to be made on the basis of detailed empirical evidence (see Dryzek 2016). But drawing on the ‘eclectic affinities’ across rich case work already undertaken can allow researchers to explore such a question. It would allow researchers working in different sorts of contexts to explore parallels and divergences in the impact of non-deliberative acts.

As such, Mendonca and Ercan’s insightful study discussed above might further benefit from engagement with studies in other contexts, even where differences in background or ‘family’ features will require particularly careful reflexivity. They could, for instance, usefully augment their analysis with consideration of research on anti-government protests that have seemingly had lesser impact on broader deliberative practice (as reflected in Smith 2016). They could further draw out comparison with research on protests—albeit in a very different context of sectoral activism—that outlines important detrimental effects for the broader deliberative system (as reflected in Parry 2016). Sustained analysis comparing these cases might help trace patterns in the mechanisms that produce positive deliberative effects in some cases but neglible or negative effects in others, in the process unpacking the enabling (and discouraging) contextual features that channel such effects. It is precisely this sort of rich comparison—inflected with a commitment to reflexivity and an appreciation of fluidity—that is so essential in the task of informing the broader empirical study of deliberative systems in practice and the normative theorising of their features and components.

To be clear, comparative research conducted along either path would not be able to provide the broad account of general trends that a systematic, naturalist approach can provide. Nor would it be able to delve into the rich depth that an idiographic single case would offer. What it would offer instead is a detailed account of patterns and disjunctures in how non-deliberative acts impact deliberative practice within systems. It might explain, for example, how and why particular institutional or cultural factors enable and sustain the broader deliberative effects of particular non-deliberative interventions, or how and why certain forms of non-deliberative activity appear to have broader deliberative effects than others. These are findings that rigorous systematic analysis could subsequently put to the test, that rich idiographic case work might further flesh out, and that would ultimately feed into a clearer set of specifications about the systemic effects of non-deliberative acts in the normative account of deliberative democracy.

**Conclusion**

We have argued that comparison must be at the heart of efforts to empirically study, and thus inform, the new normative ideal of the deliberative system In turning to new tools of comparison, though, empirical scholars of deliberative systems should avoid the bifurcation that besets comparative political studies—they should resist prevailing norms that might push them to be too systematic, on the one hand, or too idiographic, on the other. The dominant approaches to comparative political studies—naturalist comparative political science and interpretive area studies—do not contain all the answers. The former cannot account for *whole* deliberative systems. The latter does little to enable comparison. Neither approach alone, nor in combination, can shed sufficient light on deliberative systems in practice. And so we promote two alternatives from the interpretive margins of comparative political science that are better placed to make up for these limitations; designing for family resemblances and responding to eclectic affinities. Both approaches, we hold, are sensitive to the contextual complexities of the systems conception. Both, in different ways, can tell us a great deal about why and how deliberative practices and institutions emerge, flourish, interact, shift, or fail, and why and how they enable, enhance or undermine the democratic and deliberative qualities of the system overall.

The implications for the research agenda moving forward are two-fold. One is to resist contemporary efforts to entirely systematise the study of deliberative systems. What naturalist research can tell us about deliberative systems, it can tell us very precisely. But it cannot tell us everything we need to know. Deliberative democracy remains a rare subfield of political science in its persistent tolerance for a plurality of empirical approaches. Our hope here is for this to be extended as the systemic turn takes hold. Two, in this vein, is not to discourage detailed case work about deliberative systems, but to take the steps we suggest in order to ensure its vital insights do not get lost. The pay-off will be a richer seam of empirical material on deliberative systems in practice, helping to flesh out this appealing new democratic ideal.

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1. Our approach here is inspired in part by Parkinson’s (2016) concluding discussion to a recent edited volume, in which he illustrates how his more expansive understanding of deliberative democracy – ‘as a label for a kind of democratic system that has deliberation as a salient feature’ (Parkinson 2016, 147) - would in practice provide fresher and richer insights into the the three key case studies illuminated in the volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)