**The (un)lucky country: The problem of the single antipodean case study and what to do about it**

**Abstract**

Single case studies, though once the foundation of political science, have become a high-risk strategy in the discipline. The risk is especially acute for scholars who do rich qualitative work about New Zealand and Australia. There is a double bind. On the one hand, the community studying Antipodean politics is not large enough or sufficiently well-defined to ignore trends and mores overseas. On the other hand, Antipodean politics is not exotic or important enough to command the attention of the larger discipline. The danger lies in ‘falling off the map’. We consider the problem this poses for academic careers, highlighting the inbuilt biases of international journals and ranking regimes. We then outline a menu of strategies for surviving this double bind using the practices of comparative interpretive research. These practices include: creative case justification; co-publishing; strategic supplementation; meta-analysis; and cumulative analysis. We posit that a more clear-eyed acknowledgement of the problem can lead to the conscious embracing of these strategies and the potential they offer for immersive case research.

**Keywords:** case study research; Australian politics; research design; case selection; interpretive comparison

**Introduction**

*"Your manuscript deals with a single case in one country. And while it certainly engages with relevant debates, the empirical scope is ultimately very narrow from our point of view. We have thus decided not to send it for review on this occasion."*

We expect that many readers of this journal will, like us, be furious at receiving such a desk rejection from an eminent international journal. It is precisely the sort of 'A\*' ranked outlet that modern regimes of research oversight incentivise us to publish in. We might have been less angry if it were a fair criticism based on the established mores and preferences of the journal in question. But it was not. There were many such ‘single case in one country’ studies in their back issues and even prominent examples among their 'early view' catalogue. The difference was that those studies were centered on countries in North America and Western Europe, or occasionally BRICS and MINT countries in the Global South. The brute fact is that US journals are US journals in content and authorship, and they dominate the field (Sharman and Weller 2009). What the desk rejection really meant was that - in the view of the editors - political scientists across the world don't care about Australia, no matter how interesting or rigorous the work might be. This sense of frustration piqued when, a few weeks later, one of us was invited by the same editors to review a paper that turned out to be a 'single case in one country'. Either there had been a radical shift in editorial policy or, more likely, they regarded this case as more intrinsically important than the one from Australia.

We channeled this sort of frustration into writing a book on *The* *Art and Craft of Comparison* (Boswell et al. 2019) aimed at helping political scientists develop an approach and set of strategies for overcoming these barriers. We revisit those issues now to speak directly to the audience most affected by this parochial prejudice in the discipline - our fellow political scientists with a professionally inconvenient interest in Australia and New Zealand.

The single case study is perhaps the oldest and most used form of academic analysis in the social sciences and humanities. Its ubiquity reflects the genealogy of these disciplines whose early exponents typically practiced a naive modernist empiricism (Bevir and Rhodes 2006: 38-44). Famous founding examples in political science include Dahl’s (1961) account of ‘Who governs?’ in New Haven or Allison’s (1971) analysis of the Cuban missile crisis in international relations. The single case study remains a mainstay of PhD training and has spawned a litany of books and articles on design, selection, data collection and analysis (see Blatter and Haverland 2014; George and Bennett 2005; Yin 2014).

Yet, despite this long and storied tradition, the single case study has become a high-risk strategy for the budding political scientist because the discipline has come to treat causation and a logic of confirmation or falsification as the gold standard of empirical research, especially when evidenced statistically (Bevir and Blakely 2018: 32-39). While some leading proponents acknowledge that qualitative data can also offer valid insights, they argue it must conform to the same core tenants of naturalism to be considered robust. The mantra is ‘diverse tools, shared standards’ (Brady and Collier 2010), which is repeated at the leading methods training schools and in the most cited textbooks for graduate students. In practice, this mantra has come to represent an attack on the genre of the single case study. A single case might have value for its ‘mere description’ (Gerring 2012), which generates plausible hypothesis that can then be tested more rigorously by statistical analysis. It could also be used to confirm or falsify under specific circumstances if the case is deemed ‘critical’ or ‘deviant’ (see, classically, Lijphart 1971). But beyond these limited functions, it has little value to naturalists because it suffers from an incurable endogeneity problem. Recent defenders of the single case have since argued that it can help us uncover ‘mechanisms’ via a series of tests that uncover why a causal sequence occurred (George and Bennett 2005). But this is a sleight of hand: analysis that seeks to uncover mechanisms relies on comparison over time. In this tradition, the single case is not singular at all.

A shift in the value of the single case has significant implications for a range of scholars, including most obviously those who work in an interpretive tradition that typically venerates empirical depth over breath. But it also has implications for those working in a range of cognate traditions, many of whom specialise in the politics of a specific country or policy area that is not deemed ‘critical’, or ‘deviant’ as defined parochially by US and to a lesser extent European scholars. For these scholars—who represent most political scientists globally—the diminished value of the single case study has become a major barrier to their careers as it makes it hard to publish in the sorts of career-boosting, so-called top-tier journals and book publishers that their universities increasingly hold up as the gold standard of academic excellence.

We cannot change this set of circumstances. We are also less concerned about the fate of the single case study than might be assumed from the tone of this piece so far. We accept that single case studies have limits, albeit for different reasons than naturalists. As we have outlined at length elsewhere (Boswell et al. 2019), in the interpretive tradition the single case can often lead to idiographic analysis that struggles to distinguish the wood from the trees. But we also believe that good descriptive work has value irrespective of its contribution to supposedly ‘general’ theory. Indeed, spelling out the value of any case is a key task that all analysis must perform. In this article, we offer strategies for how to demonstrate the value of a case. Our aim is to provide scholars struggling with this problem with a menu of options that will enable them to more easily set out the significance of what they do. Armed with these rhetorical devices, our hope is that the rest of their research practice can remain undisturbed by the broader trends that have captured our discipline.

**The problem of the single, ‘nondescript’ case**

The problem of the single case does not affect all scholars with a preference for empirical depth over breadth. Some single cases will always be valued. There is, simply, a double standard, driven by the parochialism in the most powerful bases of the discipline. Let’s start with countries. There will always be an audience for single case studies of large states such as the US and the UK. A conceptual framework with a single case from these countries will be considered of universal interest and publishable because the best journals are typically based in the US and UK and will be edited and reviewed by their scholars. Indeed, this work can still get published in top tier outlets even if – to outsiders of the parochial bubble – it offers vanishingly little in the way of wider theoretical interest or substantive contribution to our understanding of any wider political phenomenon. Scholars who work on these countries do not usually have to work hard to justify their case selections. It is tempting to pass this off as a classic example of Eurocentrism—and to an extent it is—but a similar logic justifies work on China, for example. These cases are valued more because they are ‘great’ powers (or used to be, in the case of the UK).

Other cases will be justified because they are unique in specific ways. Ethnically divided societies, for example, have long attracted single case study work. Ireland, Cyprus, or Fiji are not great powers by virtually any measure, but their elections take on significance when placed in the context of debates about power sharing and consociationalism (see, for example, McGarry and O’Leary 2006). Here lies the heart of claims about the value of ‘critical’ or deviant’ case selection. For scholars who work on or in these countries the key to getting published is to identify what makes their case ‘critical’ or ‘deviant’ and to whom. If they can find their hook, then being the global expert on that case can be a successful career strategy.

The most pressing problem arises when the single case study is not especially critical or deviant in any way. The home of this journal—Australia, where all of us have worked and studied at one time—is a case in point. Australia is usually considered a medium sized, middle power. It is also usually considered a wealthy, advanced liberal democracy. Scholars of federalism have a passing interest in its institutional structure. Scholars who study Westminster systems may likewise find the contrast with the UK or Canada useful (see Rhodes et al. 2009). Scholars of immigration policy might find Australia an interesting ‘extreme’ case due to its draconian ‘border protection’ regime. It is also becoming a ‘frontline state’ for climate impacts. In IR, Australia has become an object of particular interest in emerging scholarship on race and settler colonialism (see Cotton 2009), and its relationships with China and India can offer fruitful insights for the evolving geo-political order. But for the most part, the Australian case is ‘nondescript’; it has limited theoretical novelty or import. Typically, it is only interesting to Australians and Australian journals. Scholars of Australian politics, whose universities want them to teach Australian students and publish in the best international journals, are typically frustrated by how little interest anyone outside Australia has in what they do.

The story is little different for New Zealand. As with Australia, there are some theoretically exceptional things about New Zealand that occasionally put it on the map for an international audience – the long-standing and increasingly important role of Maori politics and legal custom in the constitutional settlement (Sharp 1999), the tradition of the wage earners’ welfare state swiftly swept aside in the early embrace of New Public Management (Chapman and Duncan 2007), the shift to proportional representation in electoral system (Marsh and Miller 2012), or more recently still – alongside Australia – the extraordinary response to COVID-19 (Bromfield 2021). But, for the most part, New Zealand sits even further in the periphery than Australia. Certainly, it is hard to publish a typical case study of public opinion, party identification or policy change in New Zealand in a top tier journal or press. There is no compelling rationale for prioritizing either country over any number of others.

The Antipodean experience is hardly unique . The way colonial logics continue to permeate academia are part of this story (Shilliam 2021) and are apparent in the Australian and New Zealand cases. But scholars of small or medium sized countries from all over the world often express similar frustrations because they are only considered interesting as a counterpoint to the US and UK (Veenendaal and Corbett 2015). The ‘Scandinavian model’, for example, or ‘post-communist transition’ provides a justification for studying much of Europe, although Dutch scholars often complain that they don’t even have these advantages. Lijphart may have made the country the model for consociationalism, and the Netherlands is at the forefront of numerous debates, from sex work policy (Wagenaar 2006) to assisted dying (Cohen-Almagor 2008) and drug legalisation (Leuw and Marshall 1994). But do single Dutch case studies get published in leading journals such as the *American Political Science Review*, the *Journal of Politics*, or the *British Journal of Political Sc*ience at the same rate as US and UK case studies (Sharman and Weller 2009)?

The most obvious takeaway from this brief discussion is that the science of politics is not nearly as naturalist as many think it ought to be. This situation is both a blessing and a curse for interpretivists. It is a blessing in the sense that it hints at the pluralism that lurks beneath the surface of the discipline and especially outside the US. We would love to see that pluralism further acknowledged and embraced. We have worked hard to achieve this over many years, although we admit that it often feels like a battle we are losing (see Bevir and Rhodes 2022). It is a curse in the sense that the fundamental parochialism underpinning this state of affairs reflects and reinforces a challenge. A relative disadvantage in terms of traditional legacies, concentration of resources, and sheer size mean that those in the periphery of global political science always have a harder task. Even theoretically unexciting, substantively incremental and grindingly dull case studies of the US (especially) can gain recognition and esteem internationally. Scholars working in and on the Antipodes have to reach a much higher bar.

So, what should the rest of us do given our universities incentivize us to follow the publishing practices enshrined by global rankings and citations metrics? Our basic argument here is that we have little choice but to be pragmatic and adapt. We can and should publish single case study work on countries such as Australia and New Zealand in journals such as the *Australian Journal of Political Science*. And we can and should continue to make the case to our institutions that this work has intrinsic value and merit on its own terms, because it helps make ‘sense’ of the places in which we live. But we also need to find ways to feed the metrics and criteria of modern universities to ensure this kind of work survives. The key point is that at times we will need to make cases from Australia and New Zealand theoretically exciting for an international readership – to make sure they are not always ‘nondescript’. The rest of this article outlines strategies that we have used and had some success with.

**Staying on the Map: Towards an Adaptive Inclination**

In this section we outline several strategies we used for broadening the audiences for our work. The list is not exhaustive. But it is indicative of the adaptations necessary to get published in leading journals. We draw on our own experience as authors, editors, and reviewers for these journals. We focus on our attempts to publish work where we sought to make an empirical contribution (an alternative strategy is to ‘bury the case’ completely and write theory). Our main audience are fellow interpretivist scholars who are doubly disadvantaged when seeking to publish empirical material from ‘nondescript’ cases in leading international outlets. But we think these strategies will be useful for scholars working in cognate traditions, too. Ultimately our commitment to pluralism means that we want to see journals carry a variety of types of work, including interpretivism.

Because labels help to get the message across, we refer to ourselves as *bricoleurs* and our practices as *bricolage*. The expression is borrowed from the anthropologist, Levi Strauss (1966: 16-17) and refers to someone who uses whatever tools are available and fit the specific situation (Denzin and Lincoln 2011: 4). A bricoleur employs a ragbag of tools; what works is best. The term distances us from the popular multimethod approach, which is firmly embedded in naturalist political science. It also signals that we value qualitative data, observational fieldwork and the many variants associated with ethnography (Fleming and Rhodes 2023).

We now turn our attention to the several practices that we believe will prevent Antipodean cases falling off the map. We cover creative case justification, co-publishing, strategic supplementation, meta-analysis, and cumulative analysis.

***Creative case justification***

The first strategy is one we have already alluded to above: think creatively about what makes your case interesting for different audiences. This is the logic of the naturalist with its emphasis on ‘critical’ or ‘deviant’ cases. Where we differ is that naturalists typically see the empirical task of establishing whether a case is in fact critical or deviant. Their research design is based on the premise that a case is what they think it is and then they undertake empirical work to confirm their initial selection. Our emphasis, by contrast, is on how we construct or perform case justification. To quote Soss (2018), interpretivists don’t study a case, we case a study. The point is our work can be a case of many different things, some of which we might have guessed beforehand but often we find out as we go. This ability to engage in creative justification is an advantage that interpretivists have over other traditions.

Take Corbett (2015) as an exemplar. Corbett studies small island developing states, a topic typically the domain of area specialists with a limited appeal to a generalist audience. Political scientists who have successfully managed to draw the attention of the mainstream to these cases have done so by using them as part of global comparative analysis. Antipodean political scientists Reilly (2002) and Fraenkel (with Grofman, 2006) used studies of Papua New Guinea and Fiji to contribute to debates about electoral engineering and deeply divided societies. Corbett and Veenendaal (2018) drew attention to the factor that made small states seemingly irrelevant to the mainstream: their small population size. They employed these cases to test arguments about the impact of population size on democratic function (Their argument was that the discipline had more to learn from understudied cases than it did from revisiting larger states).

Times have changed. A combination of climate change and increased geopolitical competition have made small island developing states much more interesting to a range of audiences than they were only a decade ago. Indeed, in some disciplines, such as human geography and environmental science, studying climate adaptation in small islands is common enough that many academic departments would employ scholars who specialise in this type of work.

Two points stand out for readers of this journal. First, a study is never an *a priori* case of anything. We perform a justification. So, we must argue why scholars who know nothing about our study should care about what we are saying. The naturalist language of critical and deviant cases can be helpful in this regard. We can use language more closely associated with an interpretive orientation, as in Bent Flyvbjerg’s (2006) highly cited defense of single cases. Sometimes – following Soss’s exhortation to ‘case a study’ - we will have to retrofit it to our study after the fact. Either way, and second, we have license to be creative in how we think about what we do and mindful of the multiple audiences our work might have. Each case has implicit value but that doesn’t mean it has a right to be published and read. We earn that right by our creative justification.

***Co-publishing***

Most of us are time poor. Reading new literatures to find new audiences for our work might be possible when we are doing our PhD or have a generous fellowship. But amidst what the modern university deems a ‘balanced’ academic pathway that involves teaching and management alongside research, finding the time and intellectual space to read widely is difficult. This limits our capacity to engage in creative justification. The easiest way around this obstacle is to co-publish, which has two benefits. First, it allows us to speak to different audiences without having to do the hard work of reading into a specific literature. We rely on our co-authors to do that for us! Second, it enables us to add more cases and turn a single case study into comparative analysis. We have addressed the second strategy at length elsewhere (see Boswell et al. 2019) and so here we focus on the first. The point is that once we recognise the potential of creative justification, we can see numerous audiences for work that might otherwise be considered nondescript.

A good illustration is Rhodes’ (2011) ethnographic study of three British government departments. The original study was not concerned with gender and how, for example, it influenced the workings of the departmental courts. Mackay and Rhodes (2013) reanalysed the data, but this time using gender identification to explore the practices of the departmental court. They focused on two questions. How did bureaucratic beliefs and practices of the departmental court reproduce gender relations? What were the gendered consequences of such everyday practices? Their data showed departmental courts were ‘greedy institutions’ (Coser 1974), which left no space for either family or social life. The protocols and ritualised practices are coping mechanisms through which the departmental court maintains continuity, and through which institutional reform and innovation, including equal opportunity reforms, can be adopted, adapted, and resisted (see also Annesley and Gains, 2010). So, the status quo is not challenged. One significant gendered consequence is that women have few institutional options but to ‘manage like men’ (Wajcman 1999).

Co-publishing is not always straightforward. We have had more and less successful collaborations over our respective careers. Finding substantive connections with other scholars is not usually hard. Finding scholars who have a complementary style can be more difficult. Collaborations in which the sum is greater than the individual parts are the holy grail. Some of the most successful academic careers have been propelled by these sorts of collaborations. But even if you don’t luck out and find such a partnership, the point is that an adaptative inclination towards co-publishing is a pragmatic response to the problem of needing to find new audiences for your work in a time poor world. As a bonus, it can also be generative of great ideas and enriching on a human level, too.

***Strategic supplementation***

Another approach is to augment a single case study in a country the audience does not intrinsically care about with a strategic supplementary case - a replica of the study deliberately situated in a country that many more in the audience *do* intrinsically care about. The logic here is to demonstrate the resonance that ‘plausible conjectures’ from a study in Australia or New Zealand might have, rather than just hint at them. The advantage of this strategy is a pragmatic one in a context of the busy lives of early career academics and the increasingly stringent limits on funding for rich qualitative research. The initial case in Australia or New Zealand can be done over a much longer ‘soak’, enabled by proximity and access that might necessarily need to be targeted local because of funding restrictions or domestic caring duties. The supplementary case can then follow as a much more intensive and targeted process of data collection, and an analytical emphasis on accounting for similarities and discrepancies. The final comparative product, however, can still speak to and interest that wider audience – provided, of course, (and here is the obvious challenge with this approach) that the supplementary case still demonstrates sufficient command of the detail and nuance.

An example can help to demonstrate this potential - Boswell’s (now long ago) PhD project on the politics of tackling obesity (see Boswell 2016). The initial case in this analysis was Australia, with rapport and understanding developed over a year’s worth of fieldwork in Canberra, Melbourne and Sydney. The supplementary case was the UK, with fieldwork undertaken over a shorter burst of around a few months in London and its surrounds. Because of long-standing professional and political overlaps between the two countries, existing contacts from the Australian fieldwork were able to help direct attention and tee up access to key people in the UK. Analysis was also much quicker because core similarities held, and the emphasis was mainly on illustrating these and teasing out the few discrepancies. The result was a set of findings that resonated sufficiently with policy scholars in the UK and Europe to justify several publications.

***Meta-ethnography***

An alternative is to situate case study work from Australia and New Zealand in a much wider synthesis. There are several labels for this approach (see Gough 2013). We prefer meta-ethnography – because the label signals both an emphasis on rich qualitative source material and a departure from the rigid strictures of systematic meta-analysis that are beginning to permeate the discipline from the more dismal sciences. Meta-ethnography entails the creative and generative process of identifying, reading, relating and translating studies of similar phenomena into one another (from Noblit and Hare 1988). It is a systematic method of creatively linking and pooling collective insights from ethnographic studies that each individually provide ‘thick descriptions’ of their own rich contexts. The work of meta-ethnography is both rigorous and creative. The rigour comes in the form of extensive and detailed reading to explore, narrow down, and digest the ethnographic source material. The creativity comes in the form of abstracting insights from across diverse studies to unveil patterns of similarity and difference with potential for theoretical resonance across contexts.

In this way, studies of Australia and New Zealand grounded in context can be repurposed and placed alongside studies from a wide variety of other places in order to identify and elucidate broader patterns. For example, in a recent paper, Boswell and Smedley (2023) pool together over 45 interpretive studies to identify a suite of more general ‘weapons of the weak’ (Scott 1985) exercised by targets of welfare policies and programmes. In practice, this meant situating insights from contemporary ethnographic work on Australian politics and policymaking – none more revealing than Tess Lea’s (2020) magisterial account of ‘Wild Policy’ in the Northern Territory - alongside similarly deep and rich accounts of, for instance, daily life on a social housing estate in London (see Koch 2018), the public encounters in welfare offices in France (Dubois 2010) and resistance to workfare programmes in Ireland (Whelan 2022). The purpose is to show idiographic work on places like Australia and New Zealand is generative of wider lesson-drawing and theory-building, rather than peripheral and incidental to it.

***Cumulative analysis***

The final strategy we advocate for here is the tradition to which most scholars engaging in single case study work have gravitated when faced with the ‘diverse tools, shared standards’ movement. The approach we have in mind here is breaking a ‘single case’ into multiple units, either via time-bound episodes or subnational comparison. By doing so, they transform a single case into a comparative study, allowing the author(s) to escape their endogeneity problem. Obviously, interpretivists are not overly concerned by endogeneity problems. But we admire this strategy and think it can be emulated, especially by self-consciously cumulative analysis. This tactic is not typically available to the new entrant in the field. But for the older hand, who has been undertaking similar work over many years, identifying changes over more granular time and space in their data is a tried and tested way of broadening the appeal of single-case study work, especially when combined with the addition of new cases.

Corbett has slowly but steadily added to his archive of interviews with political elites in small states. His first book relied on over 100 (Corbett 2015). His third, with Veenendaal, combined more than 250 (Corbett and Veenendaal 2018). He has since been able to carve out and add to specific sub-groups of interviews to tackle specific topics (see Corbett 2023). Weller, Grube and Rhodes (2022) explored how Cabinet government worked in five countries. As well as the 54 interviews conducted for this book, they also drew on some 400 interviews with ministers and civil servants conducted for previous projects (see for example, Rhodes, Wanna and Weller 2009; and for a more comprehensive listing see Weller, Grube and Rhodes, 2022: 23-7, especially note 57).

Two points stand out. The first is that even a single nondescript case can be broken down in to increments that enable the author to identify patterns over time. By doing so, they transform their case and what it offers a general audience. The second is that this strategy is especially effective when data is collected cumulatively and combined with new cases. Small N comparison adds considerable appeal to interpretive work but is especially amenable to general statements when both spatial and temporal dimensions are in play. Of course, this work is no longer strictly a single case study. But that does not preclude the author from publishing the single case as well. Indeed, an effective strategy can be to publish the single case in area studies journals and then comparative analysis in a generalist journal, thus engaging multiple audiences and meeting institutional imperatives to publish regularly, in quality outlets, and engage local policy communities.

**Conclusion**

The single case study has become much maligned, which is pushing certain types of scholars to the margins of the discipline. Naturalists see the single case study as suffering from an incurable endogeneity problem. Such studies can be valuable for hypothesis generating description. They might be able to test theory in limited ways. They also might be amenable to mechanistic analysis. But that cannot be used to generalise or falsify, unless of course they happen to focus on ‘great’ powers. The upshot is that scholars who work on seemingly ‘nondescript’ cases will struggle to place their work, no matter how well crafted, in top journal outlets, which are invariably dominated by scholars from those same large states. This in turn has impacts for their ability to meet increasingly globalised university performance metrics and by implication their careers.

We cannot change this context. Instead, we champion an adaptive inclination to battle against the prejudice that Australian and New Zealand cases are ‘nondescript’, and highlight their theoretical value for a wider international readership. We have outlined several strategies we have identified that will enable scholars to continue their work while meeting the imperatives of their institutions. They are especially aimed at fellow interpretivists but are likely to be useful for scholars working in cognate traditions such as area studies (see Hodgett and James 2018). We successively canvassed the merits of creative case justification; co-publishing; strategic supplementation; meta-ethnography; and cumulative analysis. We structured this discussion to start with strategies that will be most familiar to most readers and then worked out to those that are more novel. They can be undertaken concurrently or in isolation. None is a panacea. But they enable adaptation and survival in a context that discourages writing about certain countries and policies.

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