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Methodological specifics of policy research

1 Introduction

The aim of policy research is to describe the emergence, adoption and practical implementation of political programs, to explain them with reference to the objectives of the actors involved and the institutional framework conditions and, if necessary, to develop recommendations for alternative political solutions in the context of political consulting activities. Although some policy researchers also examine political measures taken by *private* organizations, most studies focus on *state* activities for the political shaping of social conditions - laws, regulations, subsidies, taxes, public services, campaigns, etc. - as the focus of interest. The focus of policy field analysis is therefore on describing, explaining and sometimes also normatively evaluating the actions of governments and administrations.

The subject area of policy research has an impact on the available or collectable data and the associated analysis methods. These methodological specifics of policy research are the focus of this article. In particular, the early phases of the policy cycle (problem definition and agenda setting), but also key decisions in the context of policy formulation and implementation, largely take place behind closed doors and can therefore often only be traced inadequately through publicly available information such as press reports, parliamentary materials or government documents. It is also difficult to track changes to the political programs that are debated and ultimately adopted without insight into the decision-making processes that do not take place in public.

As we see below, these requirements by no means preclude quantitative research, but they do require some difficult and sometimes unsatisfactory methodological decisions regarding the measurement of key dependent and independent variables and the establishment of causal relationships. For these reasons, case studies and qualitative research methods such as expert and elite interviews or qualitative document analysis are widely in the field of policy research. However, this line of research also has to contend with problems, particularly with the generalizability of case study results.

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 first turns to the qualitative approaches in policy research. It introduces the approaches used in process analy

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The following section presents the methods used in the qualitative and interpretative branches of qualitative policy analysis and discusses their advantages and disadvantages. Section 3 then provides an overview of the methods of quantitative policy research, in particular aggregate data analysis in comparative government activity research, the quantitative analysis of legislative processes, quantitative network analysis and qualitative comparative analysis, which, contrary to its name, is regarded here as a quantitative analysis method. Finally, the advantages and disadvantages of these quantitative methods are discussed. Finally, section 4 draws a conclusion and discusses ways of overcoming the weaknesses of the qualitative and quantitative methods commonly used in policy research.

2 Qualitative approaches

Many contributions to policy field analysis can be assigned to the field of qualitative research. In view of the large number of actors involved and the lack of publicity surrounding many decision-making processes, it makes sense to approach research into policy-making processes in the form of detailed case studies, either in the form of individual case analyses or comparative case studies with a small number of cases.

Case studies can pursue very different knowledge objectives. The literature distinguishes between different types of case study designs (Lijphart 1971; Eckstein 1975; George/Bennett 2005: 74-76; Jahn 2006: 324-330). The most important types of case studies, which are also frequently in policy research, include the following:

- *Theory-oriented interpretative case studies:* This type of case study usually focuses on individual political events or decisions that seem particularly important and attempts to explain them with the help of existing theories. However, the more general theoretical yield of such case studies is limited, as the theoretical explanation fits the specific case but is difficult to transfer to other cases. Nevertheless, such analyses are quite common in policy research. In the search for explanations, however, such studies often also uncover new, unexpected theoretical connections, which is why there is a large overlap with hypothesis-generating case studies.
- *Hypothesis-generating case studies:* In such studies, the aim is to find new theoretical connections using the example of important, unusual or extreme cases (such as cases that were particularly politically controversial or that identified as outliers in statistical analyses) and to formulate them in the form of hypotheses at the end, which can then be used in later studies,

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can be empirically tested in broader studies. This type of case study is frequently encountered in policy research and holds great potential for interesting, previously underexplored theoretical connections. This applies in particular to hypothesis-generating case studies, which a theo- retical connection in a particularly vivid way.

- *Theory-testing case studies:* After hypothesis-generating case studies, theory-testing case studies certainly play one of the most important roles in policy research. Among the case studies, they are the most theory-relevant. Individual case studies can be theory-testing if they examine *crucial cases*, i.e. cases that particularly decisive for proving or disproving a theory. The aim of *most-likely case studies* is to refute an established theory. For this purpose, a case is selected in which it is particularly likely that the claimed theoretical effect should occur. If you can then show that the effect did not occur even under these particularly favorable conditions, you have a strong argument against the theoretical assumption. Conversely, the *least-likely case study* serves to substantiate a theory. A case is selected in which it is particularly unlikely that the expected effect will occur. If it can then be shown that the effect nevertheless occurs, this is a strong argument for the validity of the theory.
- Comparative case studies with the aim of testing theory often follow the logic of causal inference as developed by John Stuart Mill (Mill 1843: Volume I, Chapter 8). In Mill's *difference method,* cases are selected that are as similar as possible and ideally only differ in one decisive explanatory variable. This makes it possible to check whether differences in the characteristics of the dependent variable can attributed to this explanatory . Similarly, *the concordance method selects* cases that are as dissimilar as possible and ideally only agree on one crucial independent variable, which can then explain the similarities in the dependent variable.

Apart from the focus on case studies, two different currents can be distinguished in qualitative policy research, each with their own scientific theoretical premises and associated methodological approaches.

2.1 Process analysis Policy research

The process-analytical branch of qualitative policy research attempts to obtain explanations for political decisions by tracing the underlying decision-making processes step by step, in order to derive a clearer picture of the political process.

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sequential process to draw conclusions about cause-effect relationships. This method has become known under the generic term "process analysis" or "process tracing" (George/Bennett 2005: Chapter 10; Schim- melfennig 2006). This methodology can be used in the context of individual case studies as well as in comparative case studies. Comparative case studies have the advantage that causal relationships can also be illustrated by contrasting cases.

As part of process analyses, the actors involved and their preferences must be identified and the course of the debates and the underlying decision-making rules must be traced. It is assumed that the perceptions and situational interpretations of the actors involved in the policy process can be quite variable, but that they are usually sufficiently consistent and stable for the researcher to be able to understand them reasonably objectively. One of the main data sources for this type of research are *elite or expert interviews* (Meuser/Nagel 2009; Pickel/Pickel 2009; Kaiser in this volume). The experts interviewed are people who were involved in the decision-making processes or who followed them at close quarters. These are usually elites such as civil servants from the ministries involved, representatives of associations, parliamentarians, journalists, scientific policy advisors or even ministers and state secretaries.

The decisive factors for the selection of experts are knowledge of the decision-making process to be investigated, the willingness to be interviewed by a researcher and the coverage of different perspectives on the process to be investigated in order to avoid one-sided, personally colored representations and to achieve a reconstruction of the decision-making process shared by as many experts as possible by interviewing people with different political backgrounds. In contrast to other surveys, representativeness does not play a decisive role here, as there is no clearly defined population of experts and it is therefore not important to select a representative sample from this population.

Additional sources of information in this type of study are public, semi-public and often also non-public *documents* of all kinds. The spectrum ranges from parliamentary materials such as draft laws, committee reports or plenary minutes written statements from associations and internal position papers or minutes of meetings, which are sometimes not publicly accessible but often released by interview partners for research purposes on request. Journalistic sources such as newspaper interviews with politicians involved or research-based background reports by journalists in newspapers, magazines or television programs are also used.

The aim of combining different data sources is to increase the reliability of the data obtained by comparing information from different sources.

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to ensure that the results are accurate. When critically scrutinizing information, it is always necessary to check whether the expert in question or the author of the respective document had any political, professional or other incentives to give a distorted account of the events. In short, the information originating from interviews, documents and journalistic sources must be scrutinized critically, as has long been taught in historical studies (Opgenoorth/Schulz 2010: 180-192).

One of the main characteristics of process-analytical policy research is the orientation of empirical research towards the goal of gaining theoretical insights. Process-analytical policy field analysis aims at least to causally explain important policy decisions with the help of theoretical mechanisms, as was the focus of the research program of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in Cologne under its former directors Renate Mayntz and Fritz Scharpf (Mayntz/Scharpf 1995; Scharpf 2000). However, there are also clearly more deductive, hypothesis-based contributions that ultimately aim to make theoretical statements about certain aspects of the policy process that are limited in time and space but nevertheless as generally valid as possible. This includes, for example, the research surrounding Sabatier's Ad- vocacy Coalition Framework (Sabatier/Jenkins-Smith 1993; Weible et al. 2009), but also a large number of other case study-based contributions, for example in EU policy research. As an example of a study from the latter area that can be classified in this methodological canon, reference should be made to my comparative study on the role of political parties in the implementation of six EU social policy directives (Treib 2004).

2.2 Interpretative policy research

In contrast to process-analytical policy research, interpretative policy field analysis assumes that political decision-makers have their own subjective world view and that it is therefore important to reconstruct these subjective views empirically in order understand policy-making processes correctly. Collectively shared patterns of interpretation such as narratives or frames play an important role here, so that research also needs to understand the influence of established cultural patterns of interpretation.

Within the interpretative camp, two directions can be distinguished. The first direction is based on concepts of understanding-oriented communication in Jürgen Habermas' deliberative theory of democracy (1992). This research direction focuses on processes of problem-oriented search for "good" solutions to social problems. Various approaches to policy learning can also be attributed to this line of research (Heclo 1974; Rose 1993; Bandelow in this volume). Instead of pure interest-driven

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In this view, deliberative processes of argumentation and persuasion play an important role in policy-making.

The second direction in interpretative policy research is based more on ethnographic and discourse-analytical approaches. The focus here is on policy design processes as "struggles for meaning" (Keller 2009: 307) between actors who are trying to assert their own values, convictions and world views. These "struggles for meaning" give rise to collectively shared patterns of interpretation in the form of narratives or frames, which are said to have a formative influence on political measures. Overall, this research direction is primarily concerned with working out what political regulations mean for different actors and what influence the deeply rooted values and convictions of the actors have on the change or consolidation of political regulatory structures.

As different as the theoretical orientation of the two directions may be, they are partly similar in terms of the data sources and data analysis techniques used. In principle, both branches operate within the *interpretative methodological canon* of qualitative social research. For reasons of feasibility, most of these studies concentrate on individual case studies or at least very small numbers of cases, as it is important to delve deep into the subject matter in order to understand the various actors' constructions of reality. Also characteristic of this type of research is a pronounced skepticism towards deductive approaches in the theoretical embedding of empirical analyses, so that most studies from this direction are inductive, i.e. they form their theoretical statements from the empirical material. There are therefore very few interpretative-type case studies that test theory; the field is dominated by hypothesis-generating or predominantly descriptive studies.

Similar to the process-analytical branch, the most important data sources in interpretative policy research include *interviews* with people who were involved in the policy-making processes under investigation (see Kaiser in this volume). However, it is usually not experts who are interviewed here, but decision-makers or at least people who are directly involved in the policy processes being analyzed. Other questions must also be asked in order to identify processes of learning and deliberation and to decipher the actors' patterns of interpretation. An example of a study that relies on elite interviews to uncover processes of understanding-oriented argumentation is Jeffrey Lewis' study of the interaction styles of senior diplomats in one of the central decision-making bodies of the EU Council of Ministers, Permanent Representatives Committee (Lewis 2003).

Another important data collection technique in interpretative studies *is participant observation* (Behnke et al. 2006: 247-269; Yanow 2007: 409-410). For example, by observing important actors in their everyday work, the researcher can

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By taking part in meetings with employees and attentively recording behavior and the content of discussions, valuable information can be gained about interaction patterns, understanding of roles and problem definitions. However, two major problems make this form of survey a procedure that is not easy to apply in practice. The first problem concerns access to the field. Decision-makers are often to share their day-to-day work processes with researchers. The use of this instrument is therefore particularly dependent on prior clarification of access to the field. There is also a risk that the observed actors will behave differently than usual if they know that they are being observed. Inconspicuous behavior and repeated observations over a longer period of time can help to get this problem under control (Behnke et al. 2006: 248-249). One example of a study focused on participant observation is the study by Frank Nullmeier, Tanja Pritzlaff and Achim Wiesner (2003) on routine political processes in two fields of German university politics.

The last and probably most important source of data for interpretative policy analysis, in particular the discourse analysis approach, are *texts that were produced in the course of the policy process*. These do not differ fundamentally from those in process-analytical research. The decisive factor is that these documents are not analyzed in order to obtain information on procedures, concrete policy positions or conflicts over individual aspects of the regulatory proposals under discussion. Rather, the aim is to typical modes of argumentation, patterns of perception and problem-solving philosophies in the texts. The expectation is that these meanings are shared by many actors in a policy field, so that systemic discourse formations emerge that can then explain the concrete form of the regulatory structures under investigation. Since it is not in advance which narratives or frames will be found in the texts, text analysis is largely dependent on an inductive approach. A good example of such a discourse-analytical study in policy research is Reiner Keller's comparative study of waste policy in Germany and France from 1970 to 1995 (Keller 2009).

2.3 Advantages and disadvantages of qualitative approaches in policy research

In general, one of the great advantages of qualitative social research is its to provide very precise descriptions of political processes. This certainly also applies to qualitative policy research. The data collection and evaluation techniques used provide deep insights into the often

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The aim is to provide an insight into the decision-making processes that take place behind closed doors when shaping public policy and into the motives, situational interpretations and world views of the actors involved.

Furthermore, qualitative policy research can look back on a long series of theoretical mechanisms that were discovered in the context of case studies. Precursors of the veto player argument, later theoretically formulated by George Tsebelis (1995, 2002), can be found, for example, in one of the pioneer studies of implementation research, in which the failure of an employment policy program in the USA was explained by the many "clearance points" that had to be overcome for successful implementation (Pressman/Wildavsky 1973). The hypothesis-generating contribution of qualitative policy research is therefore quite considerable.

Case study-based policy research has been much less able to contribute to the conclusive testing of theories of the policy process. The basic problem here is simply the limited number of cases that are examined. If a theory does not apply in one or a handful of cases, it is still possible that it has significantly more validity elsewhere. Even when cases are chosen wisely, such as in the selection of "crucial cases", the confirmation or refutation of theories through case study investigations remains a limited matter, which usually primarily provides indications of boundary conditions under which certain theo- retical mechanisms have more or less validity. This is particularly true in policy research, where, in addition to dramatic differences between countries, there is also considerable variance in the logic of policy decisions between different policy fields.

3 Quantitative approaches

The limited generalizability of the theoretical findings of case study-based research can be partially offset by quantitative approaches. This section briefly introduces four of the most important analytical methods: aggregate data analysis in comparative governmental activity research, quantitative analysis of legislative processesquantitative network analysis and qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), which, despite its name, is considered here as a form of quantitative data analysis.

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3.1 Aggregate data analysis in comparative government activity research

Comparative government research aims to explain the different performance profiles of countries depending on various economic, social and political characteristics (for an overview, see Zohlnhöfer 2008; Obinger in this volume). For reasons of data availability, the focus of interest is often on highly developed industrialized countries, mostly the 24 countries that have been members of the OECD since the early 1970s. The empirical basis is usually provided by aggregate data covering various aspects of government expenditure profiles, such as the level of government expenditure or the level of social expenditure as a proportion of gross domestic product. The level of social expenditure is a particular focus of analysis in comparative welfare state research, which makes up a large part of government activity research.

To explain these measures of government activity, indicators for economic growth and prosperity, for the institutional structures of political systems (in particular veto player indices), for the party-political orientation of governments (usually operationalized via weighted party positions from expert surveys or the analysis of election programmes) and for the strength of trade unions such as the degree of union organization or various corporatism indices are used. Multivariate regression analyses are then used to calculate whether the independent variables examined actually have an effect on government spending, in which direction the effect points and how large the relative explanatory value of the individual variables is. In order to ease the restrictions that the small number of countries studied imposes on a statistical analysis, many of the studies use pooled time series analyses, i.e. annual data from the countries studied are examined over longer periods of time, thus increasing the total number of observations.

The relatively easy availability of data to measure the dependent and independent variables has meant that there are now large numbers of studies analyzing various aspects of government activity. While there appear to be a number of reasonably well-documented effects, such as the importance of pro-welfare state (social democratic and Christian democratic) parties for the expansion of social spending, the results of this research are also characterized by considerable incongruence and instability. Kittel and Winner (2005), for example, were able to show that the statistical effects of globalization and other factors on the level of government spending change significantly through the choice of different model specifications regularly used in research.

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3.2 Quantitative analyses of legislative processes

Another form of quantitative policy research has emerged in the area of analyzing legislative processes. In this context, there are particularly many studies on the issue of policy diffusion (Graham et al. 2013). This branch of research began early on to investigate the spread of innovative policy measures within the US states. Later on, studies with the international diffusion of political regulations were added. The dependent variable in these diffusion studies is the time at which certain policy measures were introduced in a country or state. To determine this, law books, websites or comparative presentations provided by authorities or international organizations are often evaluated. Most studies use statistical event data analysis tools to evaluate this data (Box-Steffensmeier/Jones 2004). The aim is to estimate the influence of various independent variables on the probability that a certain regulation will be introduced sooner or later.

While these studies often succeed impressively in the spread of certain policies, it is much more difficult to prove actual mutual influence and, above all, to model the causes. In the absence of information about learning processes or public pressure, factors such as geographical proximity, socio-economic similarities or cultural affinities are often tested in order to determine the "skipping" of regulations from one political unit to the next. Even if such patterns can be demonstrated, as in the study by Simmons and Elkins (2004), which shows that the diffusion of fiscal liberalization measures between countries with the same religious affiliation is more likely than between countries with different religions, it is questionable whether these statistical effects can actually be attributed to causal relationships.

A second branch of quantitative analysis of legislative processes emerged in the context of EU research. Driven by the relatively good documentation of EU legislative activities, various researchers began to look at the length of EU decision-making processes. On the basis the EU's official legislative statistics, which document not only the exact timing of the procedures, but also the respective policy area of the legal acts and the underlying decision-making rules, it was examined, for example, whether the duration of the decision-making processes is shortened by the introduction of majority decisions, what effect the enlargement to include new member states has and how the heterogeneity of the member states' preferences affects the duration of the decision-making processes (see, for example, Golub 1999; Schulz/König 2000; König 2007).

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The results of this research are interesting and relevant for understanding institutional effects on the speed of decision-making. However, it is difficult to make statements about the influence of the preferences of important actors, as are no indicators for the preferences of many important actors, such as the EU Commission. For others, only very rough preference indicators can be formed. König (2007), for example, uses data from the analysis of national election programs on the positions of national parties to derive policy preferences of national governments in certain policy areas.

Quantitative studies dealing with the transposition of EU directives into national legislation are even more numerous (for an overview, see Treib 2014). Data on the transposition acts reported by the member states and data on the infringement proceedings initiated by the EU against member states that do not or only insufficiently comply with European law are most frequently used here. Similar to the diffusion studies, this research mostly uses event data analysis tools to analyze influences on the timing of the adoption of transposition acts. Panel data analyses are also used to analyze the annual data on infringement proceedings.

While this research has many interesting theoretical insights, the overall problem is that the data available to measure both the dependent and important independent variables appears to be anything but valid. The information that Member States report to the Commission as transposition measures does not provide any information on whether or not these measures are correctly compliant, and the infringement proceedings initiated by the Commission are disproportionately often directed against cases of pure non-implementation and much less often against incorrect or inadequate implementation, as this is more difficult to detect (for more details, see Treib 2014).

3.3 Quantitative network analysis

In contrast to the quantitative approaches presented so far, network analysis does not start at the macro level comparing countries, but is interested in the relationship structures between state and private actors involved in policy-making in individual policy fields or in specific legislative processes (for an overview, see Kenis/Schneider 1991; Schneider in this volume). In order to be able to explain policy decisions, the of the network of actors involved is crucial from this perspective. The reciprocal relationships between the actors are decisive importance. Actors who interact with many other actors

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Actors who operate at the edge of the network and thus occupy a more central position in the network are considered to have greater influence than actors who are at the edge of the network and have only a few interaction relationships.

This actor-theoretical perspective on policy processes is used quantitative network analysis depict and analyze network structures on the basis of data on the relationships between the actors involved. To this end, people from the participating organizations are often asked with whom they exchange policy-relevant information, how often and how intensively. Network structures are then derived from this data. These can then be visualized and various measures of the position of individual actors in the network can be calculated. Various measures of centrality play a particularly important role here, as the centrality of an actor determines its power and influence in the from a network theory perspective. There are now also interesting approaches to the construction of discourse networks (Leifeld/Haunss 2012). Here, the focus is not on the exchange of information between actors, but rather on policy positions that can be gained, for example, from pro- or anti-reform attributions in newspaper reports on a particular legislative process. In this way, coalitions of actors with similar objectives can be identified. The number, structure and size of these coalitions as well as the position of individual actors within or between the coalitions can then be used to explain the type of policy decision ultimately taken.

Quantitative network analysis offers a versatile tool for depicting and analyzing actor relationships in policy fields. It is much closer to the relevant decision-making processes in policy field analysis than the other quantitative methods presented so far. However, this greater depth of focus is also accompanied by a greater compulsion to focus on individual policy fields, often even on individual decision-making processes. In this respect, although quantitative network analysis is quantitative in its data collection and analysis strategy, it is on a similar level to qualitative research in terms of the number of decision processes that can be investigated. Consequently, its results are always subject to the reservation of generalizability. Furthermore, the methodological approach of discourse network analysis in particular is based on a not entirely unproblematic understanding of power and influence, which relates above all to the overt activities of organizations. Latent forms of influence by certain actors, whose interests may already have taken into account in an anti- cipative way in early phases of agenda setting, are difficult to uncover through such analyses (Bachrach/Baratz 1962).

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3.4 Qualitative Comparative Analysis

The third strand of quantitative policy research consists of studies that do not use statistical methods to find patterns in mostly country-comparative data, but rather procedures based on Boolean algebra. The method of Qualitative Compara- tive Analysis (QCA), originally developed by Charles Ragin, sees itself as an alternative to statistical analysis and attempts to transfer the logic of qualitative case comparisons, as out in Mill's difference and concordance method, to the evaluation of larger quantities of study units (Ragin 1987, 2000; Schneider/ Wagemann 2007; Obinger in this volume).

In its original form, QCA operates with dichotomous dependent and independent variables. To evaluate empirical data, a so-called truth table is created in which each case represented by a line. The presence or absence of the individual explanatory factors and the observed result (outcome) are represented by the numbers 0 and 1. The next step is to determine the necessary and sufficient conditions for the existence or non-existence of the outcome. This is done using the logical reduction method. Influencing factors that are present in one case and absent in another, while the outcome remains the same both times, can be excluded as necessary conditions. In this way, the truth table can be reduced until in the end the smallest possible number of combinations of factors remains, each of which in itself leads to the occurrence of the dependent variable.

The further development of this method moves away from the restriction to dichotomous variables, which is often criticized as being too coarse and deterministic, and now also allows the use of "fuzzy sets", i.e. variable values that can lie between 0 and 1. This makes it possible to work with ordinal or metrically scaled variables without any great loss of information. Charles Ragin has also developed a computer program (fsQCA) that calculates the logical reduction of the case configurations, as this can quickly exceed human computing capacity with larger numbers of cases and especially when using fuzzy set variables. With these extensions, QCA has taken a major step towards an analysis method that is similar to quantative methods. For this reason, the method is also discussed here under this heading.

Nevertheless, QCA differs significantly from statistical analyses because the method allows equifinal causality to be identified. This means that several combinations of factors can alternatively produce one result, whereas statistical analyses normally assume that there is only one common effect of the independent variables, which can be broken down into its individual parts but not divided into groups of factor combinations.

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all lead to the same result (Blatter et al. 2007: 201-202).

In comparative policy research, this still relatively new method has already been used surprisingly frequently (for an overview, see Rihoux et al. 2011). It is not only in policy research that QCA is primarily used to analyze "medium" case numbers. In other words, the method is generally used when the number of cases appears too large for a simple qualitative comparative design, but there are not enough cases to provide sufficient scope for a complex statistical analysis.

Due to its focus on factor configurations and its ability to recognize equifinal causality, QCA is fundamentally well suited to capturing the social complexity that policy research necessarily has to deal with. Nevertheless, it should be noted that QCA cannot perform miracles. The problem that arises in many comparative studies in political science of too few cases for the large number of relevant explanatory variables cannot be fundamentally solved with QCA either (Wagemann 2008: 251-255). Focused theoretical designs are therefore also of great importance for QCA analyses.

3.5 Advantages and disadvantages of quantitative approaches in policy research

The greatest advantage of quantitative social research is the ability to detect correlations in large amounts of data. This ability makes quantitative analysis methods very attractive for testing the general validity of theoretical hypotheses that may have developed in qualitative studies. So if you not only want to know whether the influence of social democratic governing parties in individual political decisions leads to the adoption of pro-employee social policy measures, but also want to find out whether this effect can also proven in a larger number of political decisions, there is hardly any way around quantitative analysis methods.

However, quantitative methods of policy analysis have two major disadvantages. Firstly, it is often difficult to find or generate data that can be considered valid indicators for the theoretical concepts under investigation. This applies first and foremost to the measurement of the dependent variable. It should be clear, for example, that the level of a country's social spending is only a very indirect indicator of the design of welfare state policies, as money can be spent in very different ways. Esping-Andersen (1990) already pointed this in his three-world typology. However, the measurement of important independent variables also poses major problems for many quantitative studies. Without detailed surveys of their own, the preferences of important ac

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teure is difficult to determine. Although there is now reasonably reliable data on party positions, the preferences of interest groups or bureaucratic actors can often only be incorporated into quantitative analyses by means of grossly simplifying assumptions. This means that certain questions in policy research can often not be answered by statistical analyses, or only in an unsatisfactory way.

The second problem lies in deriving causal conclusions from statistical correlations. Strong statistical effects that are based on valid data and are consistent with well-founded theoretical mechanisms can certainly serve as a strong indication of causal relationships. However, in the absence of detailed case-based process analyses, it is always possible that the real causes of the observed reforms are to be found in factors that cannot be included in the statistical analysis due to a lack of data. In order to get to grips with this problem, mixed-method designs would be advantageous so that, for example, important theoretical arguments gained statistically can be qualitatively illustrated once again in the context of in-depth case studies.

4 Conclusion

From a methodological perspective, policy research is a difficult undertaking. Many important decisions in the shaping of public policy are made behind closed doors and are therefore difficult to understand on the basis of publicly accessible statements and documents. The interests, values and ideas of the actors involved in the policy process and their respective influence on political decisions are also not directly observable and must therefore be painstakingly reconstructed empirically.

A significant part of policy research has met these challenges the help of qualitative social research methods. are a large number of case study-based works that have enormously advanced our understanding of the logic of state policy-making processes. One of the strengths of qualitative approaches, whether they are oriented more towards the process-analytical or the interpretative paradigm, lies in the precise description of political decision-making processes and in the recording of the motives, interests and world views of the actors involved. Case study-based work is also of great value for the discovery and plastic illustration of theoretical contexts. However, this capacity for analytical depth comes at the cost of weaknesses in the empirical breadth of the statements obtained.

If you want to know whether theoretical correlations identified in case studies claim more general validity, you have to look quantitatively.

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processes. Indeed, quantitative comparative research on state activity and legislative processes has empirically confirmed a number of theoretical arguments. However, this type of research often suffers from a lack of suitable data for measuring central variables, so that many theoretically interesting questions cannot be dealt with quantitatively, or at least only in an unsatisfactory way.

There is no easy way out of this dilemma between empirical depth and breadth. However, there are certainly ways in which the weaknesses of the qualitative and quantitative approaches could be reduced and thus the strengths of both approaches could be better utilized. Three suggestions for improving methodological approaches in policy research will be briefly explained in conclusion.

Firstly, quantitative researchers should devote more time and energy to generating better data themselves if the supply of available data is unsatisfactory. Hopeful approaches to this exist both in the area of measuring policy change and in the recording of political preferences. In comparative environmental policy, for example, a large research project was carried out that mapped the development of environmental policy legislation over time in 24 countries with the help of expert assessments and thus generated quantitatively evaluable data (Holzinger et al. 2008). The same procedure has since been transferred to other subject areas (Knill 2013). In EU research, there are broad-based efforts to survey the policy preferences of the Commission and governments using standardized expert interviews in order to be able to use them in quantitative analyses (Thomson et al. 2012). Likewise, quantitative content analysis appears to be making further progress, so that the derivation of political preferences from large quantities of parliamentary speeches or position papers from interest groups using quantitative text analysis methods delivers increasingly reliable results (Klüver 2009; Proksch/ Slapin 2010).

Secondly, qualitative researchers should strive even more than before to work in a theory-oriented manner. The theoretical benefit of qualitative policy research could be increased above all through the increased use of comparative case studies, the case selection of which is based on theoretically motivated criteria. This would enable qualitative research to make a greater contribution to theory testing beyond the formulation of hypotheses. In order to achieve this goal, collaborative projects would have to be organized even more than before, so that the number of cases analysed would exceed the number that can be handled by individuals alone. In this context, bridges to quantitative forms of evaluation would then also be possible. This could include an increased use of QCA, but also attempts to carry out statistical analyses with quantitatively collected data.

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Thirdly, some of the weaknesses of qualitative and quantitative research could be compensated for if more studies were carried out both qualitative and quantitative methods. It would be conceivable, for example, to follow up quantitative studies with qualitative studies of typical cases to illustrate the theoretical results and to use case studies to shed more light on deviating cases. Similarly, hypothesis-generating qualitative studies following the case analyses could test the theoretical hypotheses developed for their generalizability as part of a quantitative analysis. It is clear that such designs are considerably more time-consuming and also require a much wider range of methodological skills. They are therefore not necessarily suitable for research projects by individuals, such as dissertations, but are most likely to be realized in the context of research collaborations.

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2 comprehension questions

1. Name and explain three different forms of case studies that are frequently used in policy research.

2. What are most-likely and least-likely cases and for what purpose are such cases investigated?

3. Explain the difference method and the concordance method according to Mill.

4. What are the differences between process-analytical and interpretative approaches qualitative policy research?

5. Describe a quantitative method for analyzing political decisions that is used in policy research.

6. What are the advantages and disadvantages of qualitative and quantitative approaches in policy research?

Transfer questions

1. What could a case selection according to Mill's difference method look like, which includes two countries and with which you could test the theoretical hypothesis that the participation of left-wing political parties in government leads to higher government spending?

2. Think of an important political decision in Germany that you have heard about in the media recently and think of three experts who would be worth interviewing to find out how this decision came about.

3. Assuming you had all the necessary data available, which of the quantitative analysis methods presented in the chapter would be best suited to finding out why some countries in the world spend more on education than others?

Problematization questions

1. Think of an important political decision in Germany that you have heard about in the media recently and discuss what common and different insights a process-analytical and an interpretative researcher could find out about it using their methods.

2. Discuss what benefits it would bring to policy research if more researchers were willing and able to combine quantitative and qualitative methods in their research.

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