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To cite this article: Iris Geva-May, David C. Hoffman & Joselyn Muhleisen (2018) Twenty Years of Comparative Policy Analysis: A Survey of the Field and a Discussion of Topics and Methods, Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice, 20:1, 18-35, DOI: [10.1080/13876988.2017.1405618](https://doi.org/10.1080/13876988.2017.1405618)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13876988.2017.1405618>



Published online: 09 Mar 2018.



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Twenty Years of Comparative Policy Analysis: A Survey of the Field and a Discussion of Topics and Methods

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(Received 10 November 2016; accepted 20 October 2017)

ABSTRACT *Comparative policy analysis has emerged as a distinct field of study in the past two decades, however only one journal is explicitly devoted to its study: the Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice (JCPA). This article performs a content analysis of abstracts in the field of comparative policy analysis to determine the contours of the field. First, the paper charts the development of comparative policy analysis and compares the trajectories of comparative politics, comparative public administration and comparative policy analysis. Second, the paper analyzes the results of the abstract coding to reveal the methods employed, countries studied, the number of countries studied and the countries of the authors' institutions. The results from JCPA and other journals in the Elton B. Stephens Co. (EBSCO) Academic Complete database are compared to distinguish the dominant role that JCPA plays in the field. Finally, it discusses the major trends in the work published in comparative policy analysis, the limitations of the current publications and further areas for development. A clear finding is that the field of comparative policy analysis is on a sharp upward trajectory.*

Keywords: comparative public policy; comparative policy analysis; comparative; comparative public administration; comparative political science; international policy

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Introduction

In her 2013 article “Policy Analysis Reaches Midlife”, and her seminal second book titled *Beyond Machiavelli: Policy Analysis Reaches Midlife*, Beryl Radin traces the development of the policy studies and policy analysis field and highlights the *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice (JCPA)* and its mission statement as important stepping-stones in the development of the field. To date, *JCPA* is still the only journal exclusively devoted to comparative policy studies. Founded 20 years ago, the mission of *JCPA* has been advanced with the support of leading scholars and dedicated editorial board members, such as Laurence E. Lynn Jr., first co-editor, Peter deLeon, Duncan McRae, David Weimer, Beryl Radin, Frans VanNispen, Yukio Adachi, Claudia Scott, Allan Maslove and others in the US, Canada, Europe, Australia/New Zealand and Asia. In recent years it has increased from three to five issues per annual volume. There are about 120 articles submitted each year. In 2016 the *JCPA* acceptance rate was 21 per cent, there were 443 citations of its articles, and the impact factor increased from 0.612 to 1.07 within one year (Thompson Reuters SSI Citation Index, June 2017). This shows that an increasing number of policy researchers and scholars from many policy domains are engaging in comparative studies, and indicates the standing of *JCPA* in this field. New comparative policy books are in process or have been recently published and more courses in comparative public policy are being offered around the world. This trajectory in comparative policy studies is also evident in the establishment of the International Comparative Policy Analysis Forum (ICPA-Forum) with over 1,400 international members and around 50 institutions involved in a scholarly network advancing comparative studies. The ICPA-Forum also partners with ten scholarly associations to offer awards to outstanding comparative work.

In an effort to take stock of where the field of comparative policy analysis has been and where it is going, this paper reports the results of a content analysis of *JCPA*, the field’s flagship journal, and compares the results to a broader analysis of comparative public policy articles indexed on the Elton B. Stephens Co. (EBSCO) Academic Complete database. This analysis categorizes research articles published over the last two decades in comparative policy analysis by topic, methodology, countries studied and countries of the authors’ institutional affiliations. It reveals some strengths and weaknesses of the field as a whole, and sheds light on *JCPA*’s place within it. We also trace the development of comparative policy analytic studies in contrast to comparative political science and comparative public administration. We begin with a brief survey of the history of the field, move on to a discussion of its scope and importance, review the results of the content analysis, and then make suggestions for some new directions that comparative policy analysis in general, and *JCPA* in particular, might head in the future.

The Development of Comparative Policy Analysis as a District Field of Study

The field of comparative policy analysis developed out of the older and more general field of policy analysis, also drawing on research traditions in public administration and comparative politics. Policy analysis originated in the United States because of developments in the early 1960s. It is a relatively new area of social scientific inquiry, whose main rationale is the need and requirement for democratic societies and their elected policy makers to be systematic, evidence-based, transparent, efficient and

accountable. Policy analysis is a craft, which “Speaks Truth to Power”, in the words of Wildavsky (1979), a pioneer of the policy analysis field. Policy analysis has been defined in at least six ways: (1) “A type of quantitative analysis involving comparisons and interactions of values and politics” (Lindblom 1958, pp. 280–312), (2) creating problems that can be solved (Wildavsky 1979, p. 1), (3) the use of reason and evidence to choose the best policy among a number of alternatives (MacRae and Wilde 1979, p. 14), (4) a “profession-craft clustering on providing systematic, rational, and science-based help with decision-making” (Dror 1983, p. 79), (5) a problem-solving process (Bardach 1992, p. 1), (6) client-oriented advice relevant to public decisions (Weimer and Vining 1989, p. 1; 2010).

Initially, the movement started with the notion that the key objective of public service was to design, enact and implement better public policies – meeting the Kaldor–Hicks criteria for economic efficiency as Lindblom (1958) first asserted. A major cornerstone in policy analysis has been the principle that decision making should be evidence-based, verifiable and evaluable, transparent and accountable and implementable to meet democratic principles, meet social and economic needs, and be answerable to the public (Brans et al. 2016). Evidence-based policy making also implies, by definition, looking for evidence “elsewhere” for historical, international, disciplinary, or other comparisons of data, facts and events. This requirement appears to have been the reason for the divergence of the new comparative policy analysis field from the policy analysis domain.

Although policy analysis has been in existence for more than half a century, the *comparative* field in policy analysis, which examines similarities and differences between the policies of different nations or sub-national political units, has been around only since the 1990s. In the 1970s and 1980s we witness the re-initiation of discussions about scientific comparative research design or methodologies, and their logics and limitations. Nevertheless, these debates do not include “comparative public policy” as perceived today. We witness an attempt in Dierkes et al.’s (1987) contribution, *Comparative Policy Research: Learning from Experience*, in which Wildavsky is a contributor. The realization that policy literature written about the US did not apply directly to other countries was one of the factors that led to the creation of *comparative* policy analysis. Hogwood and Gunn (1984) pointed to the difficulty of even teaching the concepts and practice to UK students mainly because of the need to translate the strategies and techniques developed in the US to other contexts. They conclude, “this [policy analysis] literature fails to discuss the use and limits of policy analysis techniques” (vi).

At its inception, comparative policy analysis, as a modern research tradition, joined comparative politics and comparative public administration as a field of political science that uses the comparative method. While comparative politics has been a domain of study since the late 1800s and comparative public administration since the 1950s, scholars doing comparative policy analysis in the 1980s did not identify as part of a distinct field of study. John Stuart Mill’s *A System of Logic*, first published in 1843, is widely considered to be the first systematic formulation of the modern comparative method for social sciences research (Mill 1843). The comparative method began to be systematically applied in the modern academic study of politics being conducted in 1968 when the journal *Comparative Politics* was established by the Graduate School in the University Center at City University of New York and where Harold Lasswell published his “The Future of the Comparative Method” – as the lead article of the first issue of the journal. Comparative policy analysis became a domain in the 1990s because (i) there were more

publications identifying as part of an explicit field and (ii) scholars began investigating and developing specific theories and methodologies (Lasswell 1968).

Comparative policy analysis shared a developmental trajectory with both comparative politics and comparative public administration, as Beryl Radin argues (2013a) but has tended to thrive as comparative public administration stalled. Comparative public administration uses the comparative method to study bureaucratic institutions and identify policies that are applicable in different political contexts. Substantively, public administration focuses almost exclusively on the public bureaucracies of the executive branch and the implementation stage of policy, drawing a distinction between administration and politics. After World War II, scholars began to use comparative studies to answer questions about development and find administrative strategies that would work in different countries. In 1960 the comparative administration group was created and its Chairman, Fred W. Riggs, used it to push forward a scholarly agenda for the field. Comparative public administration experienced a boom in the 1960s and several journals were formed to advance the field. However, in the 1970s funding and academic support ended and the discipline floundered (Heady 2001). Reflecting this decline in interest, *The Journal of Comparative Administration* was renamed *Administration & Society* in 1973. In the late 1980s and 1990s neoliberal economic principles changed the approach to government in the United Kingdom and United States. Instead of privatizing public authorities and services, governments embraced mechanisms that provide competition, applied market principles, and focused on efficiency and rightsizing. International development organizations projected neoliberalism globally as part of the Washington Consensus. The new ideas about government were embodied in the New Public Management literature and this scholarship led to a slight resurgence of comparative public administration in the 1990s. Since that period, the discipline of comparative public administration has been stagnant. According to Jreisat, many scholars avoid cross-cultural studies or any study in which the units of comparison are not functional equivalents (2002). This is a significant shortcoming of comparative public administration as the interdependence that results from globalization necessitates such comparisons. As comparative policy analysis is not limited to focusing on the unit of bureaucratic administration, it has taken up the challenge of analyzing how policies work in dissimilar environments.

The rise in output in the comparative policy analysis field and the concurrent decline of output in comparative administration are borne out by data gathered from the EBSCO Academic Complete database and from Google Books. Figures 1 and 2 show the growth of literature on Comparative Public Policy and the decline of literature in Comparative Public Administration. Figure 1 is a comparison of the number of articles indexed in the EBSCO Academic Complete database per year with the words “comparative administration” and “comparative policy” in their titles or abstracts from 1969 to 2015. Figure 2 shows the result of a Google Books N-gram search for “comparative policy” and “comparative administration”. The chart represents the percentage of two word combinations in the “Google Million”, a randomly sampled set of books published between 1500 and 2008, comprising the target phrases.¹ In Figure 3 another Google Books N-gram search shows how much more frequent the phrase “comparative politics” is than either “comparative policy” or “comparative administration”. However, of course there is ample comparative work that may not be explicitly labelled comparative. Unfortunately our search strategy does not capture those studies that perform comparative work without using the term comparative. Although there is much that these searches do not capture, we believe they show strong trends in a fair sampling of overall publications. The graphs look different because they show data from different samples and

Figure 1. A comparison of the number of articles indexed in the EBSCO Academic Complete database per year with the words “comparative administration” and “comparative policy” in their titles or abstracts from 1969 to 2015.

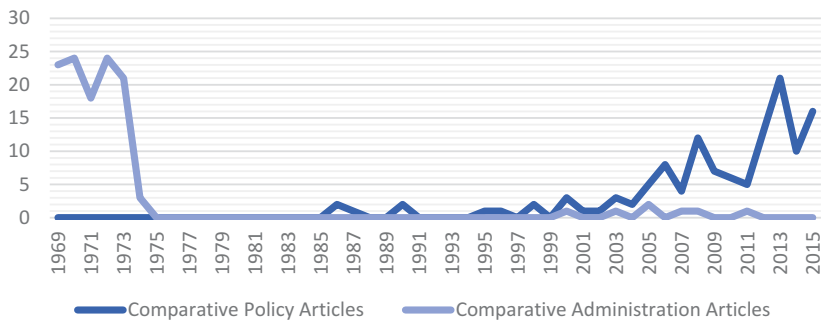
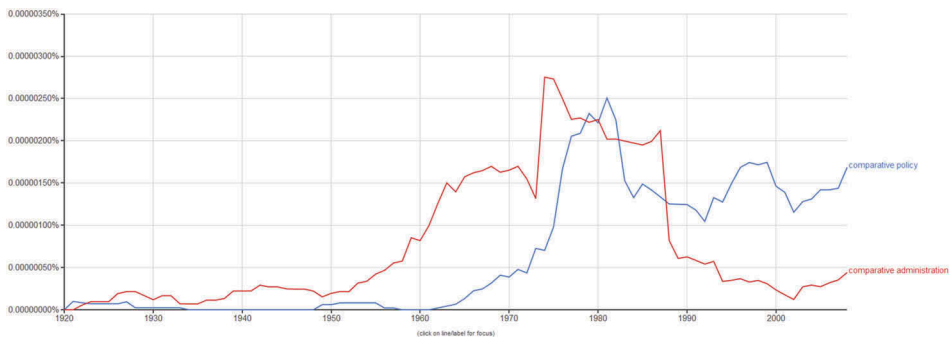


Figure 2. Relative usage rates of “comparative policy” and “comparative administration” by year in the “Google Million” Database. The y-axis represents the percentage of two-word phrases in the corpus comprised by the target phrase. Although these two phrases will certainly not capture all the references to these fields, they are essentially a random sample of all references which can be expected to capture about the same portion of the total over time

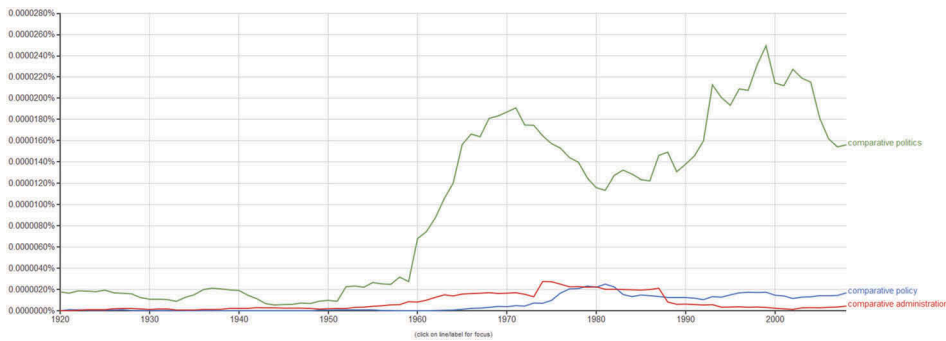


measure the prevalence of “comparative policy” in different samples, but the overall trend that they show is the same: there is more discourse about comparative policy now than ever before. We believe the fact that the same trend is apparent in different samples measured by different methods adds robustness to the finding.

The Importance and Limitations of Comparative Policy Analysis

Why do we compare public policies? We do so to be more effective and efficient, avoid the replication of failures, to maximize our use of resources, to save time and to be

Figure 3. Relative usage rates of “comparative politics”, “comparative policy” and “comparative administration” by year in the “Google Million” Database



inspired by those similarities that allow for degrees of lesson drawing. Comparative policy analysis contributes to saving precious time and resources in an era when challenges need to be faced at optimal speed and level (Wildavsky 1979; Neustadt and May 1986; Rose 1991; Rose and Mackenzie 1991; Weimer 1993; Geva-May and Wildavsky 1997; Ostrom 1998; Weimer and Vining 1999).

It is natural to pursue comparisons within the field of policy analysis for many reasons. De facto comparisons, implicit or explicit, have always pervaded the work of social scientists. The basic research methods advocated in experimental designs are comparative in that they use control and experiment groups. To cite Swanson (1971, p. 145), “Thinking without comparisons is unthinkable and in the absence of comparisons, so are all scientific thought and scientific research”. Comparison is an innate cognitive attribute of humans that we apply in our daily lives, in our professional activities, or as producers or consumers of products. Public policy can be viewed as one such product. Further, there are political, cultural, sociological, economic and other terms of reference within different contexts. What may be considered successful in one country may be assessed harshly in another due to different values as social controls.

But context and policy transfer, policy borrowing, or lesson drawing *can be* compatible between social units, while transferring, borrowing or lesson drawing are determined with a view of the country’s particular structure, culture and politics (Geva-May 2002), because “the commonalities are more important than the differences” (Ingraham 1996, p. 4). The value of comparative policy studies lies in

crossing national boundaries [and] expand[ing] the number of programs that can be observed in action . . . the fact that they are foreign introduces an element of speculation whether they can transfer. But speculation is bounded, for experience elsewhere provides palpable evidence how programs actually work. (Rose 1993, p. 110)>

Comparisons are needed in today’s public policy analytic world for at least four reasons. First, *access*: in the global village age, distance has been made less significant through communication technology and transportation systems. Public policies are more

visible, as are their successes or failures, which can be adopted or avoided, as would any tangible product. Second, *economic path dependence or interdependence* among national actors because of economic considerations – markets, customers, firms, legal systems and transactions – which affect the welfare or even survival of other entities. Third, in the global village governments are faced with *similar national policy problems* that usually have similar triggers and outcomes and lead to similar socio-economic, structural and technological challenges and dilemmas. Loss or gain of human capital, population aging and skilled workforce scarcity, safety and security, healthcare access and so on, are only a few examples of such policy problems. Finally, *cross-national problems* constantly emerge and reveal the extent of interdependence. Take for instance cross-border legal or illegal migration from one country to another affecting the welfare or socio-political canvas of the target state; or environmental policies: whether or not countries adhere to the Kyoto Accord, their policies affect other countries' pollution levels – air simply cannot be stopped at a jurisdiction's borders. As long as there are governments and public services or institutions faced with similar emerging global issues, there are, as Rose (1991) contends, "lessons to be drawn".

Comparative policy studies are often perceived as international comparisons between two or more nations. Indeed, the comparative case study is a significant method utilized in the field, as will be discussed in the results of our coding. However, the logic of the comparison being drawn is important. Comparative means that contributions should clearly contribute to comparative lesson drawing based on circumstances in which the domains compared have some potentially manipulable policy, program or institutional variables in common.

The "Aims and Scope" statement of *JCPA* embodies, to a large extent, the dimensions of the field of comparative policy analysis. These are:

- (1) Drawing lessons based on circumstances in which compared policy issues share manipulable policy, program or institutional variables;
- (2) Contribution to comparative theory development;
- (3) Presentation of theory-based empirical research;
- (4) Comparative evaluations of research methods;
- (5) Comparative practice implications of theory-based research; and
- (6) Uses of conceptual heuristics to interpret practice. (Geva-May and Lynn 1998)

Comparative methodology does have its limitations. The methods first explicated in Mill's *A Theory of Logic* are difficult to apply in the social sciences in general and in comparative public policy analysis in particular, because it is problematic to find sufficiently similar cases to compare, and because of resources, timeliness and other practical constraints. This leads to problems of randomization versus purposive limitations. Gerring (2006) addresses these limitations in his work on case study selection. Public policy comparisons also face the problem that policies or governmental structures – for instance in education, immigration and transportation – are typical of the cultural or structural context in which they emerge. In Lasswell and Kaplan's view (1950), "context is all-important". Additionally, we need to acknowledge that public policy does not occur in laboratory conditions, and that there are limitations attached to the difficulty to observe and rigorously compare

these “contexts” as control groups or experimental groups for ethical and practical reasons; the target units of comparison are purposive rather than random, and they are affected by volatile events, agendas and timelines, unexpected natural or economic developments, political changes, and so on. While in social science research we acknowledge external interfering variables, the volatility of public policy implies significant interference of external and unexpected variables. What we are studying in comparative public policy analysis are not control and experimental groups but rather “naturally occurring experiments”; that is, what happens in a certain “social unit”, and what lessons can be drawn from that jurisdiction to others.

Recognizing the limitations we have just discussed, we need to define what comparative policy analysis means given contextual differences. Accordingly, in comparing and lesson drawing there are nuances on the comparative spectrum ranging from full Transfer, Borrowing, Adoption, Adaptation, to “Pinching” (Deleon and Resnick-Terry 1998; Geva-May 2002), or in Rose’s (1991, 1993) words, from Copying, Emulation, Hybridization, to mere Synthesis or Inspiration – depending on the respective culture or system of said social units. This view of the nuanced nature of comparative public policy accounts for the perception that there must be core commonalities among aspects of policy problems, which are more similar than different and that they can be taken up at distinct levels. To address the validity of the comparison, one needs to identify the comparable common core aspects, which dictate the search for comparative information. The contextual differences would then shape the degree to which lessons are drawn ranging from adoption to sparking a creative signal, which can lead to the creation of a policy solution that otherwise would not have been reached.

Content Analysis Study of *JCPA* and Comparative Policy Analysis Articles in the EBSCO Academic Database

In order to discover trends within the domain of Comparative Public Policy Analysis as a scholarly domain, we conducted a content analysis of two sets of refereed articles (a) 356 non-forum articles that have appeared in *JCPA* between 1998 and 2016, and (b) a set of 144 articles contained within the EBSCO Academic Search Complete database published between 1976 and 2016 that were returned when the phrases “comparative policy analysis” or “comparative public policy” were entered (this set of articles was not inclusive of the *JCPA* articles). Although there is undoubtedly more literature that is substantially about comparative policy than was captured by our search (a Google Scholar search for “comparative policy” yields more than 18,000 hits), our search provides a sample of the overall literature of a manageable size that provides a window on the total output. For both these sets of articles, we used the program NVIVO to code each article for (1) Year of Publication, (2) Policy Area, (3) Country of the Authors’ Institutions, (4) Number of Countries Studied, (5) Names of Countries Studied, (6) Journal of Publication, and (7) Methodology and/or Theory. These categories were chosen because they could be detected by reading the abstracts of the articles in most cases, and because they could provide useful information about the type of work that is and is not being produced in the comparative policy field. Not all the data collected figure into the present analysis. Here we concentrate on the results concerning year published, policy area, countries studied and methodology/theory. Categories under the headings of Policy Areas Studied and

Methodology Employed were arrived at inductively. They certainly do not represent the only ways of classifying articles, and further useful distinction might well be made. All coding judgments have been reviewed by at least two coders, and none by more than three. All discrepancies were resolved in conference between coders. We believe that we have gathered evidence to strongly support a number of important claims about the growth of the field of comparative policy analysis, and about what is being published both in the pages of *JCPA* and more broadly.

The Growth of the Field of Comparative Policy Analysis

There are strong indications that general interest in the field of comparative policy analysis is increasing. As shown by Figure 1, even excluding *JCPA*, which is not indexed by EBSCO, the number of journal articles published whose titles and abstracts contain some combination of the terms “comparative policy” or “comparative public policy” has increased dramatically over the course of the last 15 years. These results should be viewed in light of the fact that the overall number of academic journals indexed in EBSCO has probably increased as a whole, a fact that needs to be controlled for in future analysis. Also it should be noted that there are many journals, *JCPA* among them, that are not included in the EBSCO database.

JCPA remains central to the field as the only journal devoted solely to comparative policy analysis. Even while the overall number of publications in the field of public policy analysis has been on the rise, very few journals in our EBSCO sample have yielded more than two hits in the search. Of the 88 journals in the sample that had published at least one article in comparative policy analysis between 1976 and 2016, only four had published five or more articles, while the vast majority, 75 journals, had published only one. *The Journal of European Public Policy* and *Politics & Policy* had ten comparative articles apiece. Also competitive were the *Journal of Policy & Practice in Intellectual Disabilities* (eight articles) and *Policy Studies* (five articles), and *Comparative Political Studies* and *Social Policy and Administration* with four articles each.

Next we turn to a more detailed analysis of what has been published in *JCPA*.

The Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Publication Trends

Our content analysis revealed a number of distinct publishing trends in *the Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis*.

Policy Areas Studied. *JCPA* has a very strong history of publication in the area of economic and financial policy, on the one hand, and of welfare states and social subsidies, on the other. Figure 4 shows the number of articles by topic published in *JCPA* between 1998 and 2016, and the percentage of the total output each topic represents. There has also been a strong interest in international agreements and organizations, the environment, education, healthcare and immigration. Comparatively little has been published about criminal justice, economic development, foreign policy, human rights, NGOs and arts and culture. At first glance it would appear that *JCPA* has not much partaken in the trend of publishing centered on the key term “globalization”. However, such a view would not take into account frequent publication on a number of overlapping topics, including “convergence” and “Europeanization”. (Note: Policy areas were coded in a non-mutually exclusive way to allow for one article to count in

Figure 4. *JCPA* articles published in common policy areas, 1998–2016

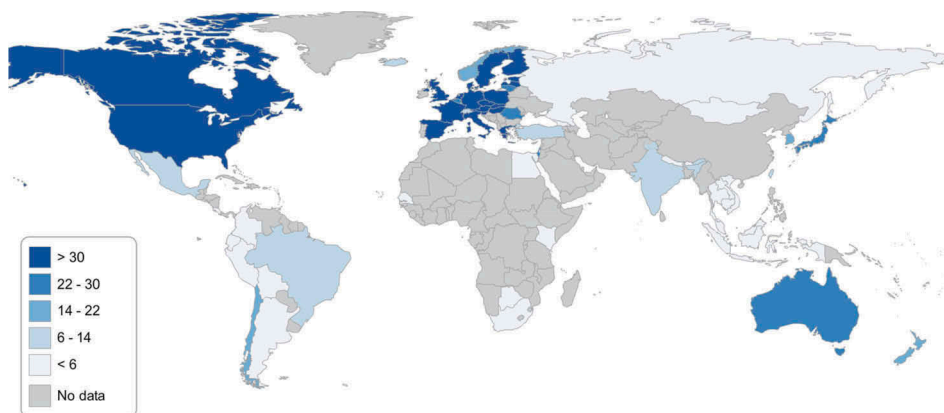
<i>Policy Areas Studied</i>	Percentage	Articles
Markets, Money and the Economy	19%	68
Welfare, Social Services, and Poverty	14%	49
Health, Healthcare, and Medicine	11%	40
Local and Regional Government & Policy	11%	38
International Relations and Organizations	10%	37
Environment	9%	32
Education	9%	31
Media & Communication	6%	20
Science & Technology	6%	20
Immigration and Migration	5%	19
Regulation & Deregulation	5%	18
Privatization and Public Private Partnerships	4%	16
Disasters	3%	9
Globalization	3%	9
Development of Underdeveloped Regions	2%	7
Human Rights	2%	6
NGOs and Non-Profits	1%	5

two or more areas. In addition, 21 per cent of articles had one or more areas not captured in the list and were categorized as “other”. Many of these articles were devoted to building theory or frameworks.)

Countries Studied. While *JCPA* has published work about countries on all five continents, studies have tended to focus on the most economically developed countries. The United States is the single most studied country, with 52 articles including it in comparisons, and Europe is the most studied region. Central America, the Caribbean, Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia have received relatively sparse coverage. Two international organizations frequently determined the set of countries compared, the European Union (21 articles, 6 per cent) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (nine articles, 3 per cent). Countries named in EU or OECD studies are not included in the totals used for [Figure 5](#) because it was frequently difficult to determine the sub-set of member states that were being studied.

Methodology and Theory. Figure 6 shows a breakdown of the methodologies employed in the *JCPA* articles. The single largest methodological category was the case study, which represented 62 per cent of the total sample. Relatively few articles (2 per cent) drew upon interview or ethnographic methods. A sizable portion (42 per cent) of the articles attempted to employ or develop a theoretical or methodological framework, but a greater portion (58 per cent) of articles compared practices and outcomes without advancing a theoretical framework.

Methodology was assessed in a way that does not involve mutual exclusion: a single article could be fit into more than one category as was appropriate. Descriptions are as follows:

Figure 5. Articles per country in *JCPA***Figure 6.** *JCPA* article methodology, 1998–2016

<i>Methodology Employed</i>	Percentage	Articles
Case-Based & Historical	62%	219
Theory and Framework Pieces	42%	150
Quantitative Analysis	15%	55
Textual & Content Analysis & Qualitative	10%	34
Survey Created for this Research	3%	11
Ethnography and Interview	2%	7

Case-Based and Historical: Articles in this category draw conclusions by comparing different countries, localities and policy regimes, often over a period of time. They do not attempt to delimit any set of texts or sources for analysis, but rather freely mix scholarship, journalism, government reports and other sources.

Theory and Framework Pieces: Articles in this category have the advancement of a theoretical or methodological framework as one of their aims, as opposed to providing insight into specific cases or answering an empirical question. Frequently they advance this theoretical or methodological objective by employing some other more specific method. For instance, theoretical perspectives are often advanced through comparative case studies.

Quantitative Analysis: Articles in this category employ descriptive statistics, significance testing, regression and cluster analyses, and other statistical methods.

Textual and Content Analysis and Qualitative Research: Articles in this category delimit a set of texts – such as speeches, newspaper articles or legislation – for specific analysis, and then employ methods like content and rhetorical analysis to draw conclusions.

Survey Created for this Research: The authors of articles in this category created and conducted surveys specifically for the articles.

Ethnography and Interview: Articles in this category employ ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interview to draw conclusions.

Comparative Policy Analysis Articles in the EBSCO Academic Complete Database

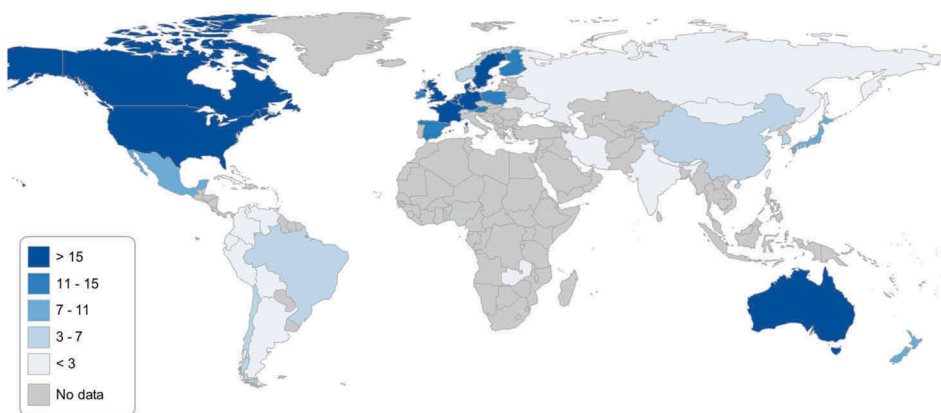
A search of the EBSCO Academic Complete database for articles in comparative policy analysis yielded 144 hits for the search period 1976 to 2016, exclusive of review pieces. The first hit was in 1986. Although the date range of the search is broader than the publication period of *JCPA*, we believe that this provides a robust comparison to the field of comparative policy analysis as it exists beyond *JCPA*. Figures 7 and 8 show policy areas and countries studied in the EBSCO sample, respectively. Figure 9 shows the methodology used in the studies in the EBSCO sample.

Policy Areas Studied. In general, the strengths and weaknesses in *JCPA*'s coverage are echoed in the EBSCO sample. In the matter of policy areas studied, the top four topics are the same in both the *JCPA* and the EBSCO analysis, although in a slightly different order. There is relatively more attention to health and healthcare in the EBSCO sample (24 per cent) than in *JCPA* (11 per cent), although health is by no means a neglected topic in *JCPA*. Both the *JCPA* and the EBSCO samples lack much coverage in the areas of criminal justice, human rights, arts and culture, and developmental aid, for instance.

Figure 7. EBSCO articles published in common policy areas, 1976–2016

Policy Area Studied	Percentage	Articles
Health, Healthcare, and Medicine	24%	34
Markets, Money and the Economy	19%	28
Welfare, Social Services, and Poverty	15%	22
Local and Regional Government & Policy	13%	18
Education	10%	15
International Relations and Organizations	9%	13
Science & Technology	8%	12
Environment	7%	10
Human Rights	6%	8
Regulation & Deregulation	4%	6
Media & Communication	3%	5
Immigration and Migration	3%	4
Globalization	2%	3
Privatization and Public Private Partnerships	2%	3
Criminal Justice	1%	2
Development of Underdeveloped Regions	1%	2
NGOs and Non-Profits	1%	2

*Policy areas are not exclusive categories. That is, each of the total 144 articles coded from the EBSCO database may have been coded as studying multiple policy areas.

Figure 8. Articles per country in the EBSCO sample**Figure 9.** EBSCO methodology, 1976–2016

Methodology Employed	Percentage	Article
Historical and Case-Based	53%	76
Theory and Framework Pieces	42%	60
Quantitative Analysis	19%	28
Textual, Content & Qualitative Analysis	11%	16
Ethnography and Interview	8%	11
Survey Created for this Research	3%	5

Countries Studied. The results of the EBSCO analysis also look very similar to those of the *JCPA* analysis in what they reveal about the countries that have been studied. Again, North America and Europe predominate, and Central America, Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia are the least studied regions. A number of new countries – like Iran, Haiti and Cuba – do show up in the EBSCO articles, but these are mostly from comparative policy briefs published in a single issue of one journal, the *Journal of Policy & Practice in Intellectual Disabilities*, in 2008. (See Appendix 2 for a full list of the countries studied in the EBSCO sample.)

Methodology and Theory. The results of the analysis of methodology and number of countries studied were much the same for the EBSCO and *JCPA* samples. A greater percentage (8 per cent) of articles in the EBSCO sample employed ethnographic and interview techniques than in *JCPA* (2 per cent), but these methods still ranked toward the bottom of the list.

Conclusions

Comparative policy analysis has emerged as a separate field in order to achieve what the “old” social sciences research did not: to extend robust, actionable findings grounded in comparison to decision makers and to the scholarly community. The comparative policy analysis domain has gained momentum, as [Figure 1](#) shows, post-1998 as the field of comparative administration declined. *JCPA* is the only journal of comparative public policy devoted entirely to the publication of articles on comparative policy analysis. Its emergence coincided almost exactly with the rise of interest in the field of comparative policy analysis we see in [Figures 1](#) and [2](#). It channels a multitude of policy disciplines, regional cases and methodological and theoretical approaches.

Although we cannot know exactly the publication output of the entire comparative policy analysis field, *JCPA*’s output accounts for a sizable portion of it. *JCPA* published over 350 articles between 1998 and 2016 while the entire EBSCO database shows 144 articles for all journals over this period of time (with ten appearing before 1998). According to Routledge’s database, in 2015 there were over 30,000 full-text downloads of articles from the *JCPA*. This is an increase of 29.6 per cent on the total from the previous year and an increase of 86 per cent on the total from 2012. At present, the *JCPA* publishes five issues per annual volume – that is about 600 pages of refereed studies of comparative policy analytic work. *JCPA* promised to advance comparative studies beyond comparisons of two national entities and address, apply or develop comparative methodologies and theories. About 40 per cent of *JCPA* articles feature a comparison of more than two countries. Prominent theoretical frameworks that have been highlighted in *JCPA* are path dependence, multiple streams and convergence (Coleman [2001](#); Kuipers [2009](#); Clavier [2010](#); Happaerts and Van Den Brande [2011](#)). In 2016 a special issue edited by Beland and Howlett addressed the contributions of the multiple-streams approach to comparative policy analysis (Beland and Howlett [2016](#)). *JCPA* should continue to build on these strengths, but might also encourage the development of thought with other prominent frameworks such as punctuated equilibrium theory and policy diffusion (Jones and Baumgartner [2005](#); Berry and Berry [2007](#); Shipan and Volden [2012](#)). The journal might also feature less prominent and experimental designs, like qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), so far only addressed by Rizova ([2011](#)), and a special issue edited by Marleen Brans and Valerie Pattyn ([2017](#)).

JCPA also has as part of its mission the comparison and development of methodologies useful in comparative analysis and has published work that employs a wide variety of methodological approaches. But some approaches are used far more than others, and *JCPA* should encourage the building of methodological capacity for rigorous qualitative analysis, and research based on interviews and ethnography. Case studies are the prominent approach and represent 62 per cent of the articles analyzed. This reinforces the “natural experiments” perception of the policy analytic studies’ comparative methodology. The addition of a section devoted exclusively to statistics in 2014 has helped to increase the prevalence of quantitative approaches. These studies more often rely on publicly available data, often from national governments and multinational organizations like the OECD and EU, than on data generated by surveys designed by the researchers. A few exceptions to this rule are Benito and Brusca ([2004](#)), Avrami and Rimmerman ([2005](#)) and Varma and Kapur ([2013](#)). Although Fischer and Maggetti ([2017](#)) recently made the case for the usefulness of the

controversial qualitative comparative analysis, large-*n* qualitative methods are used more rarely than case studies or statistical analysis. The addition of the Comparative Statistics section of the journal did seem to somewhat increase the overall number of quantitative studies. There remains a dearth of work that employs interview or ethnographic methods, although these methods are not completely absent from the pages of *JCPA*, as exemplified by the recent work of Maybin (2015) and Escobar (2015). Both of these articles occurred in the special issue on “Professional Knowledge and Policy Work” which attempted to pursue inquiry into how policy is subjectively perceived in addition to traditional analysis of which policies are most effective according to objective measures. We suggest that an understanding of “policy-perception” is critical to an understanding of policy success and failure.

JCPA promised to be international in scope and indeed it has published articles about five continents, but the developed world is studied far more than the developing world. The predominance of authors from the developed world most likely reflects the nascent status of the field of comparative policy analysis and comparative policy analysis studies in much of the developing world (Muhleisen and Mukherjee 2016). Increasing awareness means that the *JCPA* should seek to publish more comparative policy analytic studies from Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Central America and the Caribbean. Steps have been taken already to expand *JCPA*’s geographic reach. Five years ago the *JCPA* initiated the Best Comparative Paper Award at the Network of Institutes and Schools of Public Administration in Central and Eastern Europe (NISPAcee) for papers presented at the NISPAcee annual conference. Since then, *JCPA* has published a special issue on “Policy Analysis in Eastern Europe”, and another special issue is forthcoming on comparative public policy methodology in the former Soviet satellite state public policies. The special issue is based on a recent workshop at the School of Higher Economics, Moscow. Several institutions in Eastern Europe have become members of the ICPA-Forum seeking to engage in collaborative research and publications. *JCPA* should extend such efforts to Africa, Central Asia and the Near East, Central America and other under-studied regions.

There is a certain fit between the geographical and methodological trends at *JCPA*. The developed nations which are studied most frequently tend to have relatively open governments that produce reliable data for quantitative analysis and keep publicly accessible records, they have free presses that report on policy developments with some degree of objectivity, they have developed academic establishments to coordinate and oversee research. Consequently, historical, case-based, qualitative and quantitative methods can be used with relative ease. On the other hand, many of these characteristics – and consequently the data available to researchers – are less prevalent in the countries scholars have neglected. The presence of such public data and independent journalistic and academic establishments is likely to be correlated with democracy and GDP. Consequently, a greater emphasis would need to be placed on fieldwork to draw meaningful conclusions about the effects of policy.

As noted in the content analysis, *JCPA* has a strong record of publication in the areas of economic and financial policy, welfare and social subsidies, and health. It is fairly strong on international agreements and organizations, the environment, education and immigration/migration. But there are many important questions of policy that fall beyond this scope. Christos Kassimeris’ (2006) effort to advance a framework for comparing foreign policies is one of just a handful of articles on this topic, and while there is at least one study of military spending (Dicle and Dicle 2010), there is no comparative work on the

outcomes of military intervention. There is no work on the effectiveness of economic and other sanctions as a tool of international diplomacy. Although social welfare, healthcare and environmental policies all have a basis in a fundamental set of human rights, there is little work dealing explicitly with human rights policies as such, although Montefrio (2014) and Golder and Williams (2006) are part of a small number who do make contributions in this area. There is little to nothing on crime and criminal sentencing, prison and incarceration, and racial bias and discrimination, despite a wealth of raw data in these fields.

As the leading journal in the field of comparative policy analysis, *JCPA* should continue to encourage pioneering work. The content analysis revealed that the strengths and weaknesses of *JCPA* are similar to the strengths and weaknesses of the comparative policy analysis field at large in terms of topics studied and methods employed. *JCPA* could maintain its leadership position in the field of comparative policy analysis by encouraging work about neglected regions and topics, and by building bridges to those who practice academic disciplines not normally associated with comparative policy analysis. Special issues of the journal might explore human rights, international development or military intervention. Editors might reach out to researchers in the discipline of anthropology, who are increasingly engage in policy-relevant work in many geographic regions where *JCPA* is at its weakest. The American Anthropology Association has an entire section called the Association for the Anthropology of Policy, and journals like *Anthropology in Action* are devoted to publishing policy-relevant finding of anthropologists. Scholars and researchers in the fields of criminal justice, who are increasingly relying on cross-jurisdictional comparisons, might also make important contributions (Reichel 2010). And efforts similar to those that resulted in more attention being paid to Eastern Europe might be made in other geographic regions.

Note

1. Google's description of the Google Million: "The 'Google Million'. All are in English with dates ranging from 1500 to 2008. No more than about 6000 books were chosen from any one year, which means that all of the scanned books from early years are present, and books from later years are randomly sampled. The random samplings reflect the subject distributions for the year (so there are more computer books in 2000 than 1980)." Retrieved from <https://books.google.com/ngrams/info> on 8 October 2016.

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