

Comparative media analysis: Why some fuzzy thinking might help. Applying fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis to the personalization of mediated political communication

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John Downey and James Stanyer

Loughborough University, UK

Abstract

This article examines the benefits of fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) for comparative media research. It shows the advantages of fuzzy set theoretic thinking in examining the causes of a major feature of contemporary political communication research, namely personalization. The article has three parts. The first is a critique of the method adopted by Hallin and Mancini, a generally laudable and highly influential recent contribution to comparative media analysis. The second is a brief introduction to fsQCA. The third demonstrates the method's usefulness by investigating the personalized character of mediated political communication.

Keywords

comparative media research, fuzzy sets, Hallin and Mancini, personalization, personalized political communication, Ragin

Introduction

Hallin and Mancini (2004) have been rightly praised for their significant contribution to the field of comparative media analysis. What was once a neglected area in the field has become fashionable. Methodologically, however, comparative media analysis does not yet enjoy the maturity of comparative analysis found in other social sciences (for a similar

Corresponding author:

John Downey, Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University, Epinal Way, Loughborough, LE11 3TU, UK.

Email: j.w.downey@lboro.ac.uk

criticism, see Livingstone, 2003). The development of comparative media analysis may be hastened by examining methodological developments in other fields to see what is potentially useful. In this article we contribute to this by working through one method developed and used in other social sciences, namely fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) (Ragin, 2000, 2008a). The article has three parts. The first is a critique of Hallin and Mancini's method, which we take to be the state-of-the-art of comparative media analysis (see also Esser and Pfetsch, 2004). The second is a brief introduction to fsQCA geared towards why it is particularly useful for comparative media analysis. The third is to demonstrate this usefulness by investigating the personalized character of mediated political communication.

The methodological impasse of comparative media

Hallin and Mancini (2004) introduce their groundbreaking book on comparative media analysis by arguing for the importance of comparisons as a method. They make a number of claims. The first is that the field of communication has made little progress since the publication of Siebert et al. (1956), in *explaining* what should be the central question: why do we have the media we have. This is a damning indictment of the field. The second is that much existing comparative media analysis is ethnocentric, taking North American or Western European media as either normative models of what media systems ought to be like or making invalid generalizations about the character of media systems beyond the USA and Western Europe based on empirical analysis of a limited range of countries. While there are some notable and noble exceptions to this ethnocentricity, Hallin and Mancini's claim is difficult to refute (see Park and Curran, 2000). They suggest that comparative analysis helps to get past ethnocentricity when forming concepts (helping us to notice differences and through this, making us aware of the geographical limitations of concepts and the importance of generalizing prudently). Comparison also permits the testing of hypotheses about the relationship between media systems and economic, social, cultural and political factors.

Hallin and Mancini argue that talk of independent and dependent variables and the imitation of natural science methods in media analysis has turned many media scholars away from the task of explanation. They contend, however, that it is not necessary to imitate natural sciences in order to use comparisons as a way of testing hypotheses and causal inferences. To show this they criticize an argument made by Jeffrey Alexander (1981), who explains the rise of journalistic professionalism in the USA in contrast to France, through reference to the absence of working-class parties and associated newspapers. Hallin and Mancini refute this by extending the comparison beyond the USA and France to show that there can be media systems with both a strong labour press and highly developed professionalism, thus casting doubt on the idea that a weak labour press produces journalistic autonomy.

While Hallin and Mancini do not describe what they are doing in these terms, they are engaged in *set theoretic* thinking. Let us redescribe what they do in fsQCA terminology: they take the set of countries with high levels of journalistic professionalism (the outcome, *not* 'the dependent variable') and then show that there are different subsets (one with weak labour press, one with strong labour press) of this outcome and conclude that

other causal conditions (*not* ‘the independent variables’) must contribute to the outcome. Hallin and Mancini implicitly do set theoretic thinking but remain, for want of an alternative vocabulary, tied to the language of the ‘effects’ tradition of social scientific enquiry (independent and dependent variables, hypothesis testing, causal inference and so on). The argument in this article is that there is a better alternative, fsQCA, which offers an alternative to the imitation of natural sciences methods.

Having given an example of how comparison can be used in ‘hypothesis testing’, Hallin and Mancini backtrack a little and say that their study is largely exploratory, more for concept formation than hypothesis testing and causal inference. They seek to develop a framework for analysis but do not test it. This is, to some extent, because of the problems of collecting comparative data across media systems. The problem unfortunately is that it is difficult to collect comparative data across countries, not only because of the relative infancy of the field of comparative media but also because different data collecting bodies often collect their data in different ways, not to mention differences in media institutions themselves. The position argued for here is that in the collection of data there will inevitably be gaps and differences that may preclude multivariate analysis. Such problems may effectively strangle the new field of comparative media analysis at birth or stunt its growth through restricting it to small-*n* case studies. They would do so if we were to tie ourselves either to a ‘net effects’ mode of enquiry or to less systematic case study research (which is mostly what we have at present). To move beyond these alternatives, when comparing data we need to think along the lines of *calibration* rather than *measurement*, and *causal conditions*, *causal configurations* and *causal complexity* rather than a net effects analysis.

Hallin and Mancini choose a most similar systems design (MSSD) for their research (see George and Bennett, 2005). They limit themselves to North America and Western Europe, i.e. to cases they consider to be most similar. The logic lying behind MSSD is that one chooses cases where all but two of the variables are constant thus allowing one to conclude that it is the independent variable that causes changes in the dependent variable. While not claiming to demonstrate causality, Hallin and Mancini argue that the cases they choose share comparable economic development, political history and culture. Political systems are posited as the independent variable with the type of media system as the dependent variable.

The problem with both MSSD and its less commonly adopted methodological sibling, most different systems design (MDSD), is that they require variables to be crisp: present or not present, 0 or 1. Crisp sets, however, simply do not adequately reflect the complexities of states. If we think in this binary way then we either have to say, for example, that the levels of economic development of the USA, Sweden and Greece are the same or very different from one another. Rather than a binary logic we need to employ fuzzy sets that allow us to calibrate membership of sets on a variety of possible scales. Not only does this give us a more adequate reflection of what is actually the case but also it allows us to make comparisons across different types of states, economies and so on. We do not have to choose either most similar or most different states but can compare both together and also choose states in the middle, as it were, for good measure.

MSSD and MDSD share the problem of being monocausal. MSSD, for example, holds variables constant in order to identify the independent variable that causes the

dependent variable. Many media scholars of a more qualitative methodological inclination have difficulty with such an approach in that they argue outcomes are determined by a number of causes and it is the configuration or recipe that is important. The problem with independent variables is that causes are not *independent* but *interact*.

Now the point here is not to accuse Hallin and Mancini of crude analysis. They provide a sophisticated analysis that is extremely illuminating but it is ill served by MSSD. For want of an alternative they have to fit their analysis into the straightjacket of MSSD.

Redesigning comparative media analysis

Charles Ragin's work in developing fsQCA (Ragin, 1987, 2000, 2008a, 2008b) provides an alternative both to small-*n* qualitative analysis and to large-*n* quantitative analysis. He argues that fsQCA can be applied to small, medium and large-*n* and has four distinct advantages over large-*n* correlational research. This is a necessarily brief, uncritical summary of fsQCA's principles for the purpose of introducing the method to media scholars, as it has not previously been applied to media analysis.

The first advantage is that while correlational thinking is symmetrical, fsQCA is asymmetrical. The example Ragin uses is the investigation of the relationship between democracy and development. If one correlates democracy and development one finds a weak correlation because there are many less developed countries that are democracies. If one employs set theoretic thinking, however, one can see a very strong set theoretic relationship, in that developed countries are a subset of democratic countries. This prompts the examination of what it is about developed countries that leads to democracy. That is not to say, of course, that there are not other causal paths to democracy taken by less developed countries. Correlational thinking in this case would, however, serve to obscure what it is about developed countries that fosters democracy unless it was accompanied by a cluster analysis.

The second advantage is that fuzzy sets are based on *calibration* rather than *measurement*. Calibration, although widely used in natural sciences, is rarely used in social sciences because of the dominance of correlational thinking and its dependency on measurement. Calibration means that 'scores must be interpreted according to external standards' (Ragin, 2008a: 8). These external standards are based on theoretical and substantive knowledge. One takes, therefore, a series of measurements on, for example, interval or ratio scales and calibrates them according to external standards. This can also be done when measurements are not strictly comparable across cases and would thus prevent correlational analysis.

MSSD employs crisp sets with a variable given a score of either 0 or 1, it is either absent or present. With fuzzy sets causal conditions can be calibrated (0.1, 0.2, 0.3 and so on) (Table 1). It would mean that we could recognize the differences between say the levels of economic development between Greece and the USA, while placing them in a set of developed economies.

The third advantage is that while correlational thinking sees independent variables as independent from one another, with each variable having a discrete additive net effect, set theoretic thinking sees causal conditions working together as a 'causal recipe' to produce

Table 1. Crisp versus fuzzy sets

| Crisp set | 3-value fuzzy set | 4-value fuzzy set | 6 value fuzzy set | 'Continuous' fuzzy set |
|---------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1 = fully in | 1 = fully in | 1 = fully in | 1 = fully in | 1 = fully in |
| | | | 0.8 = mostly in | 0.9 |
| | | 0.67 = more in than out | | 0.8 |
| | | | 0.6 = more in than out | 0.7 |
| | 0.5 = neither fully in nor out | | | 0.6 |
| | | | 0.4 = more out than in | 0.5 = maximum ambiguity |
| | | 0.33 = more out than in | | 0.4 |
| | | | 0.2 = mostly out | 0.3 |
| | | | | 0.2 |
| | | | | 0.1 |
| 0 = fully out | 0 = fully out | 0 = fully out | 0 = fully out | 0 = fully out |

Adapted from Ragin (2008a: 31).

an outcome. It is the combination that is important. While there are methods of examining causal interaction via correlational thinking, set theoretic approaches provide a simple and illuminating analysis of causal configurations. To go back to Hallin and Mancini this allows us to examine the interplay between different causal conditions (economic, historical, cultural, political) rather than place all of our causal eggs in one basket (in Hallin and Mancini’s case, the political system).

The fourth advantage is that fsQCA allows for the analysis of causal complexity through counterfactual reasoning. It allows researchers to examine different causal recipes and the consistency and coverage of their outcomes. This can be achieved through using truth tables that list the logically possible combinations of causal conditions and their relation to the outcome. The number of possible combinations is 2^k where k is the number of causal conditions. If there were 5 causal conditions there would be, for example, 32 possible causal combinations (Table 2).

The fsQCA algorithm follows a process of simplification. It compares causal recipes that differ by only one causal condition and that have the same outcome. In such cases, the differing causal condition is said to be irrelevant to the outcome and the causal combination that produces the outcome can be simplified.

It may be that different causal recipes or combinations lead to the same outcome (in this case, the outcome, weak class voting, is caused by a number of different recipes). One can calculate the ‘raw’ and ‘unique’ coverage of each causal recipe (the percentage of the outcome that each recipe explains when part of a subset of other recipes that produce the outcome and by itself). It may be that the same causal recipe leads to different outcomes. Here we can calculate the consistency of the causal recipe in producing the

Table 2. Fuzzy set data on class voting in advanced industrial societies

| Country | Weak class voting (W) | Affluent (A) | Income inequality (I) | Manufacturing (M) | Strong unions (U) |
|-------------|-----------------------|--------------|-----------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Australia | 0.6 | 0.8 | 0.6 | 0.4 | 0.6 |
| Belgium | 0.6 | 0.6 | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.8 |
| Denmark | 0.2 | 0.6 | 0.4 | 0.2 | 0.8 |
| France | 0.8 | 0.6 | 0.8 | 0.2 | 0.2 |
| Germany | 0.6 | 0.6 | 0.8 | 0.4 | 0.4 |
| Ireland | 0.8 | 0.2 | 0.6 | 0.8 | 0.8 |
| Italy | 0.6 | 0.4 | 0.8 | 0.2 | 0.6 |
| Netherlands | 0.8 | 0.6 | 0.4 | 0.2 | 0.4 |
| Norway | 0.2 | 0.6 | 0.4 | 0.6 | 0.8 |
| Sweden | 0 | 0.8 | 0.4 | 0.8 | 1 |
| UK | 0.4 | 0.6 | 0.6 | 0.8 | 0.6 |
| USA | 1 | 1 | 0.8 | 0.4 | 0.2 |

Source: Ragin (2008a: 127).

outcome. When the consistency is below a certain cut-off value, say 0.75, we can conclude that there is likely to be another causal condition at work that has not been considered in the analysis and that had it been considered would have produced greater consistency. Ragin recommends a cut-off consistency value of 0.85.

As well as examining complex combinations of causal conditions with real outcomes, fsQCA allows the researcher to engage in ‘thought experiments’ or counterfactual reasoning involving the ‘remainders’ (the causal recipes that do not yield a real empirical outcome) in order to achieve greater parsimony. Here it is assumed that the remainders would yield an outcome and are then matched with the real cases to produce greater parsimony (Ragin, 2008d: 13). Such reasoning has a long history in social science and is often implicit in argument (Weber, 1949). Counterfactual reasoning can lead to the discovery of more parsimonious causal recipes that have similar levels of consistency and coverage to more complex recipes. Social scientists often find more parsimonious solutions attractive.

Some remainders are more plausible than others in the sense that they have causal recipes that fit in with theory and substantive knowledge about what causes the outcome. If we permit all remainders, we will find the most parsimonious solution but it will involve ‘difficult’ counterfactuals in the sense that it would include causal combinations that may contradict existing theory and knowledge of the causes of the outcome. As well as allowing for the most complex and the most parsimonious solution, fsQCA allows for intermediate solutions by considering solutions that contain the causal conditions of the most parsimonious solution and some of the conditions of the most complex solution. ‘Easy’ counterfactuals are those that fit in with existing theory and knowledge of the outcome while difficult ones confound existing theory and knowledge. Ragin prefers the intermediate solution as it ‘strike(s) a balance between parsimony and complexity, based on the substantive and theoretical knowledge of the investigator’ (Ragin, 2008a: 175).

Personalized political communication: Causal conditions and recipes

We have offered a brief critique of Hallin and Mancini's comparative method and have suggested that Ragin's fsQCA offers a number of clear advantages over existing approaches such as most similar and most different systems design. In the final part of the article this will be demonstrated by taking as a case study an important issue, the personalized character of political communication.

There has been a growing interest in the personalized nature of contemporary politics across a range of democracies (for a synoptic account, see McAllister, 2007). In the field of political communication, research has largely concentrated on the extent to which media output is focused on politicians rather than institutions, organizations, or policies. Plasser and Lengauer (2008: 257) define personalization as 'an increasing focus on candidates at the expense of their parties or even policy issues'. In this context studies have provided a wealth of often contradictory evidence. Some have found evidence of personalized political communication (Dalton et al., 2000; Mughan, 2000; Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007). Others have observed that there is little evidence of a more personalized political communication (Lessinger and Holtz-Bacha, 2003). Clearly, in some democracies political communication is more personalized than in others. The literature, however, has little to say about why this might be the case. As media scholars we might be tempted to give primacy to the media as the cause while political scientists, in contrast, may focus more on the character of political systems and political behaviour. To what extent is the level of personalized political communication the result of political or media conditions? To what extent might it even be the product of a combination of political and media conditions?

Fuzzy sets

Following fsQCA (Ragin, 2000, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2000d), we see a personalized political communication as a *fuzzy set* which democracies can be members of, to a varying degree. Drawing on Ragin, democracies might be full members, or full non-members, but more likely than not, membership is not so black and white. Members might be, for example, more in than out or more out than in, that is, have some but not all of the features. Based on secondary sources many democracies sit in this middle ground exhibiting some features which generate membership. It would be wrong to force them to fit into either a set of democracies with fully personalized mediated political communication or a set without.

The first stage of the research was to allocate membership to the fuzzy set *democracies with personalized mediated political communication*; in other words, democracies where media output is more focused on politicians rather than institutions, organizations, or policies. The study deliberately identified a broad range of democracies with both shared and different characteristics. This list included presidential and parliamentary systems; established and consolidating democracies; developed and developing countries; and countries with different kinds of media systems. A total of 20 democracies were

examined. Of course such a selection process could be said to be biased, but such criticisms bedevil all small-*n* comparative work (see Ebbinghaus, 2005: 149).

Each of the 20 democracies was then given a score between 0 and 1 according to their membership of *democracies with personalized mediated political communication*. 1 indicated full membership of the set, 0, full non-membership, 0.7, more in than out, and 0.3, more out than in. Calibration of membership scores is the most important but perhaps the most difficult process. Ideally, we would have used data from a content analysis of all national mediated political output for democracies around the world, but such a source does not exist. Indeed, there are few comprehensive cross-national studies of personalization of mediated political communication. Given the known difficulty of such studies, the likelihood of one existing in the near future is also remote. This though should not present an insurmountable barrier to comparative research. As noted, set membership can be calibrated 'according to external standards' (Ragin, 2008a: 8) which are based on the theoretical and substantive knowledge. In other words, the researcher, rather like a detective, can determine set membership based on theoretical and substantive knowledge. This act is, of course, fundamentally interpretive but this is one of its strengths (see Ragin, 2000: 166). The process of calibration enables systematic comparative research to take place in areas where full data sets are not always available.

To determine the extent of personalized mediated political communication the authors drew on comparative studies and on a range of nationally focused articles and book chapters. Given the number of countries involved, acquiring detailed knowledge presented quite a challenge. The authors used these secondary sources to determine what it would take to gain full set membership, at what point countries would be full non-members and the cross-over point, where a country could be considered more out than in.

Due to the nature of the data the study adopted an indirect method of calibration. This approach involved an initial sorting of cases, the assignment of preliminary set membership scores to each case based on secondary sources and then a further refining of the scores (see Ragin, 2008b). The study settled on several measures to produce a comprehensive picture of the extent to which mediated political communication was personalized. First, was the presence of televised leadership or candidate debates during elections. This was determined with data taken from Plasser with Plasser (2002: 190). Second, was the national prominence of leadership selection. In some democracies the process by which leaders are selected is a public media event, in other democracies leaders are chosen exclusively by the parliamentary party or by national convention or other closed means. One may plausibly suggest that where the selection process is open, the process and the actors are more likely to be discussed in the media, the US presidential primaries being a case in point. Leadership selection was determined with data taken from Scarrow et al. (2000). The final measure was based on national research on media content some of which focused on election campaigns, and the extent to which that content was more focused on personalities (Campus and Pasquino, 2006; Dalton et al., 2000; Johansson, 2008; Maniago, 2007; Mughan, 2000; Muir, 2005; Musialowska, 2008; Neveu, 2005; Plasser and Lengauer 2008; Reineman and Wilke, 2007). On each of the three factors the 20 democracies were given a score between 0 and 50 according to the factors presence or absence. These scores were then combined to form an overall measure of personalized political communication. Countries with a score of 130 and over (out of 150) were

Table 3. Membership of the fuzzy set 'democracies with personalized political communication'

| Country | Personalized political communication |
|--------------|--------------------------------------|
| Argentina | 0.7 |
| Australia | 0.3 |
| France | 0.7 |
| Germany | 0.3 |
| Greece | 0.3 |
| Hungary | 0 |
| India | 0 |
| Italy | 0.7 |
| Mexico | 0.7 |
| New Zealand | 0.3 |
| Philippines | 0.7 |
| Poland | 0.7 |
| Russia | 0.7 |
| South Africa | 0 |
| Spain | 0.3 |
| Sweden | 0.3 |
| Taiwan | 0.7 |
| UK | 0.7 |
| USA | 1 |
| Venezuela | 0.7 |

considered full members, those democracies with a score of 50 or less were considered fully out, and the point of maximum ambiguity, or the cross-over point, was set at 90. Each of the democracies was then given one of the following scores: 1 indicating a full membership of the set, 0, full non-membership, 0.7, more in than out, and 0.3, more out than in (see Table 3).

Causal recipes

Having allocated membership scores, the authors then wanted to explore the causal conditions for membership and the different combinations of causal conditions – or causal recipes – which generate membership. One of the strengths of the fuzzy set approach is that it allows the exploration of complex combinations of causal conditions. So, for example, a key causal condition for membership, as identified by others, might be membership of the set of democracies with a presidential system. Directly electing leaders might be a key causal condition but, of course, the nature of presidential systems varies and it may only be significant if countries are also full or partial members of the set of democracies with weak public service media and with a large tabloid media sector. A vigorous, well-developed commercial media system might well be necessary for full membership for a particular democracy. It might also be that having a vigorous commercial media system with a strong tabloid media sector combined with low party identification among voters will be sufficient for a country to be a full member without necessarily being a presidential democracy. To emphasize, it is different combinations of conditions working together that is the significant factor here, not the discrete net effects of any one

cause. Different combinations might lead to the same outcome and similar recipes to different outcomes.

The authors explored a range of causal conditions drawing up a long list of likely conditions before reducing them down to a final list of five. Membership of each causal subset was calibrated drawing on general resource books, edited collections, as well as a range of nationally focused articles and book chapters.

The first condition selected was the degree of membership of the set presidential democracies. It is often argued that a more personalized style of politics is evident in democracies where the national leader is directly elected rather than in a parliamentary system where voters choose a party or parties to govern. Membership of the set 'democracies with directly elected presidents' was established with data from Blais and Massicotte (2002: 42) and Plasser with Plasser (2002). Countries where presidents were directly elected were considered full members, countries where presidents were not directly elected or were parliamentary democracies, were considered full non-members. Due to the crisp nature of these data, there was no point of maximum ambiguity (see Table 4 for membership scores).

Observations about the personalization of political communication are not confined to presidential democracies. Another factor shaping media output might be slick media management and a greater focus on politicians' personal image, which are both features of professionalized campaigning. To measure membership of the set 'democracies with professionalized campaigns' the study drew on findings from a global survey of political consultants by Plasser with Plasser and from a range of national case studies (see edited collections Johnson, 2008; Negrine et al., 2007; Schafferer, 2006; Voltmer, 2006). Set membership was determined by several measures: the use of external consultants and campaign research, and the results of a survey of international consultants asking whether image is more important than issues in a range of national election campaigns (Plasser with Plasser, 2002). Each democracy was given a score between 0 and 50 on each measure. Countries were considered full members if they gained a score of 130 or more, full non-members if their score was 50 or less and the cross-over point was set at 90 (see Table 4 for membership scores).

Another condition might be the extent to which a democracy has weak public service media. Studies tend to suggest that with weak public service media there is greater potential that political output will focus on personality rather than process (see Habermas, 2006: 423). Membership of the set 'weak public service media' was determined drawing on data from Hallin and Macini (2004) and from other sources (see edited collections Atkinson and Raboy, 1997; Park and Curran, 2000). Countries were considered full members if public service broadcasting audience share was 5 percent or less, full non-members if public service broadcasting audience stood at 45 percent or more, and the cross-over point was set at the 25 percent audience share level (see Table 4 for membership scores).

Another condition shaping output might be the extent to which a democracy has an established and/or growing tabloid media sector. Research in media studies shows that countries with an established and growing tabloid media sector are more likely to see intrusion into politicians' private lives on a regular basis (see edited collection Stanyer and Wrang, 2004). To gauge membership to the set 'large tabloid media sector' the study

used data from *World Press Trends, 2008* on newspapers and magazines around the world, supplemented with data drawn from national case studies (see Quintos de Jesus, 2007; Sparks and Tulloch, 2000; World Association of Newspapers, 2008). Countries were considered full members if they had 80 or more tabloid outlets, full non-members if there were 10 or fewer tabloid outlets and the cross-over point was set at 40 (see Table 4 for membership scores).

The final condition potentially shaping media output is audiences. More personalized political communication might be the result of media adaptation to the increasing importance of personal qualities in the minds of the voter-audience. Indeed, studies have shown that candidate's personal qualities are an important factor shaping electoral choice (see Clarke et al., 2004; Miller et al., 1986). While there is no comprehensive data set on personal voting patterns, there are data on the level of party identification among voters. Low and declining levels of party identification might mean other factors, such as the personal qualities of those being elected, are important in determining the outcome of elections. Evidence of the level of party identification was drawn from data provided by Plasser with Plasser (2002) and supplemented by information from Dalton and Wattenberg (2000), Schmitt and Holmberg (1995) and from a range of national case studies (see Canache, 2002; Dalton and Burklin, 2003; Schulz-Herzenberg, 2007). Countries were considered full members if 90 percent of eligible voters surveyed did not identify with a political party, full non-members if 10 percent or fewer identified and the cross-over point was set at 50 percent of the voting population (see Table 4 for membership scores).

Table 4. Causal conditions for membership of fuzzy set 'democracies with personalized political communication'

| Country | Personalized | Presidential system | Low pty identification | Professionalization | Tabloid media | Weak PSB |
|--------------|--------------|---------------------|------------------------|---------------------|---------------|----------|
| Argentina | 0.7 | 1 | 0.7 | 0.7 | 0.7 | 0.7 |
| Australia | 0.3 | 0 | 0.7 | 1 | 0.3 | 0 |
| France | 0.7 | 1 | 0.7 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Germany | 0.3 | 0 | 0.3 | 1 | 0.7 | 0 |
| Greece | 0.3 | 0 | 0.3 | 0.7 | 1 | 1 |
| Hungary | 0 | 0 | 0.7 | 0.7 | 0 | 0.7 |
| India | 0 | 0 | 0.3 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Italy | 0.7 | 0 | 0.3 | 0.7 | 0.3 | 0 |
| Mexico | 0.7 | 1 | 1 | 0.7 | 1 | 1 |
| New Zealand | 0.3 | 0 | 0.7 | 1 | 0.3 | 0 |
| Philippines | 0.7 | 1 | 0.7 | 0.3 | 0.7 | 1 |
| Poland | 0.7 | 1 | 1 | 0.3 | 0.7 | 0.7 |
| Russia | 0.7 | 1 | 1 | 0.3 | 0.3 | 0.3 |
| South Africa | 0 | 0 | 0.3 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Spain | 0.3 | 0 | 0.3 | 0.7 | 0.7 | 0.3 |
| Sweden | 0.3 | 0 | 0.3 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Taiwan | 0.7 | 1 | 0.7 | 0.7 | 0.7 | 0.3 |
| UK | 0.7 | 0 | 0.7 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| USA | 1 | 1 | 0.7 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Venezuela | 0.7 | 1 | 0.7 | 0.3 | 0.7 | 0.7 |

Explaining the personalization of political communication

FsQCA software was used to produce a variety of truth tables that show which causal combinations lead to which outcomes (software available at: www.u.arizona.edu/~cragin/fsQCA/). What is presented next are the complex, parsimonious and intermediate solutions, or causal recipes, that lead to the personalization of political communication.¹ In these tables capital letters indicate the presence of causal conditions while lower case letters indicate the absence of causal conditions. Table 5 shows three different complex causal recipes that produce personalization of political communication.

The first two complex causal recipes in Table 5 include the same four causal conditions, the only simplification being the absence of professionalization as a causal condition. It would appear that whether professionalization is present or not is not significant in explaining the personalization of political communication. In the first recipe the presence of a presidential system together with low party identification and the absence of tabloid media and weak public service, produces personalization. In the second causal recipe we have the presence of all four causal conditions. This raises the question of the relevancy of tabloid media and weak public service as causal conditions. When presidential systems and low party identification are present as causal conditions the outcome is the same irrespective of the presence or absence of tabloid media and weak public service. The third complex causal recipe shows that the presence of low party identification, professionalization and tabloid media and the absence of presidential systems and weak public service produces personalization.

We now turn to more parsimonious solutions using all remainders, i.e. both easy and difficult counterfactuals. Table 6 shows that the presence of a presidential system alone can explain the outcome of personalization with a consistency of below 0.75 (below the 0.85 recommended by Ragin). This low level of consistency means that being a presidential system on its own is not enough and another causal condition needs to be considered as well. An alternative parsimonious recipe would be the presence of low party identification and an established tabloid media, which explains the outcome with a high level of consistency.

Table 7 presents intermediate solutions, based on the assumptions that the presence of all of the causal conditions should contribute to personalization (thus permitting only 'easy' counterfactuals).

Table 5. Complex causal solutions for the personalization of political communication

| Causal recipe | Consistency |
|--|-------------|
| PRESSSYS* <i>LWPTYIDENT</i> * <i>tabloid media</i> * <i>wkpublic service</i> | 1 |
| PRESSSYS* <i>LWPTYIDENT</i> * <i>TABLOID MEDIA</i> * <i>WKPUBLICSERVICE</i> | 0.941176 |
| <i>pressys</i> * <i>LWPTYIDENT</i> * <i>PROFESSIONALIZE</i> * <i>TABLOID MEDIA</i> * <i>wkpublic service</i> | 1 |

The raw and unique coverage scores for the first recipe are: 0.265306; 0.112245. For the second recipe: 0.489796; 0.336735. For the third recipe: 0.255102; 0.255102.

Table 6. Parsimonious solutions for the personalization of political communication

| Causal recipe | Consistency |
|-------------------------|-------------|
| PRESSYS | 0.733333 |
| LWPTYIDENT*TABLOIDMEDIA | 0.963855 |

The raw and unique coverage scores for the first recipe are: 0.673469; 0.142857. For the second recipe: 0.816327; 0.285714.

Table 7. Intermediate solutions for the personalization of political communication

| Causal recipe | Consistency |
|--|-------------|
| PRESSYS*LWPTYIDENT | 0.875000 |
| TABLOIDMEDIA* PROFESSIONALIZE*LWPTYIDENT | 1 |

The raw and unique coverage scores for the first recipe are: 0.642857; 0.234694. For the second recipe: 0.693878; 0.285714.

These intermediate solutions suggest that there are two different paths to the personalization of political communication and that media institutions play a different role in each causal path. The first causal path is where a democracy has a presidential system plus low party identification. Here it is very likely that political communication will be personalized irrespective of whether there are tabloid media or weak public service, i.e. media institutions do not appear to be a determining factor in the production of personalized political communication. It is much more a question of political systems and culture that drives the personalization of political communication rather than media institutions. This though is not a 'necessary' condition for the personalization of political communication. Personalization is not, for example, dependent upon there being a presidential system. We can see this if we examine the second causal path. Mediated political communication is also personalized in democracies where party identification is low, campaigns are professionalized, and there is a strong tabloid media. In this case, the presence or absence of presidential systems is irrelevant. Where we have low party identification together with professionalized campaigns and tabloid media we have personalization in both presidential and parliamentary democracies. In these cases the presence of tabloid media is partly responsible for personalization, but note that it is responsible as part of a recipe, a combination of conditions, rather than on its own as an independent variable.

What light can this shed on our question concerning how to explain the personalization of mediated political communication? The first thing to say is that there are different answers (because there are different causal recipes) to the question depending on the character of the political system concerned. Where the political system is a presidential system and characterized by low party identification, it appears that this is sufficient to cause the personalization of political communication. This can be seen in the US, and in many Latin American, Eastern European and East Asian democracies. Media factors

appear to be irrelevant if these two political causes are present. The media system is off-the-hook as it were, in terms of being responsible for the personalization of political communication in such democracies.

The media system can contribute to personalization in certain circumstances. Where the country has merely low party identification, then it appears a large tabloid media sector contributes to the personalization of political communication. We can see this in parliamentary democracies, such as the UK, with a strong tabloid newspaper sector. Here we find that it is the combination of political and media factors that causes the personalization of political communication.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was threefold. First, to highlight the relatively undeveloped nature of comparative media research, both methodologically and empirically, and point out the weaknesses of some current approaches. Second, to introduce briefly the central tenets of fsQCA that can help to address such weaknesses. Third, to demonstrate this through applying fsQCA to a key issue in political communication. Such an approach instead of seeing discrete net effects of independent variables, reveals, via fuzzy set truth tables, more or less complex, more or less parsimonious ‘causal recipes’ that produce an outcome. Fuzzy sets allow us to draw finer distinctions between case studies, while maintaining the power of comparative analysis. The example of personalization shows that such an approach can yield simple yet illuminating solutions and analysis. The analysis suggests that there are two causal paths to personalization of political communication: one where the make-up of political institutions is predominant causally (particularly the presence of presidential systems) and the character of media institutions is relatively unimportant; another where a combination of political culture and media conditions explains personalization irrespective of whether the political system is parliamentary or presidential. Such analysis suggests that if we wish to understand the personalization of mediated political communication comprehensively then we should consider the complex causal combinations of political and media conditions and the different paths towards personalization. We should eschew a one-size-fits-all approach as there are different paths to personalization. We should also avoid either a politico-centric or a media-centric approach and examine a variety of political and media conditions and the interaction of these conditions rather than seek to isolate the discrete effects of independent variables.

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Note

1. For the sake of space we have focused solely on the consistency of each recipe and have not discussed the ‘raw’ and ‘unique’ coverage scores. These scores can be found in the footnotes to Tables 5, 6 and 7.

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