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A Framework for Congruence Analysis in Comparative Historical Analysis of Political Change

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Abstract:

Scholars engaging in comparative historical analysis rely on observational data. The use of these data to analyze causal factors is affected by a number of problems that follow from studying historical developments. First, scholars often face a dearth of data which inhibits both large-n statistical analysis and in-depth qualitative analysis of individual cases. Second, scholars often confront the problem of historical diffusion, a problem that is in itself aggravated by the absence of good historical data. Against this backdrop, this paper devises a “middle-range” framework based on congruence analysis. This framework includes considerations about case selection in the face of diffusion and about the kind of within-case evidence that allows scholars to analyze the causes of political change. The framework devises a systematic way of converting narrative historical descriptions into within-case binary observations. This conversion allows other scholars to replicate the analysis in a transparent way and to probe the validity of the scoring based on the sources referred to. The framework is illustrated via empirical analysis of the origins and development of representative institutions in the medieval Crown of Aragon.

A Framework for Congruence Analysis in Comparative Historical Analysis of Political Change

Introduction¹

Comparative historical analysis has flourished in recent decades, occasioned by what has been termed a historical turn in the social sciences (McDonald 1996; Mahoney & Rueschemeyer 2003; Capoccia & Ziblatt 2010). This development has been accompanied by a string of debates about the strengths and weaknesses of comparative historical analysis (e.g. Skocpol and Somers 1980; Tilly 1984; Sewell 1996; Thelen 1999; Mahoney 2000; Capoccia and Ziblatt 2010; Boix 2011; Lijphart 1971; Bartolini 1993; Coppedge 2012; Lange 2012; Møller 2015). In this paper, I focus on a particular challenge that has been widely ignored in this debate. This concerns the fact that scholars engaging in comparative historical analysis of political change by default rely on scarce observational data. In recent decades, a heated discussion has centered on whether such observational data allows for a genuine test of causal relationships (Sekhon 2009; Gerring 2011; see Coppedge 2012: 266-267). We need not take an explicit stand in this debate to observe that comparative historical analysis is especially vulnerable to the criticism made against observational data. Scholars probing questions of comparative history have to resort to this kind of data because they study things that occurred in the past. Meanwhile, the data that is available is normally scarce, at least in comparison with the data available for scholars studying the modern world (Carr 1990[1961], 12-16). Indeed, data is sometimes so scarce that scholars are in reality left grappling in the dark – or, as the drunken man who has lost his keys, under the few lampposts of historical evidence that do exist.

¹ I am indebted to participants at the workshop “From Transparency to Replication in Qualitative Inference”, May 23- 24, 2016 at the University of Essex for valuable input. I also wish to thank an anonymous reviewer at *Quality & Quantity*. Finally, thanks to Suthan Krishnarajan for research assistance.

This has a number of consequences for the methods available to scholars probing historical developments in general and processes of political change in particular. As we delve back in time, it becomes more and more difficult to, on the one hand, employ quasi-experimental designs and, on the other hand, get near to the implications of the causal arguments based on qualitative evidence. In large-n statistical analysis, the lack of valid data on key variables means that we constantly face problems of omitted variable bias and that we often have huge difficulties dealing with autocorrelation caused by diffusion of ideas and institutions. With in-depth case studies, we often lack the kind of detailed historical data that would allow us to get close to the actors and, hence, the causal mechanisms.

The point of departure for this paper is a simple one: One way of mitigating these problems is by attempting to combine the strengths of large-n and small-n approaches. More precisely, I propose a middle-range method based on congruence analysis of carefully selected cases. Confronted with a situation of scarce historical data, this method presents distinct advantages over large-n cross-case analysis and within-case process tracing or causal narratives, respectively.² Compared with large-N analysis – particularly cross-case analysis – it enables scholars to get relatively close to the implications of causal mechanisms of relevant theories of political change based on the historical data that does exist, and it alleviates problems of historical diffusion via careful case selection. Compared with small-n qualitative analysis, the method requires less in terms of the available data and it converts narrative descriptions into numbers, which eases the ability to make generalizations about within-case developments and generalizations across a medium number of cases. An additional strength of the method is that it facilitates transparency and replication because the numbers can be directly reanalyzed by other scholars and because it is easier to check them up against the stipulated sources than it would

² See Lange (2012) for an overview of these methods in comparative historical analysis.

be for either a large-n statistical dataset or a within-case causal narrative or process tracing analysis (see Møller & Skaaning 2016).

The proposed framework for congruence analysis can be situated within the recent tendency to shift focus from more aggregate levels of analysis to the micro level by enlisting within-case evidence that is coded in systematic datasets. However, it adds hands-on advice on how to do this in a situation where scholars face problems of unit dependency and scarce historical data. More particularly, the framework is especially relevant for comparative historical analysis of political change. We can here return to the anecdote about the drunkard looking for his keys under the lamppost. Fischer (1970, 90-94) uses this anecdote to illustrate what he terms “the quantitative fallacy”: the erroneous notion “that facts which count best count most” (90). This is an objection that can be legitimately made against many of the new large-n analyses of historical developments, including the example of the birth of medieval representative institutions which I use to illustrate the proposed method in this paper (Stasavage 2010, 2011; Blaydes & Chaney 2013; Abramson & Boix 2014). The proposed congruence method can be seen as an attempt to actually count facts that count most rather than only those that count best – and to retain the ability to count them in a way that is more nuanced than a simple use of tallies (more on this below). Indeed, the entire point is that the method devises a way of analyzing the kind of data that would go into an in-depth qualitative case-study; but that does so in a way where narrative information is converted into binary data that lends itself to systematic analysis and replication – in a word, to being counted.

The paper proceeds as follows. I first further elaborate the problems confronting scholars engaging in comparative historical analysis. Against this background, I introduce the framework for congruence analysis. I illustrate this framework by applying it on one of the most prominent questions of comparative historical analysis, namely the origins and development of medieval representative

institutions. The illustration shows both how to deal with case selection and how to apply the method. More particularly, the case of the Crown of Aragon is selected and analyzed. The final section concludes.

Two problems of comparative historical analysis of political change

The attempt to analyze historical processes of political change run up against two problems, each of which we need to specify in detail. The first has to do with the diffusion of political institutions. Diffusion can be defined as a process through which innovations spread among units of a social system. This is most likely to take place if communication channels connect these units, i.e., if multiple, overlapping networks intersect the social system.

Confronted with historical diffusion there is a big risk that any empirical relationship established across multiple cases is either an expression of ‘Galton’s Problem’, that is, a parallel diffusion of both political institutions and their identified causes, or of a diffusion of political institutions which is causally unconnected with one or more factors that are (for some other reason) present in most or all cases where diffusion occurs. As illustrated in Figure 1, the problem here is that diffusion undermines the independence between cases which is a premise of controlled comparisons, whether these take the form of large-N statistical analysis or of qualitative contrasts between cases (see Lijphart 1971; Sartori 1991).³ This means that, without a convincing control for diffusion, we cannot

³ There are a series of standard ways to address the problem of diffusion in quantitative comparative historical analysis – say, of the advent of or variation in representative institutions. These include clustering standard errors on regions (e.g., Scandinavia or the Iberian Peninsula), modeling diffusion as convergence by controlling for the initial scores of the political institutions that enter the analysis, and including a variable measuring institutions in neighboring countries. All these techniques are valuable but they cannot substitute for genuinely controlling for diffusion.

reject the possibility that similar developments owe to common cross-pollinization rather than to similar domestic conditions.

[Figure 1 about here]

The arguments about non-independence of historical cases have prompted some scholars engaging in historical analysis to flatly reject controlled comparisons. For instance, Sewell (1996: 248-59) has forcefully made this criticism against the methodological logic which Skocpol (1979) uses in her studies of social revolution. Mann (1986: 501-3), too, sees the non-independence of historical cases as undermining controlled comparisons, full stop. Both Sewell and Mann opt for the same remedy, namely the historical narrative which – ideally – enables scholars to trace at least the footprints left by diffusion. Meanwhile, quantitative scholars argue that it is possible to deal with both spatial and temporal autocorrelations in large-n statistical analysis, provided one can enlist the necessary data (see fn. 2 above).

But this is where we run up against the second problem, whether we are dealing with in-depth historical narratives, process-tracing or large-n statistical analysis. Measuring diffusion is difficult enough in the contemporary setting. It is well-nigh impossible once we hone in on historical developments where data is scarce. This scarcity problem compromises both the extent to which we can enlist data in large-n analysis and the ability to take demonstration effects into consideration in in-depth qualitative analysis of particular cases.⁴ Of course, the depth of attention of the latter strategy of

⁴ The dearth of historical data has wider ramifications for both quantitative and qualitative analysis of historical processes of political change. It impedes both the attempt to validly score the dependent variable and key explanatory factors across a

inquiry means that it is less vulnerable to this objection. But the odds are still stacked against it for the simple reason many historical processes are shrouded in obscurity – and that the scattered fact we do have access to have been pre-selected by e.g. chroniclers who were situated in monasteries or courts and wished to tell a certain story (see Møller & Skaaning 2016). Qualitative analysis of singular cases, whether it takes the form of process tracing or causal narratives, is therefore also vulnerable to the dearth of historical data, especially if the aim is to probe several competing explanations.

Illustrating the two problems: The case of representative institutions

The two problems can be illustrated via the example that I analyse below, namely the origins and developments of medieval representative institutions. Bearing the point about autocorrelation described above in mind, we can first observe that diffusion of political institutions was pervasive in Europe in the Middle Ages for two reasons. The first and most important is that there existed an international organization that was ubiquitous throughout Western and Central Europe and that towered above anything else, namely the Catholic Church. “Medieval Europe was saturated in Christian values” (Finer 1997a, 857) and the Catholic Church was the key integrative force of this area (Hall 1985; Mann 1986). Furthermore, the Catholic Church had a *de facto* monopoly on education until the advent – or in fact until the secularization – of the universities, meaning that European monarch relied upon churchmen to staff the chancelleries. The German historian Otto Hintze (1975[1931]: 318) long ago observed that

larger number of cases and the attempt to carry out, for instance, in-depth process tracing in singular cases. That is, it is not only relevant for the attempt to deal with diffusion. In this more general respect, too, the proposed congruence analysis has a competitive edge.

the whole primitive machinery of state were in the hands of ecclesiastics, and that the procedures and ideas of these chancelleries passed from country to country, from court to court, and that in this way a certain uniformity of thinking about politics and administration was established.

The presence of this common ideological and physical infrastructure eased the spread of a series of innovations that facilitated representative institutions, including the notion that secular rulers were bound by Christian law, the notion of corporate groups, and the notion of proctorial representation (Proctor 1980; Finer 1997a: 863-644; Tierney 1982: 11-25; Maddicott 2010).

Second, medieval European political entities were what have been termed “composite states” (Te Brake 1998). These bundled units had normally been created by dynastic politics (Finer 1997b: 1269). They comprised a series of relatively independent sub-units, each with their own political and administrative institutions (Poggi 1990). Political units covered tracts of territory with great distances between, borders were porous, and impulses constantly reverberated from sub-unit to sub-unit and from sub-units to the center (and *vice versa*). This meant that demonstration effects – especially impulses that concerned political rights and institutions – were often transported over great distances, in spite of the fact that travel was difficult. Just to give one example, historians have documented that the Magna Carta of 1215, which has been identified as one of the main impetuses behind the advent of the English Parliament in the 13th century (Maddicott 2010), was inspired by similar charters in “those parts of Spain and southern France where king John had been diplomatically most active in the years before 1215” (Vincent 2012: 62).

The impact of the church and the composite structure of states make it untenable to treat the political entities of Western and Central Europe as independent units in comparative analysis when

probing the advent of representative institutions (cf. Marongiu 1968: 53).⁵ This is what Van Zanden et al. (2012: 839) acknowledge when, having described the early convocation of representative institutions in Leon-Castile in 1188, they note that it is unclear if the adoption of representative institutions across the rest of Western and Central Europe is the result of the “copying of this institution, or of parallel evolution under similar circumstances” (see also Kagay 1988: 71).

On top of this comes the data scarcity. To see this, let us hone in on one of the earliest instances of representative institutions, namely the development of the *cortes* of Leon-Castile. There is a consensus in the literature that the first genuine representative institutions was called by king Alfonso IX in the state of Leon in 1188 (Marongiu 1968: 61-2; Van Zanden et al. 2012). Indeed, the first three instances of genuine representative institutions are normally identified in Leon, as Alfonso called similar meetings of the *cortes* in 1202 and 1208 (Procter 1980: 45). These assemblies earn the title because they are arguably the first documented instances where townsmen were called as representatives of municipal councils (that is, as proctors based on Roman Law). However, there is a lot of guesswork involved in establishing that the *cortes* of 1188 was the first one where this was the case. Christian rulers across the Iberian Peninsula had been convoking king’s councils (*curia*, vernacular *corte*, from which the plural *cortes*) throughout most of the 12th century (O’Callaghan 1975: 264-5, 287; Procter 1980: 1-18). Identifying the transition from *corte* to *cortes* requires the ability to determine whether townsmen arrived as genuine representatives, i.e., whether their participation was based on proctorial representation or whether they simply arrived in capacity of being important persons (notables).

⁵ Indeed, it is quite difficult to delimit the political units of the Middle Ages, which were still not genuinely characterized by territoriality (Poggi 1990), in a meaningful way in comparative analysis. Many analyses have used later nation states as the unit (e.g. Stasavage 2010), something that is highly problematical confronted with the shifting sands of medieval and early modern Europe (but see Abramson & Boix 2014).

The key problem here is that the royal archives of Leon-Castile have not survived for the medieval period (Procter 1980: 2). This means that information about assemblies must be gleaned from the documents left by groups partaking in assemblies – e.g. in episcopal or municipal archives – or from narrative chronicles by contemporaries. This creates a bias as we of course prone to emphasize well-recorded events more (see Procter 1980: e.g. 107-8; Marongiu 1968: 63). The main reason that the 1188-assembly has been identified as the first representative institution is that we have clear evidence that townsmen were summoned as representatives (on top of the nobles and high clergy that had long been called to the kings' councils).

There is some evidence, less well documented, that townsmen participated as representatives at a number of earlier assemblies in the Iberian realms, including one at Zaragoza (for the kingdom of Aragon) in 1164 (Kagay 1981: 39-42). Furthermore, townsmen seem to have been present at assemblies in Castile in 1169, 1188 and 1189 (O'Callaghan 1975: 266-7; 1989: 16; Procter 1980: 116-7; Cerda 2011: 62). But because the sources on the 12th century are so fragmentary – especially in Leon-Castile – it is difficult to know for sure. What we can say with a large degree of certainty is that a number of assemblies, including genuine representative institutions, are bound to have been ignored because the evidence has not survived. Contemporary chronicles thus mention several assemblies about which we cannot say more because no other documents concerning them have survived (see Procter 1980; Maddicott 2010). Finally, attesting when an assembly was genuinely representative is often a spurious business. As already mentioned, there is quite some evidence that the 1164 assembly in neighboring Aragon saw townsmen arriving as proctors (see Kagay 1981: 39-42). The problem here is that the evolution of representative institutions was a gradual development and that we therefore find many assemblies which belong in a grey zone between a king's council and a genuine *cortes*.

In other words, there is so much we do not know when we attempt to measure assemblies in large-n datasets. And so far, we have only touched upon the dependent variable, representative institutions. The problems with missing data is likely to be much more pronounced with respect to the explanatory factors and control variables that would need to enter convincing large-n analysis of the development of representative institutions – or for that matter the myriad of links in the causal chain we would want to know about in an in-depth qualitative analysis.

Towards a solution: A framework for congruence analysis

I have argued that to successfully analyze historical processes of political change – for instance the development of representative institutions – we need to deal with diffusion of institutions on the basis of relatively scarce data. My claim is that this can be done by employing congruence analysis in carefully selected cases. The paper proceeds by first describing the way theoretical claims can be transformed into within-case implications that can be assessed empirically and then by discussing criteria for case selection.

Guidelines for congruence analysis

Congruence analysis has been proposed as a middle-range method between in-depth qualitative analysis and large-n statistical analysis (Blatter & Blume 2008). However, there is little consensus in the literature about exactly how this is done (compare George & Bennett 2005 and Beach & Pedersen forthcoming). To illustrate, whereas many scholars equate this method with process tracing, others have used it to operationalize causal process observations which are then scored across a large number of cases in a way that has very little in common with in-depth process tracing (e.g. Haggard & Kaufmann 2012).

I follow Beach & Pedersen (forthcoming) in arguing that congruence analysis is based on within-case evidence but – as opposed to process tracing – is not premised on an explicit theorization of causal mechanisms. Blatter & Blume (2008, 320) describes the logic well when noting that congruence analysis “[f]ocuses on drawing inferences from the (non-)congruence of concrete observations with specified predictions from abstract theories to the relevance or relative strength of these theories for explaining/ understanding the case(s) under study”. In other words, congruence analysis is based on a more general operationalization of the implications of causal claims, which are then evaluated with evidence pertaining to a particular case or to several such cases. This can be understood as a way of getting closer to the causal mechanism than what is done in a standard correlational or frequentist analysis but based on implications that are still one step removed from what would characterize in-depth process tracing (more on this below).

Such an approach makes it possible to interrogate several competing theories by analyzing singular cases. This is best done via a focus on the choices of key actors. That is not to say that this kind of analysis only serves to test voluntarist theories based on the causal priority of actors’ choices. The point is that even structuralist theories have to deal in predictions about actors’ choices to be coherent and convincing (Hedström & Swedberg 1998). That is, structuralist theories have implications with respect to actors’ choices that can be corroborated or rejected on the basis of the (non-)congruence of specific observations.

To illustrate with respect to the example used below, in well-documented cases it is possible to score the aims of key actors in convoking medieval assemblies. If these cases are selected based on considerations about diffusion, as described below, such a procedure will allow us to adjudicate between several competing theories about the origins and development of representative institutions based on a large number of within-case observations.

We can once again place this in relief by relating it to the kind of evidence that would ideally go into an in-depth process tracing analysis. Recall that the proposed method is partly a solution to the problem of data scarcity. It follows from this that what can be registered are mostly the outcomes of actors' choices, not the considerations made by the actors in order to arrive at these choices or, for that matter, the iterative interactions between actors that made some choices more viable than others. In other words, the analysis centers on the eventual decision, not on the process leading up to this decision. This can be understood as a way of capturing key actors' aims in e.g. creating institutions or implementing particular policies. These aims are as close to the actors' choices as we can meaningfully get in a situation of scarce historical data where the objective is to include a large number of within-case observations. Insofar as more fine-grained data on this process had been available, we would probably opt for an in-depth qualitative analysis instead – or at least combine it with the proposed congruence analysis.

The logic of inference when analyzing these data can be understood as a mix of quantitative counting and qualitative interpreting. Regarding the former, the data makes it possible to compare counts of how often particular within-case instances – in the example below convocations of (pre-)parliaments – corroborate different theoretical perspectives. Regarding the latter, the data is so close to the empirical developments that it is possible to factor in the fact that some observations are more important than others for understanding the outcome in question. Recall in this connection the more general point that the strength of this evaluation of within-case evidence depends on the *certainty* and *uniqueness* of the deduced implications (Van Evera 1997, 31; Beach & Pedersen forthcoming). This point should shield us against using congruence analysis in a purely quantitative way, that is, by mechanical counting.

To elaborate, a more qualitative interpretation is required in two different respects. First, if the purpose is to interrogate several theories, it is not advisable to simply create a tournament of positive counts or tallies, considering that the certainty and uniqueness of the within-case implications for each theory might differ. Second, some historical periods – whether days, months, years, or decades – are more important than others because events intensify and outcomes crystallize (see Capoccia and Ziblatt 2010). Particular attention can be devoted to these historical “switch points” in congruence analysis whereas they would often be hidden to the view of those who operate on the cross-case level.

Here, we can list another advantage of the kind of analysis proposed in this paper. The dearth of historical data has tended to reinforce the unfortunate tendency for comparative historical scholarship to read history “backwards” rather than “forwards” (Capoccia and Ziblatt 2010: 939-942; Møller 2016). Lacking fine-grained observational data, scholars have tended to take later political developments as the points of departure, and ventured back in time to uncover their origins. The problem with this strategy is that the vantage point often determines what we see. Hence, by working backwards from large-scale developments we often miss surprising initial aspects of a given development, which are not on the radar of the social scientist with a preconceived explanation to test. The example that I use as a foil throughout the paper – the study of the origins of medieval representative institutions – is a good example of this (Møller 2016; but see Boucoyannis 2015). However, the fine-grained data used in the congruence analysis and the ability to interpret it in a qualitative way makes it much easier to identify surprising developments, which occurred relatively fast, in a forward-looking way.

Guidelines for case selection

How does this framework mitigate the problem of autocorrelation in a situation where scarce data makes it very difficult to control for diffusion? Here, I argue that we need to displace focus from

general patterns to the *first recorded incidences* of particular institutions. Honing in on first incidences removes not the causes of diffusion but diffusion itself. The point here is that a genuine imitation of – to return to the main example of this paper – representative institutions obviously could not occur until these institutions had come into being. Needless to say, prior processes of diffusion can still have affected the onset of the developments and the way they subsequently played out. But within-case analysis of the developments that first brought assemblies about should enable scholars to avoid at least some of the problems that arise from diffusion.

[Figure 2 about here]

One thing is to focus on first incidences. A further consideration concerns the number of cases subjected to congruence analysis. This is mostly a question of resources. More cases are obviously better because they increase our chances of identifying more general causal dynamics. However, doing the kind of congruence analysis proposed in this paper is very exacting. Hence, the pragmatic advice that can be given is to attempt to include more than one case but not to expand the case number beyond what is feasible with respect to empirical analysis. If observed, this formula means that we retain the possibility to generalize both within certain cases and across cases.

Empirical illustration

The paper proceeds by empirically illustrating the proposed framework for congruence analysis. This is done by first identifying relevant cases and then analyzing the causes for the development of representative institutions. The chosen example is based on Møller (2016).

As already mentioned, this example concerns the origins and development of medieval representative institutions. This subject has received much attention recently (e.g. Ertman 1997; Stasavage 2010; 2011; Blaydes & Chaney 2013; Abramson & Boix 2014; Stasavage 2016). To explain the birth and growth of representative institutions, two questions need to be answered (cf. Møller 2016). First, why did monarchs initially begin to convoke the assemblies of notables that everywhere in Latin Christendom preceded genuine representative institutions? Second, why did these assemblies – “pre-parliaments” in Marongiu’s (1968) terminology – develop into representative institutions which came to place constraints on monarchs?

These two questions concern a development that at first sight seems paradoxical. As historians never tire of emphasizing, the very prerogative to call assemblies was originally a regalian right and assemblies were a tool monarchs could use to project power (Kagay 1981: 360; Maddicott 2010: 141; O’Callaghan 1975: 439). Assemblies were, in Bisson’s (2009: 559) eloquent phrase, “implements of lordship” (see also Boucoyannis 2015). Nonetheless, the very reason for the great interest political scientist and economists put in these institutions is that they eventually came to constrain monarchs (Hintze 1975[1931]; Poggi 1978; Ertman 1997; Acemoglu et al. 2001; Stasavage 2010; 2011; Blaydes & Chaney 2013; Abramson & Boix 2014). So, why did monarchs create assemblies and why did these assemblies later spin out of their control and instead empower the elite-groups that confronted monarchs?

Case selection

To probe these questions, we first need to decide which historical cases to interrogate. Hewing back to the notion that we need to analyze first recorded incidences, we can start by noting that representative institutions first arose in Leon-Castile around 1200, shortly to be followed by Aragon-Catalonia and a

bit later by England (Hintze 1962[1930]; Marongiu 1968; Myers 1975; Van Zanden et al. 2012; Stasavage 2010).

Marongiu (1968, 76) long ago observed that these cases are particularly interesting for scholars probing the birth and early development of representative institutions. In fact, the development in these units appears to be near-simultaneous, even if scholars have attested representative institutions earliest in Leon-Castile. When reading historians' narrative accounts, we thus detect, first, that what Marongiu (1968) term pre-parliaments of feudal nobles were increasingly convoked in Leon-Castile, Aragon-Catalonia, and England from the 12th century onwards, second, that it is quite difficult to attest exactly when these assemblies deserve the title of genuine representative institutions (Proctor 1980; Kagay 1981; O'Callaghan 1989; Maddicott 2010). What is clear, however, is that these early cases were also among those where representative institutions first turned into genuine constraints on monarchs (e.g. Proctor 1980; Kagay 1981; O'Callaghan 1989; Maddicott 2010).

The Iberian and English cases are therefore the most relevant ones to analyze, based on the criteria for selecting first recorded instances discussed above. However, to be able to carry out a convincing congruence analysis, we obviously also need to take the presence or absence of valid historical data into consideration. It has already been pointed out that the royal archives of Leon-Castile have not come down to us for the medieval period. We are in a more fortunate situation with respect to the two other early instances, the Crown of Aragon and England. The *curia regis* rolls of England have survived as have the royal archives of the Crown of Aragon (Procter 1980: 2; Kagay 1981: 1). We therefore have relatively exhaustive information about whether medieval assemblies were summoned. Furthermore, this information also stipulates the groups partaking in assemblies, the reasons for convoking them, and the decisions arrived at. In this paper, I use the case of the Crown of Aragon to

illustrate the congruence method but elsewhere I have analyzed the English development in a similar way (Møller 2016).

Congruence analysis

To reiterate a point made above, to be causally convincing theories of the origins of representative institutions should have something to say about why key actors (principally monarchs) summoned assemblies. These theoretical considerations can be converted into observable implications about the kind of decisions key actors make. This can more precisely be understood as a way of capturing the aims of these actors, even if we are unable to get at the strategic considerations that have produced these aims.

The congruence analysis is based on attesting whether these implications can be observed empirically. These tallies can then be cross-tabulated with the decisions made at different assemblies, say, the extent to which monarchs granted concessions which would henceforth constrain them. Taken together, this procedure allows us to probe why monarchs first chose to call assemblies and why these assemblies later developed into institutions constraining the executive.

Let us see this in practice. To make matters simple, suppose that the entire body of work on the origins of representative institutions can be summarized in two competing theoretical perspectives.⁶ The first proposition is that representative institutions arose and consolidated themselves as permanent

⁶ This is not far from the actual situation, although we do not appreciate aspects of Stasavage's (2010) claim that there were geographical barriers for representation, meaning that smaller units – in spatial terms – would see more often convocations and stronger representative institutions or Boucoyannis's (2015) claim that state capacity was a prerequisite for representation. That said, Stasavage's claim shares similarities with the warfare and taxation perspective and Boucoyannis's claim shares similarities with the public order perspective, which underscores that the categorization is close to being exhaustive.

public institutions due to the twin factors of warfare and taxation (e.g. Schumpeter 1991[1917/1918]; Hintze 1962[1930]; Poggi 1978; Tilly 1991; Maddicott 2010; Stasavage 2016). In a nutshell, this argument goes, the intensification of geopolitical pressure in Western Europe that began in the late 12th century AD forced rulers to bargain with societal groups such as the nobility, the clergy, and townsmen to secure the wherewithal for warfare. Representative institutions provided the forum for doing this and the use of representation provided a way of securing credible commitment. The other side of the coin was that monarchs had to grant concessions to the groups delivering taxes or troops, including political prerogatives such as fixed convocations of representative institutions, veto over taxation, and veto over warfare.

The second proposition is that monarchs called representative institutions to secure public order (Procter 1980; Kagay 1981; Møller 2016). In a nutshell, in anarchic realms plagued by “private wars” between nobles (and sometimes implicating clergy or townsmen), representative institutions were used to make two kinds of commitments that would preempt such violence. First, to establish semi-voluntary land peace, where the parties committed themselves to sanctioning those who broke the oath. Second, to regulate the crucial matter of royal succession in order to forestall conflict breaking out over who was to inherit the throne (see Kokkonen & Sundell 2014).

Both causal claims are based on a similar scope condition, namely the existence of weak monarchs facing strong societal groups (Møller 2014; Stasavage 2016; but see Boucoyannis 2015). How can we investigate whether the development of representative institutions in the Crown of Aragon and England corroborates none, one or both of these perspectives? This can be done by operationalizing each claim with respect to observable implications that can be registered on a within-case level. Recall here the two questions that need answering: why did monarchs first call assemblies and why did these assemblies later on turn into constraints on monarchs? With respect to both

questions, the predictions of the two theoretical perspectives differ fundamentally. If the war-and-taxation theory is correct, we should observe that monarchs called assemblies to secure the wherewithal for warfare – tax and troops – and that monarchs gave concessions, including a strengthening of the assemblies, as a *quid-pro-quo*. If the public order theory is correct, monarchs called assemblies to enforce land peace and regulate succession and it was in this context they gave concessions, including a strengthening of the assemblies.

These implications make it possible to differentiate empirically between the theories. In terms of the uniqueness and certainty of these two sets of implications, we can start by noting that they are largely on par with each other. If it can be showed that a convocation was called to tax or because of external warfare, it supports the war-and-taxation theory to a high extent but it does not support the public order theory – and *vice versa* with succession and land peace. Note, however, that an assembly could be called for both kinds of purposes, which would support both theories. Particularly in this situation, a more qualitative interpretation of whether one of the two competing purposes trumps the other is called for. The same applies with respect to confined periods of stark political development, such as the “type switch (Poggi 1978) from pre-parliaments to parliaments and the periods where representative institutions won independent political prerogatives.

The Crown of Aragon, 1100-1327

I have gathered a dataset on the development of representative institutions in the Crown of Aragon, 1100-1327, which systematically registers these implications. The dataset is coded using a PhD dissertation by a historian, the sole aim of which is to describe all assemblies in the Crown of Aragon in the period 1064-1327, based on an extensive reading of primary sources (Kagay 1981; see Møller & Skaaning 2016). More precisely, for each convocation of a royal assembly in one of the four

constituent units of Aragon, Catalonia, Valencia, and Aragon-Catalonia(-Valencia), the dataset registers the following (see Møller 2016):

- 1) The place and date of the assembly as well as the monarch who called it.
- 2) Whether it was a representative institution (coded 1) or a pre-parliament (coded 0).
- 3) Whether each of the following groups was summoned: clergy, nobles, townsmen (coded as 1 if present, 0 if absent).
- 4) Whether any of following five prerogatives were granted by the monarch: fixed convocations, the right to audit expenditure, veto on declaring war, the right to adjudication, and the right to appoint royal officials (coded as 1 if granted, 0 if not granted).
- 5) Whether one or more of the following reasons for summoning the assembly applies: taxation (not related to coinage), coinage, land peace, war, and succession (coded as 1 if they apply, 0 if not).

This coding converts the narratives of historians into binary numbers which can be used to analyze within-case implications of causal claims. What do these data show about the purchase of the two competing theories of the advent of representative institutions?

We can start with some descriptives. Figure 3 shows a simple breakdown of assemblies in the four constituent units of the Crown of Aragon, sorted into pre-parliaments and genuine representative institutions. The shaded assemblies are representative institutions.

[Figure 3 about here]

We can make a simple observation based in this. While we find some early representative institutions, the genuine “type switch” (Poggi 1978) only occurs in the middle of the 13th century. By the end of this century, the shift is complete as representative institutions have replaced pre-parliaments. We now turn to the cross-tabulation of assemblies with the reasons for convoking them.

[Figure 4 about here]

In Figure 4, the shaded assemblies are those where each the four reasons for summoning applies. The figure supports another simple observation. Early assemblies were overwhelmingly summoned to deal with public order whereas warfare and taxation virtually never occasioned early assemblies. The extent to which early assemblies were convoked to establish land peace is especially striking. The data on the Crown of Aragon thus support a relatively simple first conclusion: The assemblies that gradually turned representative were born as a royal initiative to regulate public order. The differences between the counts are so massive that we need not go further into the (qualitative) importance of specific convocations here.

When we displace focus to this later transformation into representative institutions, the picture changes completely. Land peace fades into irrelevance in later phases whereas the geopolitical factors kick in. The war-and-taxation explanation of the birth of assemblies thus has much more traction if we exclusively focus on genuinely representative institutions. However, succession holds up as an important reason for convocations, even after pre-parliaments have metamorphosed into genuine

parliaments. We therefore need to go “under the hood” of the numbers to adjudicate between the two theories with respect to this latter development.

The first thing we can do here is to enlist more data. That is, we can cross-tabulate the reasons for summoning assemblies with the assemblies where various prerogatives were granted by monarchs (numbers not included in Figures 3 and 4). When inspecting the data in this way, it turns out that the granting of prerogatives overwhelmingly took place in assemblies where war and/or taxation were on the agenda. By far the most important concession to be granted by monarchs was “fixed convocations”, that is, the promise to call assemblies yearly, biannually or triennially. There are eight instances of this concession in the dataset. In three out of these eight instances, the monarch granted fixed convocations against the promise of taxation. More generally, across the coded concessions taxation emerges as the reason that most often sparked them, with war as the second most important reason (see Møller 2016).⁷

This conclusion is further corroborated when interpreting the data in a more qualitative way. Upon inspection, it is clear that the constitutional development in the Crown of Aragon occurred in three “bursts”: the periods 1217-1236, 1275-1293, and 1307-1325. These periods saw the highest frequency of convocations. 63 out of 107 assemblies in the full period 1100-1327 date to these years. Moreover, the first period was the one where representative institutions started to supplant pre-parliaments and the latter two periods where those were almost all constitutional concessions were granted. The period 1275-1293, in particular, is a transition period where the *corts* (of Catalonia) and the *cortes* (of Aragon) become permanent public institutions rather than institutions called at the whim of the ruler. This much can be established simply by scrutinizing the dataset. This information can then be matched with more qualitative historical sources on these three periods. What these sources show is

⁷ I here take “taxation” to include “coinage”, that is, the tax which the monarchs received against a promise not to debase the coinage.

that the first two periods in particular were dominated by warfare. Most importantly, the critical events in the period 1275-1293 correspond with a situation where the Crown of Aragon was genuinely endangered, facing a hostile coalition comprising France, Castile, The House of Anjou in Naples, and the pope. The major concessions in this period were granted against this backdrop, in an effort to enlist the nobles and townsmen of Aragon and Catalonia to fight for the imperiled monarchy as the French marched towards the Pyrenees.

In sum, then, both the “type switch” from pre-parliaments to genuine representative institutions and the later consolidation of these assemblies into permanent public institutions seem to owe to geopolitical factors, not attempts to establish public order. This is the second major conclusion that can be made based on the congruence analysis.

Strengths and weaknesses of congruence analysis

The proposed congruence analysis offers a number of strengths for social scientists working with historical developments in general and processes of political change in particular. Faced with relatively scarce data, it presents a way of getting close to the causal mechanisms across one or multiple cases, based on data that is relatively easy to code and that lends itself to replication. Vis-à-vis causal narratives or process tracing, the main strengths here are the generalizability of the findings, transparency, and the ability to avoid confirmation bias in the reading of historical sources (cf. Møller & Skaaning 2016). Vis-à-vis the prior large-n statistical analysis of the advent of representative institutions, the main strength concerns internal validity as the proposed method allows us to get much closer to actors’ choices than what would be possible in a frequentist cross-case study. On top of this, the method includes guidelines for case selection in the face of scarce historical data and historical diffusion of ideas and institutions.

The main weakness of the method concerns the lack of comparative control. The method is an attempt to solve the problem that it is often unfeasible to analyze more than a medium number of cases. This means that it does not rest on an explicit use of the logic of comparative control (Sartori 1991). To be sure, comparisons can be made between the cases that are included, say between the Crown of Aragon and England or between the constituent units of the Crown of Aragon (see Møller 2016). But the method makes the researcher look at the treatment without looking at control cases. Compared with large-n statistical analysis, it is therefore difficult to appreciate whether more general confounders operate.

Let us push a bit more at one of the key advantages of the method, namely the ability to secure transparency and replication. First, it is very easy to cross-check the data as this is based on explicit sources and because the very purpose is to register easily observable events. Second, this also means that – in so far as data is available – multiple cases can be coded in relatively consistent ways; that is, the problem of cross-case equivalence is mitigated. Third, as narrative data are converted into numbers reported in a dataset that is made public, other scholars can reanalyze the data in a way that is not possible with e.g. historical process tracing.

Conclusions

In historical studies we have no way of carrying out experimental manipulation. Instead, social scientists rely on the narrative evidence of historians. This situation presents a number of challenges (see Møller & Skaaning 2016). This paper can be seen as an attempt to deal with the problem that data is often too scarce to carry out in-depth historical analysis in individual cases (whether in the form of causal narratives or process tracing) and that historical diffusion often undermines large-n analysis of

multiple cases. Against this background, this paper has proposed a “middle-range” framework based on congruence analysis.

This framework includes considerations about case selection in the face of diffusion and about the kind of within-case evidence that allows scholars to analyze the causes of political change. The framework devises a systematic way of converting narrative historical descriptions into within-case binary observations. This conversion allows other scholars to replicate the analysis in a transparent way and to probe the validity of the scoring based on the sources referred to.

To illustrate the logic of the method, I applied it to probe a particular research question, namely the causes of the origins of political institutions. This instance is hugely important, it has attracted a lot of notice from scholars recently, and it seems a safe bet that these efforts will be intensified in the future (Stasavage 2016). However, the attempt to analyze the origins of representative institutions confronts scholars with a fundamental problem: diffusion of political institutions means that the notion of unit independence is tenuous and data is too scarce to probe causes based on in-depth qualitative analysis. This is a good example of a situation where the congruence framework has a competitive edge. Insofar as the purpose is to establish causal relationships, it seems much more promising to actually register the reasons for summoning assemblies than to rely on cross-case correlations, especially considering problems of diffusion and of lack of valid data for many medieval political units. As I have demonstrated, this makes it possible to test competing theories about the origins of representative institutions based on the earliest recorded instances of this development.

Finally, a few words on the applicability of the method. I have pitched the framework for congruence analysis as one that is particularly well suited to historical studies of political change. The key argument is that it presents a way of getting at the aims of political actors in situations that are well recorded, *in casu* monarchs’ objectives in calling royal assemblies and the decisions made at these

assemblies. However, the framework has a wider applicability for comparative historical analysis. Most obviously, it lends itself to the study of the historical origins of political institutions more generally and it can also be used to probe the causes of many other historical developments. Indeed, it can be applied to any situation where the aim is to assess the empirical purchase of a theory (or competing theories) of historical developments that contains explicit considerations about actors' choices but where scholars confront a dearth of historical data.

This equals saying that the method has a wider applicability than comparative historical analysis. For instance, the considerations about case selection are relevant whenever diffusion undermines unit independence. But the congruence analysis itself is only the preferable option when scholars face a situation of very scarce observational data. Otherwise, we would normally want to opt for either statistical analysis (if data is available for multiple cases) or in-depth qualitative analysis (if data is only available for a few cases or if the purpose is solely to get at the mechanisms). With many contemporary developments, where ample information exists and can be coded or perused by scholars, these methods therefore have a competitive edge. This is why the proposed method is particularly relevant for historical analysis where data is normally scarce.

Figures

Figure 1: Cross-spatial autocorrelation as a consequence of diffusion

Figure 2: Dealing with cross-spatial autocorrelation by analyzing first incidences

Figure 3: Tallies of assemblies of notables and representative institutions by decade in the constituent units of The Crown of Aragon, 1100–1327

Figure 4: Tallies of reasons for summoning assemblies, by decade, The Crown of Aragon, 1100–1327

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