



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Case Study Design and Grounded Theory: Theory Building in Qualitative Political Science Research**

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**ABSTRACT**

Qualitative Research in Political Science relies on its philosophical foundations and methodological designs. Case Study and Grounded theory are two prominent approaches in the field of Political Science. The present study made an epistemological and methodological comparison of case study and grounded theory methods and explores how case study design contributes in the field of political science research contrast to grounded theory. The aim of the research is to analyze and explores in-depth study of both methods. The study adopts Qualitative, comparative and interpretive methodology to study case study design and grounded theory. Data is collected through a systematic literature review of existing secondary sources such as book chapters and peer-reviewed journal articles on case study and grounded theory are analyzed. It concluded that while grounded theory is inductive and seeks to develop novel theories from raw data but case study design contributes through contextualized theorization either inductively or deductively. Comparative Case study design uncovers anomalies and generating new theories in political science research through employing process tracing and causal inference methods.

**Keywords:** Qualitative Research, Case Study, Grounded Theory, Political Science, Theory Building

**Introduction**

Qualitative Research is an approach that seeks to explore in-depth study of the human behavior, social processes and institutional dynamics through contextual and interpretive analysis. It is a technique and process used to gather data about social phenomena. Qualitative data refers to some collection of words, symbols, pictures, or other non-numeric records, materials, artifacts that are collected by a researcher and have relevance to the social group under study. The foundations of qualitative research have seen in various disciplines i.e sociology, anthropology and education. However, in the recent decades the importance of qualitative research has increased in the discipline of Political Science.

In qualitative political science research, the theory building is a central goal of the researchers. They often employ methodological strategies to explain political phenomena that are dependent, dynamic and shaped by cultural and institutional histories. It contributes the development of theoretical framework in the field of political science. Case study and grounded theory are the most widely adopted approaches in qualitative research.

With the increasing interest of intellectuals in researching social phenomena, the application of case study and grounded theory approach is growing rapidly. Grounded theory is effective in generating inductive and data driven insights whereas case study design offers a versatile framework for both inductive and deductive methods by placing political processes within their wider institutional and historical contexts. Though their

philosophical underpinnings, methods, and contributions to theory building are different, both approaches provide rigorous pathways for investigating political reality and contributes to conceptual and theory building. The aim of the study is to compare and contrast the methodological foundations and applications of case study design and grounded theory. This paper explores how case study designs contribute to theory-building in political science research comparison to grounded theory by analyzing their epistemological and methodological foundations and analytical practices of both methods.

## **Literature Review**

Scholarly literature highlights the case study and grounded theory contribution for theory building in qualitative research. Most of the study under literature review focus on political science research. The novel work on case study is written by Robert K. Yin. His contributions to case study techniques have been a remarkable work in enhancing the rigorous methodological study of case study design and legitimacy in social and political research. He utilizes systematic methodology that begins with theoretical grounds which guide the study design, data collection and data analysis. He proposed data collection sources such as documents, interviews and observations to employ case study methodology and guarantee construct validity via triangulation. The application of process tracing to enhance internal validity by revealing causal effect inside the case is a fundamental aspect of his theory. Moreover, he presents replication logic in multiple-case designs. This methodological and analytical study enables researchers to transcend descriptive narrative analysis and case study becomes an instrument for theory testing and development in the discipline of political science. (Yin, 2009)

Eisendhardt, (1989) discussed a systematic methodology for inductive theory building by utilizing multiple case study designs to produce innovative, testable and midrange ideas grounded in empirical evidence. He emphasizes the framework of cases should be based on theoretical sampling, data triangulation and constant comparison to ensure rigorous and generalization across cases. The richness and empirical robustness of qualitative research strengthens the case study design by encouraging the development of constructs that are both deeply grounded and analytically transferable. By combining the theoretical insights and cross case pattern, case study design foster the interpretation of political processes and organizational behavior

Glaser and Strauss, (2017) Presented grounded theory inductive approach for theory development in qualitative research approach. Researchers adopt grounded theory for research to investigate the topic without a predetermined idea. This approach is useful for the analysis of nascent and emerging phenomena, when existing theoretical frameworks fail to explain new dynamics in of political science.

Steenhuis and Bruijn, (2006) proposed a hybrid model for qualitative research. By integrating the open-ended, data-driven orientation of grounded theory with the analytical rigor of case study methodology, this model employs inductive means of data collection and analysis. This model facilitates structure development of theoretical categories rather than relying on pre-established concepts. It is useful for studying complex organizational and political events where existing theories are not sufficient for explanation.

Becker, (2012) Contributes in the field of political science by examining grounded theory approach to address the methodological challenges. It helps researchers to produce accurate, relevant and precise findings and better at explaining the issues rather than relying on the pre-existing theories. This shows that grounded theory can effectively address several methodological limitations in political science, including the field's frequent reliance on theory testing and its predominantly deductive approaches to theory generation.

## **Material and Methods**

This study employs a qualitative, comparative and interpretive research technique to analyze the contributions of case study design contrast to grounded theory within political science research in theory building. It further adopts a conceptual analysis methodology. Data for the study is collected through a systematic review of methodological literature include Book chapters and peer-reviewed journal articles on case study and grounded theory approach. The study conducts a thorough analysis of methodological critiques, theoretical discussions and comparative evaluations of qualitative research methodologies in political science. It includes empirical examples in political science research employing both case study and grounded theory methodologies. Data is analyzed through textual and conceptual analysis for better understanding of the readers.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Epistemological foundations of Case Study and Grounded Theory**

The philosophical foundations of case study research are based on interpretive and constructivist school of thought which emphasize the understanding of social phenomena in their real-world situations. Unlike positivist techniques that seek universal rules, case studies emphasize the in-depth and complexity of particular situations based on the experience of the individual cases. (Bhatta, 2018). A case study is a scientific investigation of real life phenomena, is usually used when the research focuses on a current case or problem. Such a case can be an individual, a group, an organization, an event, a problem, or an anomaly that researcher wants to investigate a how or why inquiry. Its primary goal is to investigate particular phenomena in great detail. (Ridder, 2017) In other words a case study is an intensive study about a person, a group of people or a unit, which is aimed to generalize over several units". (Gustafsson, 2017) The key contributor of case study method, Robert Yin highlights that case study design enable researchers to examine intricate phenomena where comprehension depends on contextual factors. Case studies are useful in political science for analyzing and examining political institutions, political behavior, elite decision-making processes and governance procedures (Yin, 2017)

In contrast grounded theory begins in the 1960s formulated by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss as a reaction to the prevalence of theory-testing methodologies in social science and the restrictions that its inventors saw in positivist research methodology. This method is evolved from the roots in symbolic interaction theory. (Tie., Birks, & Francis, 2019) This approach provides a methodological pathway from the systematic collection of data to the development of a comprehensive, multivariate conceptual theory.(Charmaz, 2015) Grounded theory is a qualitative research approach employed when the goal is to generate new theories directly from empirical evidence rather than to test pre-existing hypotheses. It is particularly valuable for investigating novel, complex, or understudied phenomena, where existing theoretical frameworks may be inadequate. The methodology is grounded in inductive reasoning and is characterized by systematic procedures such as continuous comparison, coding, and theoretical sampling. Grounded theory allow researcher to construct organic data from the field which minimizes the influence of prior assumptions and ensures that research findings are closely aligned with the empirical context. (Sharma, Kulshreshtha, & Bajpai, 2022)

### **When case study and grounded theory would use?**

When the primary research questions are of the why and how, the case study technique works very effectively, especially the researcher has little knowledge about the events under examination. Case studies are particularly suitable for novel or unfamiliar fields of study. They provide a way to produce insights in the early stages of research or when preexisting theories are insufficient. (Eisendhardt, 1989) In a number of important

research contexts, the case study research design works very well. It is frequently used when a researcher wants to verify the viability of pre-existing theoretical frameworks or create new ideas based on actual observation. Furthermore, it is helpful in determining past circumstances or elements that have contributed to or impact a certain phenomena. By providing a comprehensive grasp of causal linkages, case study design also allows researchers to evaluate the relative relevance of the contributing circumstances. Additionally, case study design plays a crucial role in determining the case's unique importance or wider relevance in relation to other possible cases. In political science research this method enjoyed a privileged position. Because in political science research the researcher cannot change or control important factors (like who wins an election or when a war starts) so instead of experiments researchers use case study design to compare situations where certain causes and results are present or missing. This helps them to understand complex political events. (Evera, 1997) For example a multiple-case study design is used to investigate the role of student unions in political mobilization across universities in Pakistan and India. By comparing how student bodies influenced campus politics in different federal structures, the research revealed how institutional autonomy, state control, and civil liberties affect youth-led political engagement in both countries.

In contrast, Grounded theory used for analyzing social, political and group dynamics, particularly in understudied situations where the external influences on people's lives are still unknown. (Goulding, 2002) By adopting systematic process such as open coding, continual comparison and theoretical sampling, grounded theory assists researchers in developing new ideas and categories. This theory enables researchers and practitioners to have a better understanding of participant's primary problems and respond with more accurate and relevant information. It enables researchers to interpret participants' meanings, actions and concerns by constructing theory grounded in data resulting in a more accurate portrayal of social reality. (Charmaz, 2015) For example, a grounded theory research on youth mobilization in Pakistan's leaderless political groups may uncover new concepts that are difficult for standard political theory to explain, such as movement based identity or informal digital leadership. Grounded theory is useful when existing theories are not enough or are too general to explain what is happening in real-life.

### **Methodological Foundations: Data Collection and Analysis for Case Study and Grounded Theory**

The implementation of a good case study depends upon the competence of the researcher. The methodological versatility of case study design makes it appropriate for covering a wide range of political science issues in detail. It can facilitate deductive theory-testing by applying established theories to novel or comparable cases. It supports inductive theories by producing new insights from observed political behavior. Data collection should be guided by a case study protocol. The protocol should consist of the following sections: first, a summary of the case study project; second, field procedures, including the use of various information sources and arrangements for access to them; and third, case study questions, or the considerations that the case study researcher should make when gathering data. (Rowley, 2002). A wide range of sources can be used to obtain data by using case study method such as analysis of internal and external documents, archives, interviews and observations with a strong emphasis on strategic case selection guided by theoretical interests or comparative logic such as most similar system design or most different system design. The use of two or more research methodologies into the study design is one of the hallmarks of a strong case study. Through triangulation, this methodological diversity makes it easier to examine the study topic more thoroughly and raises the validity of the research findings. By using a variety of strategies researchers may lower the possibility of biasness, lessen the chances of missing crucial information and strengthen the overall rigor and reliability of the case study. (Harrison, Birks, Franklin, & Mills, 2017). Mfinanga, Mrosso, and Bishibura, (2019) A good case study analysis based on the following principles: 1.The

analysis makes use of all of the relevant evidence 2. The analysis considers all of the major rival interpretations, and explores each of them in turn. 3. The analysis should address the most significant aspect of the case study. 4. The analysis should draw on the researcher's prior expert knowledge in the area of the case study but in an unbiased and objective manner.

On the other hand, data collection in grounded theory approach generally consists of repeated interaction and observation of the participants. It employs semi-structured in depth interviews and focus groups as common methods for data collection. (Mfinanga, Mrosso, & Bishibura, 2019) But data may be obtain through questionnaires, surveys, transcripts, letters, government reports, documents, grey literature, music, arte facts, videos, blogs and memos. Data collected from the sources will be transcribed and analyzed using coding and a constant comparison process, in accordance with the constructivist grounded theory approach. The data from interviews will be utilized to facilitate the integration and advancement of conceptual thinking and theory development. The objective of data collection and analysis is to identify and examine previous events and factors related to the phenomenon under investigation. (Sharma, Kulshreshtha, & Bajpai, 2022)

**Table 1**  
**Contrasting Characteristics of Case Study and Grounded Theory Approach**

Characteristics	Case Study	Grounded Theory
Focus	Developing an in-depth description and analysis of a case or multiple cases	Developing a theory grounded in data from the field
Type of problem best suited for design	Providing an in-depth understanding of a case or cases	Grounding a theory in the views of participants
Discipline background	Drawing from psychology, law, political science, medicine	Drawing from sociology
Unit of analysis	Studying an event, a program, an activity, more than one individual	Studying a process, action, or interaction involving many individuals
Data collection forms	Using multiple sources, such as interviews, observations, documents, artifacts	Using primarily interviews with 20 – 60 individuals
Data analysis strategies	Analyzing data through description of the case and themes of the case as well as cross-case themes	Analyzing data through open coding, axial coding, selective coding
Witten report	Developing a detailed analysis of one or more cases	Generating a theory illustrated in a figure

Source: Modified by Creswell (2007)

### Case Study Design and Theory-Building in Political Science Research

Case study design is a key methodological strategy in the field of political science research n qualitative research. It provides a distinctive and adaptable approach to thoroughly examine intricate political phenomena, allowing researchers to delineate events and reveal the mechanisms and processes that underpin them. This section examines how case study approaches facilitate theory-building in political science research.

Before discussing the theory building contribution of case study compare to grounded theory, it is important to discuss the types of case study designs. Case study design is divided into two categories: Single and comparative case study design. These two designs play an essential role in theory-building within political science. It offers in-depth, context-rich insights into political phenomena. A single case study design focuses on one case such as a political institution, elections, or political culture to explore the causal relationship, test or refine existing theories, or generate new knowledge. A comprehensive engagement and process tracing help to explain how and why particular events arise within specific contexts. In single case study design, researcher discovers new knowledge by

examining the root cause of phenomena. Case study findings allowing researchers to develop new theories, expand existing ones, or assess their validity and uncover trends and connections. (Willis, 2014)

In contrast comparative case study design involves the systematic comparison of two or more cases to identify patterns of similarity and difference. This design enhances the analytical leverage for theory construction by allowing researchers to evaluate the scope and conditions of theoretical propositions across contexts. (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017) Comparative case studies are especially useful for developing middle-range theories as they provide empirical richness with broader generalization of theory and help to uncover institutional, cultural, or historical variables that shape political outcomes across different settings.

### **Theory-Building: A Central Aim in Political Science Research**

The process of developing models or frameworks that explain the patterns of political behavior, institutional evolution, governance structures or policy framework is theory-building in the field of political science. The case study method helps the researchers to investigate in-depth, thick and rich contextual knowledge of social and political activity to describe the way in which case studies assist academics for analysis. A key feature of the case study method is its capacity to provide a thick description of case. In political science research, the ultimate goal of case study design is to explain how and why events occur than find the answer of what happened. For example, if a student of politics studying the development of democratic institutions in post-colonial states, a case study helps to reveal how colonial legacies, ethnic identities and political leadership interact to influence governance patterns. Detailed and context-sensitive analysis can help to refine existing theories or generate new, middle-range theories that are neither too abstract nor too narrow.

This part of research paper will discuss the mechanism through which case study design contributes in theory building in the field of Political Science in contrast to grounded.

**Thick Description of Political Contexts:** The case oriented research focus on thick description of events, norms, values, institutions and relationships that influence political life within a particular environment. The case study method enables academics to engage with the social and political contexts of a case. This immersion facilitates a contextual knowledge of political processes crucial for substantive theory development. This detailed explanation enables the students of political science to generating new variables, constructs and clarify ambiguous concepts. It enables researchers to create explanatory frameworks that are both internally coherent and sensitive to context-specific dynamics by integrating empirical observations into narratives that are culturally and historically situated. This helps to develop or improve mid range theories in political science.

By adopting process tracing mechanism in case study methods, the researcher draws descriptive and causal conclusions by analyzing key evidence often situated within a sequence of events over time. Because it involves a detailed case-specific investigation, process tracing contributes to a variety of research goals in case study design. These include: (a) identifying and systematically describing new political and social developments; (b) testing existing theories, generating alternative hypotheses, and evaluating new causal claims; (c) uncovering and understanding the underlying mechanisms that drive outcomes; and (d) offering an alternative to standard statistical methods for addressing complex issues such as reciprocal causality, false correlations, and selection bias. In this way process tracing enhances the explanatory power of small-N research designs particularly those relying on case comparison. It complements and strengthens causal inference where traditional quantitative methods may fall short especially through in-depth within-case analysis. (Collier, 2011)

**Comparative Case Studies and Theory Refinement:** As mentioned earlier, case study design lends itself to the multi-case study design. In political science research, the researcher selects Most Similar Systems Designs or Most Different Systems Design for the study. The usage of Most Similar Systems Design and Most Different Systems Design is essential in the development of political science research because it provides comprehensive comparison methodologies that allow researchers to investigate causal relationship and increase theoretical knowledge. These designs help to make sense of complicated political occurrences by determining which variables are most important in obtaining certain results. Rather than just documenting political events or institutions it helps to build, test and enhance hypotheses that explain why and how they occur. For example, by comparing governance structures in India and Pakistan we may see how federalism differs in two formally comparable but operationally diverse political systems. The comparison can provide insight into how institutional structure, political culture, and civil-military relations affect democratic system.

Most Different Systems Designs involve the cases that have different characteristics but outcomes are the same. The aim is to identify common variables in diverse context. For example if both a developed and a developing nation effectively implement anti-corruption reforms despite significant disparities in political and economic system, the researcher may presume that a common factor: such as the existence of autonomous anti-corruption agencies exerts a critical influence. This approach facilitates to identify the cause-and-effect relationships in different scenarios. It strengthens the reliability of political science theories and supports the outcomes. Thus, these designs not only evaluate ideas but also facilitate their modification or the creation of new theories. This helps build and improve political science over time by adding to the knowledge and understanding of how political systems work.

**Identifying concept and operationalisation:** Case study research contributes to concept formation and operationalisation. It helps to identify concepts by allowing researchers to explore how abstract political terms such as democracy, power, legitimacy, parliamentary, authoritarianism are understood and practiced within the context. . Identifying and operationalising these concepts, case studies explain the significance of these principles in practical contexts via careful observation and contextual analysis. They facilitate operationalisation by assisting researchers in selecting indicators that appropriately represent concepts within a specific context, so guaranteeing that measurement is both significant and pertinent to the case. (George, 2019)

**Testing Hypotheses in Real-World Settings:** One of the strengths of case study research design is its capacity to generate new hypotheses and discover previously unrecognized variables, especially when researchers engage with real-world, context-rich environments. Case studies significantly benefits in identifying novel factors and formulating hypotheses. Case study research is deeply rooted in immersive fieldwork, using methods such as archival research, interviews with participants or elites, and discussions with area experts or historians. By opting the methodologies the researcher's knowledge enhance and he always tries to finds out hidden social and political dynamics. It is also useful to explain specific processes that are often missed in surveys or secondary data analysis. By Such first-hand data tools, enable scholars to find out the answers of specific problems and procedures. For example, by using interview methodology a researcher might explores that informal power structures or traditional leadership play a more decisive role in policymaking than formal institutions insights that challenge established assumptions.

**Uncovering Anomalies and Generating New Theories:** Case study design often disclose new developments that existing theories fails to explain. Researchers focus on these unexpected findings, called anomalies. These anomalies show that existing theories may have gaps or missing parts. It helps to create new theories and knowledge. It is common that researcher pays attention to the things that are seems interesting or surprising for research.

It is not necessary that finding an anomaly means that the previous research is wrong. It might be showed that the research is yet needs to be completed or needs further refinement. The aim is to strengthen the theory by learning from these anomalies and using them as examples to refine and expand it and make it more accurate and reliable. Case study design allows researchers to examine complex political realities without being restricted by fixed assumptions and enables them to study these realities in detail.

### **Conclusion**

The study concludes that case study and grounded theory are powerful methodologies for addressing specific issues qualitative research. Both methods contribute in the field of political science. Grounded theory helps to generate new knowledge emerges directly from empirical observation rather than pre-existing theories, while case study design enables an in-depth and rich description of existing phenomena. Case studies ensure rich empirical grounding, while grounded theory ensures systematic conceptual development. By integrating both approaches, it strengthens the credibility, accuracy and originality of qualitative research in the field of political science.

To further improve research outcome, political science researcher integrates both methods rather than rely on theory testing approaches. Researchers use multiple sources in qualitative research such as interviews, observation, and focus group discussion archival records to ensure triangulation in research.

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