



Data, Measures and Methods

Publishing in French Political Science Journals: an Inventory of Methods and Sub-fields

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Introduction

In this essay, we undertake an inventory of the published articles in French political science journals since 1970, focusing on methodological preferences and sub-field coverage. Such an approach has been used to map the development of political science and its sub-fields in the United States. Thus, Prentice Hull (1999) addressed the evolution of comparative politics by systematically surveying the range and content of journal articles in the sub-field. Bennett *et al.* (2003) conducted a systematic review of the diversity of theories and methods in American Political Science journal articles as well as a survey of Political Science Department courses on methodology, in order to make inferences about the nature of the discipline as a whole. Keeler (2005) has mapped the evolution of European Union studies in the United States, using data drawn from several leading journals and dissertations published at major American universities.

In this study, we have reviewed all articles published in two major French journals: *Revue Française de Science Politique* (RFSP) and *Politix*.¹ Looking at these journals will allow us to have an empirical basis against which to evaluate trends in the political science in France in terms of the use of methods as well as sub-disciplinary emphasis. After a brief discussion of our methodology and coding procedures, we will analyze (a) the use of quantitative *vs* qualitative methods in each journal, and (b) coverage by sub-field. In the latter part of the essay, we will compare the evolution of French Political Science with that in the United States using the data collected by Bennett *et al.* (2003).

Method and Coding Procedures

French political science remains somewhat elusive to outsiders. While the language barrier is the first ready explanation, Andy Smith (1999) reminds



us that there is something else beyond the language question that renders French political science ‘a mystery’ to the Anglo-Saxon world. He explains that, despite the traffic of ideas as well as scholars themselves, there still remains very little work by French researchers published in Britain (and vice versa). While specifically referring to the case of public policy, Smith (1999) argues that the fundamental problem is epistemological in nature; that is, the different ways in which problems, methods and data interpretation are conceived in the two academic communities. The difference in perception of such questions is in large part due to the different history and traditions of the field, in France deeply rooted in sociology, law and history (Lequesne, 1994).

Nevertheless, books as well as journals permit access to the research output from a scholarly community. In the case of France, as remarked by Jean Leca (then President of the Association Française de Science Politique), in an interview conducted by Christophe Roux published in *European Political Science* in 2004, book production has been limited. Therefore, an alternative way to map the research production of French political science would be to examine the publication of journal articles in the field. In order to do this, it is important to consider scholarly journals that are devoted to the discipline in its entirety. As Garand and Giles (2003) points out, there exists a hierarchy of such journals, just as in the United States or Britain, and so it is important to include the most prominent in any such review.

Journals that are dedicated specifically to political science as a broad discipline are still relatively young in France with the exception of the RFSP, first published in 1951. Published by the *Fondation nationale des sciences politiques* (National Foundation of Political Science) and the *Association française de science politique* (French Political Science Association), this publication could be considered the counterpart of the American Political Science Review in the United States.² The stated aim of the RFSP is to advance not only the different methodological approaches that characterize French political science but also to represent a diversity of substantive work from both French and non-French scholars. The second journal in the generalist category is *Politix*. It was launched in 1987 by young researchers, who perceived a lack of publishing outlets for innovative research. Its primary (stated) goal is the promotion of intellectual debate in and outside the field, advancing interdisciplinary inquiry in the social sciences.

In this study, we have examined all articles published with the exception of research notes and book reviews from 1970 to 2004 for RFSP and 1988 to 2004 for *Politix*. The decision to begin the data series in 1970 reflects certain data gathering problems (missing volumes, incomplete series, etc.), although it is not too problematic given (a) the late development of the field in France, and (b) its consolidation in late 1980s (Lequesne, 1994; Croux, 2004).



In 'Comparative political science: an inventory and assessment since 1980s', Hull (1999) coded each article after careful review by marking the presence or absence of selected criteria based on a 20-item check-sheet. While we have proceeded in broadly the same manner, the coding scheme used is unique to this study. With a sample of 1,422 articles, each was categorized by journal, year, author(s) name(s), institution, institution country of origin, primary methodology used (quantitative, qualitative and mixed), and sub-field. The classification scheme uses the same standard employed by Garand and Giles (2003) in their survey of American Political Science journals. Furthermore, we followed Bennett *et al.* (2003) in the sub-division of quantitative methods into formal modelling, statistics, or case studies (although their sample only included empirical research, while ours includes all articles published in these two journals). Regarding qualitative methods, we distinguished between studies using primarily interviews, theoretical analysis, participant observation and a miscellaneous category that included archival research, newspapers, and discourse/content analysis. It follows that the mixed method category is a combination from both quantitative and qualitative classifications. Regarding sub-fields, these include Public Policy, Local Government, Political Sociology, International Relations, Comparative Politics, Political Economy, Political Theory, Gender Studies and 'state of the discipline articles'. Book reviews and research notes were excluded from the sample.³ Thus, we have classified 1,427 articles by method and sub-field enabling as to perform a time-series analysis from 1970 to 2004 for RFSP and 1988 to 2004 for Politix. Given the difference in the stated mission of each journal, the findings from both will be also compared.

Findings

Methods

If we consider the whole research output in terms of methodology employed, shown in Figure 1, there is a clear imbalance between qualitative and quantitative research, the former dominating the pages of both journals. These data suggest that RFSP remains somewhat more quantitatively oriented, with 34 per cent of all articles published using some form of quantitative analysis compared to 20 per cent in Politix. Mixed approaches account for very few of the articles published in either journal.

The overwhelming preference for qualitative studies is no doubt a legacy of the strong influences of history and law at the emergence of the field, and of sociology during its consolidation. However, despite the dominance of qualitative methods in absolute terms, if we look at trends in RFSP from 1970 to 2004 qualitative methods are not always so majoritarian (Figure 2).

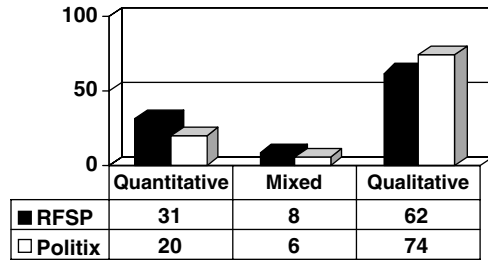


Figure 1 Methods in RFSP and Politix.

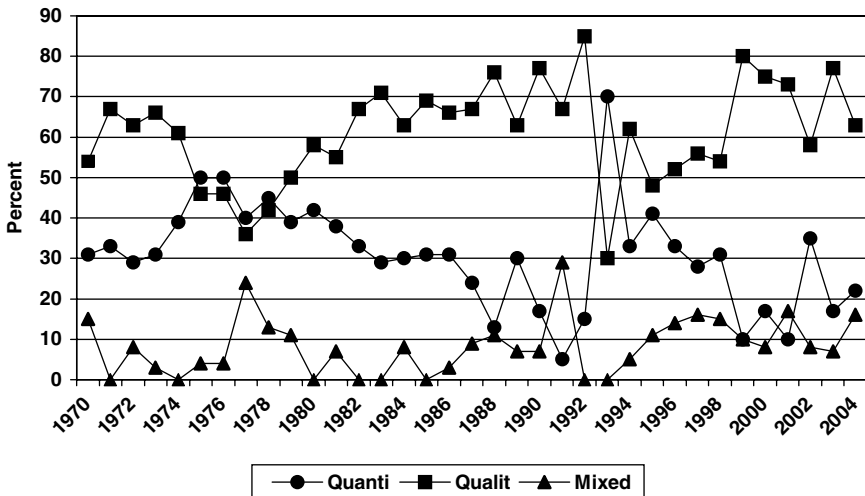


Figure 2 Methods in RFSP 1970–2004.

At two periods — the mid-1970s and the early 1990s — quantitative methods are equally present in the articles published in the pages of RFSP. It is interesting to note a disproportionate amount of mixed research during the earlier of these periods. These years also coincide with the so-called ‘consolidation period’ of the discipline. However, in 1993 there is a total inversion of the data accompanied by the lack of mixed techniques. After this time, qualitative methods regained their preponderance, while quantitative techniques remained fluctuating in the 10–30 per cent range.

Figure 3 shows the methodological orientation of articles published in Politix from 1988 to 2004; quantitative research is less prevalent than in RFSP. Moreover, mixed approaches account for a very low percentage except for in certain years (1993, 2000 and 2004).

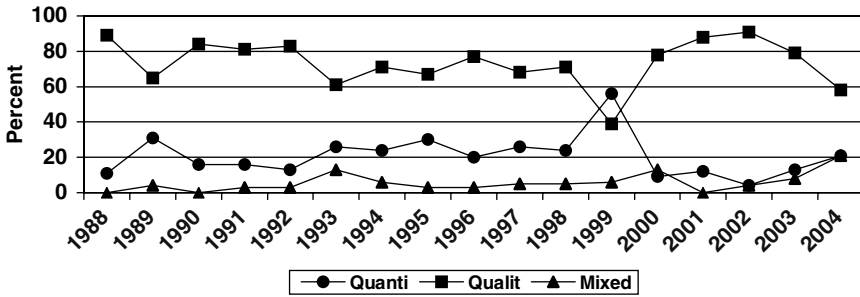


Figure 3 Methods in Politix 1988–2004.

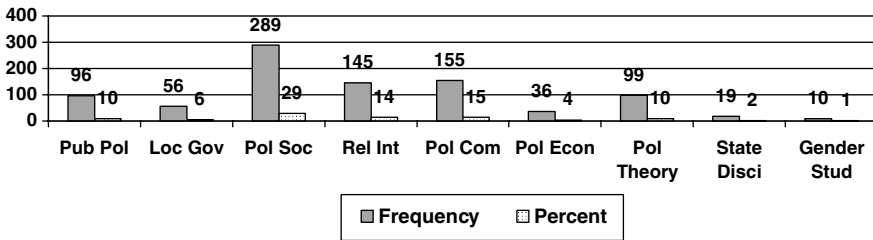


Figure 4 Sub-fields in RFSP: 1970–2004.

With the exception of a few years, qualitative techniques have dominated the research output of the journal, and the gap has increased in the last few years since 2000. If we compare the trends in RFSP and Politix, we can observe that RFSP is marked by quite large fluctuations over time, while in Politix the trends remain steady. We speculate that this represents the preferences of the editorial team of the latter, while RFSP may be more reflective of the diversity of French political science as a whole.

Sub-fields

One of RFSP’s stated objectives is to showcase the diversity of work from the French political science community by sub-field. Figure 4 shows that the largest number (289 articles, or 29 per cent of the sample, are in the sub-field of political sociology). This parallels the characterization of political science in France as being highly influenced, particularly in the last three decades, by sociology.

Second in the ranking is comparative politics (15 per cent) followed closely by International Relations (14 per cent). The comparative politics output seems

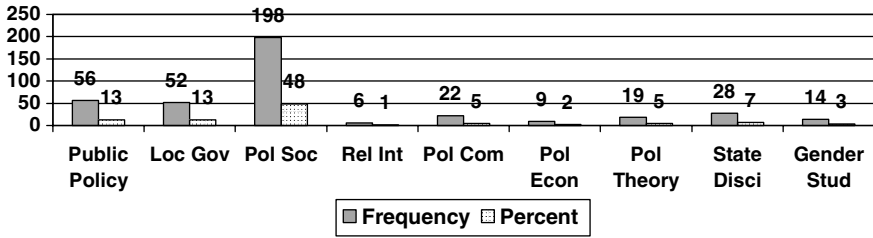


Figure 5 Sub-fields in Politix: 1986–2004.

highly reflective of the continued interest in area studies among many French scholars. As regard International Relations, several issues of the journal were almost entirely devoted to international topics when an important international event was taken place (e.g. Vietnam). Political theory and public policy both account for about 10 per cent of all articles published, while local government, political economy, gender studies and the ‘state of the discipline’ are all rather lower. It is interesting to see such a low percentage of articles focusing on local government, given that it is often considered something of a French trademark.

The sub-field data for Politix shown in Figure 5 have certain similarities with those of RFSP. For example, political sociology and public policy dominate, while political economy and gender studies are very weakly represented. On the other hand, local government accounts for twice the percentage of such articles in RFSP, and international relations and comparative politics are hardly present at all.

Methodology by sub-field

Very revealing is the division of methodology according to each sub-field. Figure 6 shows the percentage of articles that utilized either quantitative, qualitative or mixed techniques in RFSP. Interestingly, it is the sub-field of

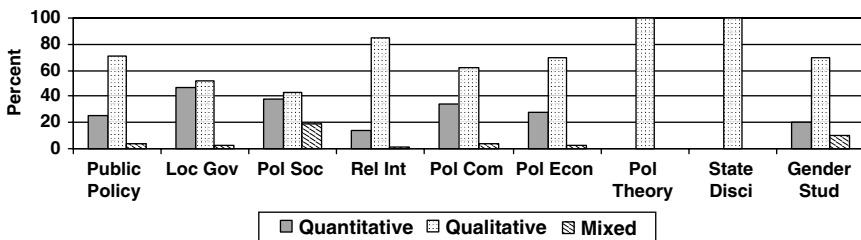


Figure 6 % of methods by sub-field in RFSP.

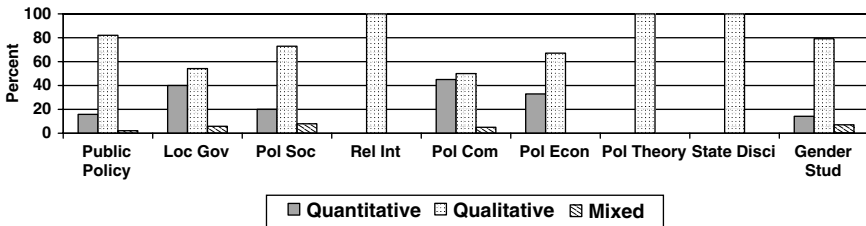


Figure 7 % of methods by sub-field in Politix.

local government that represents the highest number of cases utilizing quantitative methods. Closely second is political sociology, which also has a very high percentage of mixed cases. Comparative Politics has a level of quantitative articles right at the mean for the journal (34 per cent). International relations and gender studies show high levels of qualitative work (85 and 70 per cent, respectively), although articles using mixed methods have some currency in gender studies. Political theory and the ‘state of the discipline’ are, not unsurprisingly, purely qualitative. In the case of Politix the results were quite similar, (see Figure 7). An exception is the sub-field of political sociology which has just half of the percentage of quantitative articles in that sub-field in RFSP. The ratio of quantitative to qualitative articles for comparative politics is close to even, higher than RFSP.

Overall, the data show that there is a general convergence in the use of methodological techniques across the two journals. We hypothesize that the high number of articles dedicated to quantitative as well as mixed research techniques in political sociology could be explained due to the fact that electoral sociology is regarded as one of the stronger disciplines, the ‘forerunner of French Political Science’ and for its study a confluence between techniques is essential (Lequesne, 1994, 69).

French and American political science: comparing RFSP and APSR

In their article entitled ‘Do we preach what we practice? A survey of methods in Political Science Journals and Curricula’, Bennett *et al.* (2003) studied the methodology utilized in published articles, by sub-field over time (1965–2000). They concentrated on the American Political Science Review (APSR) because reputational studies have consistently ranked it in the United States as the leading journal in the discipline. Since the *Revue Française de Science Politique* is comparable in stature in France, a side-by-side comparison of the two would allow us to see the methodological differences in the discipline in the United States and France. Their survey showed that in no year did the number of qualitative articles published exceed 20 per cent, and some years there were



none at all (1985 and 2000). Clearly this is almost the inverse of the case of RFSP.

Nevertheless, the data presented thus far for RFSP include a number of articles that might be classified as non-empirical (political theory, state of the discipline, etc.) and which should thus be excluded from the analysis to ensure true comparability. Figure 8 presents the data for RFSP, adjusted to only include articles that meet the standard used by Bennett *et al.* (2003). In that study, articles employing statistical analysis predominate in the APSR from 1970 to 2000 (fluctuations from 60 per cent to 80 per cent except in early 1980s, where it briefly fell to 45 per cent). By contrast, articles using statistical analysis never surpassed the 25 per cent range of all empirical articles published in RFSP, and for many periods fell below 10 per cent. Nonetheless, it might be observed that statistical analysis finds more favour in the pages of RFSP than do case studies in APSR; so it cannot be said that quantification has been totally neglected in France. Nevertheless, formal modelling is almost imperceptible. One of Bennett *et al.*'s (2003) conclusions is that in actuality formal modelling is not as prevalent in the United States as is thought.

Nevue (2002) argued that the low levels of statistical analysis in French political science generally is due to the lack of influence of rational choice theory, as well as the small number of scholars that are internationally recognized for their skills in statistical analysis. Nevertheless, he adds that this lack of tradition in statistical analysis is at the same time a 'shield against number crunching objectivism', perhaps an advantage of the discipline as practiced in France.

French Political Science has been concerned recently with the internationalization of the discipline. Even though paradoxically this betrays a previous and a continuing ostracism, institutional efforts are being made to (re)integrate the field in the world community. A potential problem of the noticeable divergences in the use of quantitative methods in France may be that it hinders this internationalization. Nevertheless, the trends of the last few years show an increase in work based on quantitative research, although paradoxically at a

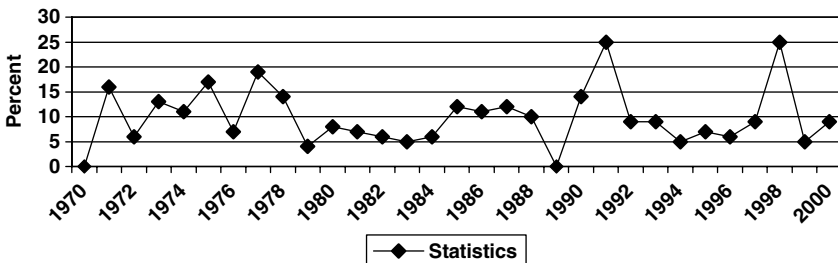


Figure 8 % of statistics in RFSP 1970–2000.



time when the perestroika movement has challenged the primacy of such methods in American Political Science. Leca has pointed out that one of the intrinsic strengths of French political science is its interdisciplinarity, which leaves it in a precarious position to be integrated with European or American political science, even more if the difference in language is taken into account (Croux, 2004). Thus, he argues that the new challenge for young French scholars is to find a way in which to reach a common understanding with foreign political science without losing the originality of the field. A convergence in the dominant methodologies still awaits.

Notes

- 1 These two journals were selected because of (a) their avowed policy to publish articles in all sub-fields of political science, and (b) their reputation among French scholars.
- 2 In comparison, the *American Political Science Review* was first published in 1906, while volume one of the *British Journal of Political Science* appeared in 1971.
- 3 While research notes could aid the evaluation of research production, the chances that those research notes will be later on published as articles once the study is finished are high and thus much of this may already be captured in the analysis of full articles.

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