

Which Approach to Select for Moderate Large-N Studies? On the Comparative Advantages of fsQCA and Regression Analysis

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Since Ragin’s seminal publication *Fuzzy-Set Social Science* in 2000, the number of publications using fuzzy-set analysis has been rapidly increasing. Like all configurational approaches, fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) is particularly apt for identifying necessary and/or sufficient (combinations) of conditions among an *intermediate* number of cases – say 10 to 50. Given its case-based logic – as opposed to a variables-based logic – having a not too large number of cases is clearly an advantage. Only with a limited number of cases is it (practically) possible to go back and forth between theory and evidence – one of the core elements of configurational approaches. While Berg-Schlosser et al. (2009: 4) define ‘intermediate-n’ quite broadly as ‘between 10 and 15 and 50 and 100 cases’ (my emphasis), the closer one moves to 100 cases, the harder it becomes to meet the criterion that ‘the cases dealt with are (or should be) well known (...)’ (Berg-Schlosser et al. 2009: 6).

With this in mind, this paper examines the advantages and disadvantages of fsQCA vis-à-vis regression analysis for studies that focus on a, so to speak, *moderate large-n*, that is to say, somewhere between 50 and 100 cases. I will argue that fsQCA has its merits for moderate large-n studies, but that conducting such an analysis – as opposed to an intermediate-n or large-n one – also comes at a price. In addition, the paper assesses to what extent combining the two approaches into one study makes sense. Given their different epistemological basis, such a discussion is warranted.

To illustrate the arguments made, the paper draws use of two recent studies employing fsQCA that have a moderately large number of cases. One of these focuses on the conditions under which so-called constitutional conflicts occur in East Central Europe, that are ‘instances of explicit disagreement about the interpretation, implementation, or modification of constitutional rules on the competencies of, and relations between, state institutions’ (De Raadt 2009: 4). The other study focuses on something completely differently, namely the conditions under which governments in Western democracies increase their spending on active labour market policies (Vis 2009). I re-analyze the studies’ findings using regression analysis, demonstrating that while both are of value, fsQCA is the preferred technique.

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NB: This paper will be a revised version of the paper I'll present at *Seminar on Comparative Methodology: Innovative Methods and Neglected Issues*, Centre for Welfare State Research, University of Southern Denmark Odense, 20-21 May 2010 (co-organized by Patrick Emmenegger).