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Cross-national comparisons in epistemic governance: analysis of parliamentary debates from eight countries

Valtteri Vähä-Savo

Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

ABSTRACT
Cross-national comparisons are a common instrument of epistemic governance in national parliaments. Their prevalence could be seen as a consequence of the emergence of the ‘competition state’ and the ‘rankings explosion’. However, what is actually done with cross-national comparisons has not been properly analysed. The study analyses almost 1000 parliamentary debates from 8 countries from the years 1994–2013. It builds a comprehensive categorisation of the functions of cross-national comparisons. Altogether, six categories were identified: competing nations; rational governance; morals of governance; modern condition; scaling, and picking apples and oranges. The findings indicate no significant increase in the number of comparisons during the studied period. More importantly, only about one third of the comparisons evoke a competitive framing. Cross-national comparisons are a stable feature of political rhetoric and their ubiquitous nature is due, precisely, to their malleability in defining political problems and principles of good governance outside a competitive framework.

KEYWORDS
Epistemic governance; international comparisons; rankings; competition state; global governance

Introduction
The image of a world composed of competing nation-states and the political rationale of trying to gain an edge over rival countries are so commonplace (Cammack, 2006) that one does not usually question the impetus for cross-national comparisons in political talk. The production and use of international rankings and governmental indicators are constantly increasing (Davis et al., 2012; Hood et al., 2008) and there has even been talk of a ‘rankings explosion’ (Gilbert, 2015; Shore & Wright, 2015) and ‘ratings craze’ (Snyder & Cooley, 2015). There are numerous think tanks, national agencies and international organisations specialising in the craft of producing international comparisons and policy advice (Cooley, 2015; Erkkilä & Piironen, 2014; Mahon & McBride, 2009; Stone, 2000, 2004). All this generates an abundance of comparative data which is available for national decision-makers and other actors involved in policy debates, who are always on the lookout for new political ammunition to use to their advantage.

What makes cross-national comparisons so popular in political debates? There is always a large variety of potential rhetorical strategies and devices available for speakers trying to...
persuade their audience. Some scholars have claimed that there has been an ongoing
global shift from welfare states to ‘competition states’ since the turn of 1970s and
tition state” is understood a state geared towards international competitiveness, then
there should be little doubt that many, if not most, contemporary states qualify for the
label’. According to him, competitiveness is considered almost as significant a priority
for state officials as national security. Even though it is not directly argued by the compe-
tition state scholars, it is easy to see how international competitiveness, as one of the
leading governmental rationales, might lead to an increasing demand for knowledge
that produces comparisons and rankings among competing nations. In addition, some
have suggested that various actors may find international rankings useful in pressuring
governments through ‘naming and shaming’ (Bauhr & Nasiritousi, 2012; Kelley &
Simmons, 2015).

However, as this study demonstrates, cross-national comparisons are not just about
situating countries in league tables based on their competitive standings. Along with
quantitative rankings, speakers can use qualitative comparisons that, among many
other things, establish moral guidelines for decision-makers. International comparisons
are malleable objects that play a central part in policy-deliberation in many countries.
Yet, there is surprisingly little knowledge of how exactly they are utilised in the politics
of policy-making: how are issues and arguments constructed, problematised and
justified by using them.

When cross-national comparisons are brought up in political rhetoric they are turned
into tools of *epistemic governance* (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2014). They are utilised in efforts
to affect people’s conceptions of what is happening in the world and what should be
considered desirable. This makes it important to analyse how international comparisons
are deployed in shaping people’s understanding of their surroundings and of the
actions that should be taken. It also raises the question, *what makes international com-
parisons such an appealing tool for justifying policies on so many political issues?* This
article unpacks the types of rhetorical uses that international comparisons lend them-
selves to.

Cross-national comparisons can be put to use by a wide variety of actors. However, if
one wants to get a comprehensive view of how they can be utilised in political talk,
one of the best places to start are national parliaments. Parliamentary debates are foun-
tains of rhetorical activity and, as earlier studies have shown (Alasuutari, 2016),
members of parliament (MPs) are typically very eager to take advantage of references
to the international community while trying to persuade their audience. These types of
references are clearly considered useful and effective in both developed and developing
countries across many different issues, but it remains unclear why. This article answers this
question by analysing transcripts of over 900 parliamentary debates from eight countries
over the time span of 20 years.

The article is organised as follows. First, previous literature and the theoretical approach
of the study are introduced by discussing scholarship on international rankings and epis-
temic governance. After that, the case study and the data and methods used will be pre-
sented. The following six sections will go through the findings of the analysis. In the
discussion section, the main results will be examined in the light of previous research,
and the most significant theoretical insights will be pointed out.


Indicators, rankings and epistemic governance

Most previous studies examining the governmental role of cross-national comparisons have centred around international rankings and indicators. The bulk of the studies has focused on the effects of rankings on higher education institutions and research, but they have also been examined in relation to national governments and cities. These studies usually examine rankings through one of the following three questions. First, there are studies which aim to evaluate whether given ranking methods are accurate and the results can be considered valid (e.g. Arndt, 2008; Bhuta, 2015; Giffinger et al., 2010). Secondly, some studies focus on the unintended side-effects of the rankings and on the often-innovative responses by the subjects of the rankings (e.g. Grewal et al., 2008; Hazelkorn, 2008, 2014; Locke, 2014; Osterloh & Frey, 2015). Typically, these try to analyse the various gaming strategies and ways of ‘playing to the test’ (Espeland & Sauder, 2007) that actors use to raise their standing in league tables. Thirdly, there are studies that strive to shed light on how the results of international rankings are used to govern others on the global playing field (e.g. Abdelal & Blyth, 2015; Grek, 2009; 2010; Löwenheim, 2008; Takayama, 2008). In many cases, these emphasise the role of international organisations, which produce rankings that are used to apply pressure on national governments through naming and shaming.

The last of the abovementioned approaches is closest to the one adopted in this paper. However, there are two main differences. This study does not only focus on rankings, but also analyses other types of cross-national comparisons. Secondly, this study does not try to unveil any actor or organisation as the one really pulling the strings and governing others. Rather, the focus is on epistemic governance: the constant strategic play of governance between a multitude of actors.

Epistemic governance (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2014, 2016) refers to governing people’s behaviour by influencing their perceptions of the world and their individual positions in it. One can try to affect the conduct of people by shaping the actor’s view of how the world is constituted and how they can pursue their individual interests within it. Whatever the circumstances, knowledge is always an essential aspect of governance. People’s perceptions, understandings and desires are key ingredients of government, even though they might not be the only ingredients. This persuasion work can be as much about hopes and fears as about facts and numbers. This epistemic aspect of governance permeates all forms of power whether they are regarded as ‘soft’ or ‘hard’; one can persuade equally by pointing at the statistics as one can by pointing at the ICBMs. Epistemic governance can be equally about tempting possibilities or about presumably pressing necessities.

In every attempt to convince others, one should be able to distinguish one or all the three objects of epistemic work: ontology of the environment, actor identifications and norms and ideals (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2014). Basically, these refer to definitions of what is happening in the world, how people should identify themselves and others, and what should be considered good and desirable. Although it is easy to make a clear distinction between different objects of epistemic work analytically, in rhetorical use they typically appear mixed together.

The case study

The dataset of the study consists of transcripts of parliamentary debates from eight countries. What makes parliamentary debates intriguing is their function as a public
forum in which politicians try to justify their views in morally acceptable and convincing ways for a wide variety of listeners (Alasuutari, 2016, pp. 99–100). Even if MPs do not feel that they can change the minds of their opponents, they can still feel the need to sell their case to a third party non-interactive audience (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2013, p. 233) such as stakeholders directly involved in the issue at hand, the people in their constituency and the general national – or even international – audience.

There are of course differences in how parliaments operate in different countries and in how much the MPs are dependent on the support and approval of the voters. However, it is noteworthy that even in countries that can be considered weak democracies and where the views of the national constituency do not necessarily have a great significance, parliamentary debates are nonetheless carried out on regular basis and recorded for everyone to see. Hence, giving justifications for policies in the form of public parliamentary debates is considered an important institution, even if it can appear as an empty ritual in some countries. This ritual is not discarded even in many countries that could be considered dictatorships or oligarchies. One rationale for holding these events can be, precisely, that they are addressed to a wide audience. The key audience for some justifications may be, for example, foreign governments or international organisations – rather than the citizens of the country. Even if the debates are held just for show, someone is apparently presumed to expect or value the show or to gain something from it.

From the epistemological viewpoint of the study, it is never possible to determine with certainty whether an individual is using a rhetorical strategy wittingly or not, as we cannot analyse the intentions of the speakers through their statements. Actors can be considered to be so immersed in their own culture that they may not always be conscious of the rhetorical choices they make, when giving justifications that they hope will resonate with the audience. They may feel that they are simply stating the facts or just speaking their mind. Regardless of the intentions and thoughts of the speakers, when actors formulate arguments and justifications, their statements can be analysed as rhetorical moves that aim to persuade the audience and that can be unpacked by a researcher. The statements have effects and they can be considered to do things (construct things, identities and images of the world, etc.) that are strategically beneficial for the speaker’s argument, even if we cannot be sure how cunning and calculating the speaker actually is. The same epistemological reservation has to be extended even to MPs, who can be considered to be quite calculating speakers.

MPs are, indeed, experts in political rhetoric. They build their careers by formulating arguments that resonate with as many people as possible. For this reason, parliamentary debates often seem like national political debates in a condensed form: every argument deemed politically useful is likely to be voiced. Even if certain justifications are unlikely to convince members in the opposition, it may be worth mentioning them if they please some section of the voters without angering others. Parliamentary debates are ideal research material for studying how actors try to convince others of what is the right and rational thing to do.

The dataset is comprised of ‘second readings’ of bills or ‘draft laws’ from Australia, Canada, Finland, Kenya, Trinidad & Tobago, Uganda, the United Kingdom and the USA. A sample of bills was collected from all of the eight countries. The sampling technique applied to this dataset can be defined as stratified random sampling: the cases selected are divided as equitably as possible across years and policy areas. Ten policy areas were
selected for the study: civic policy \((N=104)\), consumer policy \((N=82)\), crime policy \((N=87)\), education policy \((N=81)\), environmental policy \((N=96)\), fiscal policy \((N=102)\), foreign and security policy \((N=91)\), health policy \((N=84)\), science and technology policy \((N=93)\), and social policy \((N=134)\).

These eight countries were selected for the substantial variation in their economy, level of technological development, institutionalisation of democracy, and difference in cultural and historical background. However, the group of countries should not be considered globally representative. The sample is limited geographically, all of the countries are majority-Christian and many of them could be considered ‘Anglo-Saxon’ countries. Some of the countries have strong historical links with the UK due to being former British colonies and six of the countries are members of the Commonwealth. The variety of countries selected for the study is partly limited by the language proficiency of the researcher. The number of debates collected from each country is roughly 120 and they are comprised from between the years 1994–2013. Only 117 debates were collected from Canada and 119 debates from Australia, Finland and Kenya. The average number of debates per year is 48. The highest number of debates per year is 56 both in 1994 and 2009 and the lowest number of debates per year is 39 in 1998. Altogether 954 debates were analysed. While there are small differences between the countries in how many debates are collected from each year, this should not affect the findings of the study in a significant way. The study does not aim to draw comparisons between countries, but to analyse the rhetorical strategies that cut across national borders.

To analyse how cross-national comparisons are used in policy debates, all the statements invoking cross-national comparisons in the data were collected for further analysis. A comprehensive list of search words was constructed to identify all the cases. This was done by carrying out a close reading of over 150 documents (over 5% of the data) included in the dataset and by identifying words and phrases that usually appear together with cross-national comparisons. These words and phrases were used to comb through the rest of the data. This way all the comparisons could be subjected to in-depth qualitative analysis utilising the methodological tool box of discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003; Wood & Kroger, 2000) and rhetorical analysis (Billig, 1996; Perelman, 1982). The analysis looked at how the comparisons were utilised as parts of justifications by the MPs in order give weight to their statements and to win the audience over. The focus was on the way the comparisons were used to support the arguments made by the speakers by helping to construct images of the social world, of the actors inhabiting it and of appropriate courses of action. The analysis involved constructing a categorisation of the types of comparisons found in the data. The categorisation was refined throughout the process. In the end, the study distinguished six categories of cross-national comparisons, based on their function in the justifications. All of the comparisons found in the data were then coded according to the categorisation. The following sections will go over these categories, how they were used rhetorically by the MPs and how the comparisons were distributed among the categories.

**Competing nations – constructing and assessing national teams**

Cross-national comparisons, by their very nature, posit an image of a world comprised of separate, yet comparable nation-states. This image can be used by MPs to construct
arguments and narratives about the national team, which is in competition with its neighbours. In this way, the audience is led to consider the ramifications of a proposed legislation with regards to the competitive edge of the country. It is the questions of ‘who we are’ and ‘how do we compare with others’ that make the bulk of the arguments using cross-national comparisons. Consider the following quote from the United States:

Secondly, competitiveness, absolutely, top in communications, top in medical technologies. Take the Department of Commerce’s list of the 18 top technologies, and we are the highest quality producer and the lowest cost producer in two-thirds of them. So, yes, we are driving the economic forces of America into the international market, but we must do more. We must help our companies compete. (U.S. Congressional Record, 2004, H7756)

The competitive relationship with other nations serves as a justification for reforming current practices. Whether one is leading or lagging behind, the situation can be presented as one that demands action; a complacent leader of today might be the laggard of tomorrow. Comparisons also offer a way to collectivise and nationalise issues. They can be used to make the problems of different stakeholders look like ‘our’ collective national dilemmas. Cross-national comparisons enable the representatives of different stakeholders to speak in the name of the nation.

The competition between nation-states is not always portrayed as being just about money or strength. A resolution on pretty much any bill can be made to concern the honour and reputation of a nation. Cross-national comparisons can be used to depict images of competition for achievements in the fields of, for example, culture and science. Comparisons can also be used to show that the nation is remarkable or unique in some sense. Examples of this rhetorical tactic can be found in the following excerpts from the United States and Canada:

Mr. Speaker, it is very important for us to realize how tough this is; but the United States of America is a very unique Nation, and we stand for freedom throughout the world. It is important for us to stand up now. (U.S. Congressional Record, 2002a, p. H7186)

Canada can be that country. We have proven through the land mines issue that we have the moral suasive power to do this. […] We have the personnel in the Department of Foreign Affairs and we have an international reputation that is virtually unrivalled. We also have the security aspect and are involved with people from the Pacific Rim to Europe and to points south. We are in an enviable position to do that. (Parliament of Canada, 1997, p. 1254)

The gist of the argument in both cases is that the nation has some unique capabilities and distinctive features. As much as these characteristics may bring glory to the nation, they also compel the decision-makers to act in a certain way: if we want to consider ourselves unique in this regard and be proud of ourselves we should take the proposed action. Every citizen can share in the greatness of the country, but only if they support a bill that is said to be in line with what makes the nation unique and respected.

Finally, cross-national comparisons can be used to construct the very criteria for assessing the achievements of a nation. This is especially typical in cases where it is hard to define absolute measures for success and failure. Consider the following quote from the Australian parliament:

The claims by the former Leader of the Opposition and the member for Lalor that John Howard and the government are destroying Medicare are hyperbole and are not backed
up by any examination of the facts. Australia’s health remains at the front rank internationally. Amongst developed countries, only Japan, Sweden and Switzerland have longer healthy life expectancies than we do. (Parliament of Australia, 2003, p. 23792)

It can be hard to define what should be the optimal expectancy for the healthy life of an individual. However, this can be done rhetorically when cross-national comparisons are put to work; the results are good if they are on the same level, or even better than in other countries. Following this logic, a system that provides an average life expectancy of 15 years might be considered an astonishing achievement so long as other nations only manage up to 13 years. Using comparisons to define the criteria for success also makes it possible for MPs to paint very different pictures of national achievements based on which countries they choose as the reference group in any particular case.

Competitive comparisons between nation-states are abundant in our data. Overall, there were 725 statements invoking them. The number shows that MPs consider them a very effective tool. This finding lends support to the hypothesis that the emergence of a competitive state as a guiding governmental rationale might explain the prevalence of cross-national comparisons in policy debates. However, the data also shows that the frequency of cross-national comparisons in debates has not changed significantly between 1994 and 2013. They have been used steadily throughout the period in all policy areas. Their attractiveness has to be explained in a way that does not rely on a theory of cultural shift in political thought. This point is further supported by the fact that competitive comparisons comprise only 36 percent of all the cross-national comparisons found in the data.

In addition, their average amount per debate has not changed significantly over the years, as we can see from Figure 1.

Both figures fluctuate a bit during the years, but there is no clear trend in either direction. Comparative comparisons and all cross-national comparisons are used quite steadily from one year to the next.

The question then becomes what is done with the majority of cross-national comparisons, which are not based on a competitive framing? The analysis found five additional categories of comparisons, which are discussed in the next sections. While none of them is used as frequently as competitive comparisons, together they comprise 64 percent of all cross-national comparisons, and help to explain the prevalence of these comparisons in political talk. It is also worth noting that all of the six types of comparisons are used in all of the studied countries, as we can see from Table 1.

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**Figure 1.** The average amount of all comparisons and of competitive comparisons per parliamentary debate 1994–2013.
One can also see some differences between the countries. For example, the Members of Congress in the United States rely heavily on competitive comparisons. It is the one country where competitive rhetoric appears to be very dominant with regard to cross-national comparisons. Then again, the average number of competitive comparisons per debate has remained stable during the studied period in the US. Hence, there does not seem to be a trend toward increasing emphasis on competitive comparisons even there. However, as the aim of this study is not to make cross-national comparisons, what is significant here is that the same categories of comparisons are found across the board.

Similar point can be made about the distribution of types of comparisons among the ten policy areas included in the study, as we can see in Table 2.

As the table shows, there are some differences in the figures between the policy areas. Nonetheless, from the viewpoint of this study, the significant thing is that all of the categories of comparisons examined in the following sections are used in all of the policy areas.

### Rational governance – defining effective and realistic policy-making

Cross-national comparisons can also be used to support or disqualify the rationality of a proposed reform, as is done in 30.8 percent (N = 621) of the cases in the data. This can simply mean that one assesses the rationality of a reform on the basis of whether others are doing the same. The idea is that if other actors that are generally considered rational actors are doing something, it is probably a smart course of action. An argument for implementing a new policy can be backed up simply by showing that other level-headed nations have spent vast sums of money or used a lot of effort to implement a similar policy. We can see this type of effort in the following quote from Trinidad & Tobago:

> The reason we felt that we would go with the UK model is that there are a lot of case laws on it. There is a plethora of decisions on what constitutes driving under the influence and therefore we felt that if we more or less adopted the UK model, we would have the benefit of a lot of judicial reasoning and thought on this matter which has taken place over the many years that this has been in existence in the United Kingdom and that is basically it. (Parliament of Trinidad & Tobago, 2006, p 592)

Other countries can also be used as proof that a causal relationship either exists or does not exist between a given policy and expected results. One can use cross-national...
Comparisons to demonstrate that a given policy inevitably leads to specific outcomes – be they good or bad. Consider this quote from Canadian Commons Debate on the student financial assistance act of 1994:

Student leaders in Canada have stridently opposed any increases as unfair to lower income students and a deterrent toward attending school. However, we believe that under our ICR program the opposite would be the case. The argument of a deterrent factor simply fails to stand up to the facts. If these were the deterrents to schooling they claim they are, student leaders must have difficulty explaining why Canada with its fee structure has twice the percentage of university age people in school compared with France where fees are zero, or why the United States with the highest fees also has the highest percentage of its population in universities among the leading industrial countries. (Parliament of Canada, 1994, p 1130)

In this case, the speaker is using cross-national comparisons to argue that an assumed negative relationship between two phenomena is actually a positive one or that there is no causal relationship at all. If an MP is able to convince the audience of the nature or existence of causal relationships that are central to a proposed bill, it can have a tremendous impact on the perceived rationality of the reform.

Finally, one can use cross-national comparisons to delimit the possibilities of governmental action. One can use comparisons to draw out the horizon of possibilities available for a government in a given situation. One can make the case that, if comparable countries have been able to implement certain reforms, we should be able to do the same. Or comparisons can be used to demonstrate that no country in the world is able to meet certain objectives. The horizon of possibilities is always open for negotiation. With the right tools one can make anything subject to political deliberation or one can depoliticise any issue and make it seem as a factual state of affairs that cannot be tampered with, as seen in the following quotes from the UK and Uganda:

The hon. Member for South Thanet said that he knew of no engineer who would say that the Government could achieve 20 per cent. of our energy from renewables by 2020. In Denmark, however, 25 to 28 per cent. of the energy supply is from renewables, and that has been achieved in less than 17 years—the period between now and 2020. I confess that I cannot name an engineer who would support my case, but, if it has been done in Denmark, I cannot see why it cannot be done here. (UK Parliament, 2003, p. 616)

Finally, Mr Speaker, in as far as degrees and other certificates are concerned it is not possible to make the degrees the same level. Even in the United States, you find that the degrees from

### Table 2. Types of comparisons within different policy areas. The mean value of hits per debate is shown in brackets.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Competition</th>
<th>Rationality</th>
<th>Morality</th>
<th>Modern</th>
<th>Scaling</th>
<th>Similarity</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Civic</td>
<td>40 (0.38)</td>
<td>47 (0.45)</td>
<td>49 (0.47)</td>
<td>11 (0.11)</td>
<td>2 (0.03)</td>
<td>3 (0.02)</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer</td>
<td>60 (0.73)</td>
<td>26 (0.32)</td>
<td>21 (0.26)</td>
<td>12 (0.15)</td>
<td>2 (0.01)</td>
<td>1 (0.02)</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>39 (0.45)</td>
<td>64 (0.74)</td>
<td>30 (0.34)</td>
<td>18 (0.21)</td>
<td>5 (0.07)</td>
<td>6 (0.06)</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>83 (1.02)</td>
<td>52 (0.64)</td>
<td>22 (0.27)</td>
<td>7 (0.09)</td>
<td>1 (0.02)</td>
<td>2 (0.01)</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>65 (0.68)</td>
<td>82 (0.85)</td>
<td>32 (0.33)</td>
<td>19 (0.20)</td>
<td>1 (0.07)</td>
<td>7 (0.01)</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiscal</td>
<td>93 (0.91)</td>
<td>95 (0.93)</td>
<td>53 (0.52)</td>
<td>17 (0.17)</td>
<td>4 (0.04)</td>
<td>4 (0.04)</td>
<td>266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign &amp; security</td>
<td>100 (1.10)</td>
<td>79 (0.87)</td>
<td>66 (0.73)</td>
<td>19 (0.21)</td>
<td>6 (0.16)</td>
<td>15 (0.07)</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>53 (0.63)</td>
<td>37 (0.44)</td>
<td>31 (0.37)</td>
<td>12 (0.14)</td>
<td>2 (0.05)</td>
<td>4 (0.02)</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science &amp; technology</td>
<td>117 (1.26)</td>
<td>91 (0.98)</td>
<td>67 (0.72)</td>
<td>29 (0.31)</td>
<td>8 (0.05)</td>
<td>5 (0.09)</td>
<td>317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>75 (0.56)</td>
<td>48 (0.36)</td>
<td>50 (0.37)</td>
<td>24 (0.18)</td>
<td>3 (0.01)</td>
<td>1 (0.02)</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (N = 954)</td>
<td>725 (0.76)</td>
<td>621 (0.65)</td>
<td>421 (0.44)</td>
<td>168 (0.18)</td>
<td>48 (0.05)</td>
<td>34 (0.04)</td>
<td>2017</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
one university are slightly different from the other. (Parliament of the Republic of Uganda, 2003, p. 18)

A large proportion of political debates deal with questions concerning the delimitation of possibilities and with asserting the ‘undeniable facts’ of the situation. By affecting people’s conceptions of the horizon of possibilities, cross-national comparisons can become tightly entwined with ideas concerning political agency. If there is no room for deliberation between various courses of action, there is no room for agency and responsibility. In this respect, cross-national comparisons can be used to affect profound conceptions regarding the limits of democratic decision-making and political agency.

The morals of governance – defining decent nation-state behaviour

Being a unique nation is typically presented as a positive trait, but it can be easily transformed into a negative quality when the discussion turns to questions of morality. One way to use cross-national comparisons is to evoke them when defining appropriate state behaviour. These comparisons comprise almost 21 percent \((N = 421)\) of all the cross-national comparisons in the data. In this context it is usually the ‘typical’ and the ‘common’ which is held in high regard. What is considered acceptable for a nation-state or a government is often defined by evoking comparisons to the community of nations.

One way to do this is to claim certain laws and regulations to be morally justified if other countries have previously established similar measures. This type of justification is typical in cases where the state might be considered to step out of line and infringe on the rights of citizens or undermine traditional political principles. We can see an example of justifying through a comparative precedent in the following quote from the Canadian parliament:

I want to assure hon. members that we are proposing a proven model for regulating telemarketing through this bill. It is similar to the model already in place in the United States of America. In the event that some colleagues want to say that this infringes too much on business being able to work, it in fact exists in another jurisdiction. (Parliament of Canada, 2005, p. 1330)

The rhetorical strength of this type of comparison can rely on the number of other countries that can be used as examples of something being a normal and well-established thing for governments to do. But it can also rely on the quality of the examples. The argument quoted above, for example, might not work as well if the United States was replaced by China or Iran, because they are not usually considered to be shining examples of democratic government by the international community.

Moral arguments drawing on cross-national comparisons can also work the other way around. Consider the following excerpt from a parliamentary debate in the United States:

No other country in the world at this time is known to use the organs of prisoners except for China and to take them in an involuntary fashion. They appear to have turned a chilling execution of thousands of people who did not even commit capital crimes into a multimillion dollar black market of a kind the world has never seen. (U.S. Congressional Record, 1997, p. H10070)

In this instance, the atrocities conducted by the government of China are emphasised by making it clear that no other nation has sunk this low before, even though people are familiar with many inhumane political regimes in the history of the world. If there were more
countries doing the same, it might be possible to make it seem more normal and it could be seen as legitimate, or at least understandable, behaviour for a nation-state.

The rules of proper behaviour for a state are constantly under negotiation and, in many cases, it is the moves made by other states that are turned rhetorically into yardsticks for appropriate behaviour. This is evident, for example, in the well-known debates concerning the acceptability of electronic surveillance of citizens by the government following the implementation of the Patriot Act in the United States. Another illustrative point on the malleable moral criteria for states can be seen in the following extract from Canada:

As for subsidies, it must be understood that Canada, which is supposed to be a major player on the world stage when it comes to agriculture and agrifood, has been described—and I am not the one who said it—by many associations, federations and farmers’ unions as a boy scout compared to other countries that constantly give huge subsidies to their farmers. This is definitely the case in the European Union and the Unites States. (Parliament of Canada, 2008, p. 1720)

What the statement is proposing is that this particular nation-state should be more self-interested and willing to bend the rules to achieve national benefits. When every respected actor is bending the rules, it is no longer considered wrong; it becomes normal behaviour, and as such it is behaviour accepted and expected from nation-states. At some point following established moral codes may become frowned upon, because the widely-shared conceptions of acceptable behaviour are not necessarily based on official rules and treaties but on cross-national comparisons, which put them in a constant state of flux.

Finally, cross-national comparisons can be used to define whether a given reform is fair and reasonable. This can be done by constructing the policies and conditions of other countries as benchmarks, which can be used to evaluate the moral acceptability of national decisions. In this way, the proposed policies can be presented as either more gruelling or more yielding than the policies in other countries and – as such – as fair or unfair with regard to citizens. Consider the following quotations from parliamentary debates concerning alcohol policy reform in Finland and Medicare reform in the United States:

When it comes to the issue of bureaucracy, I will note that, every European country, even the European Union countries, do in fact have some sort of alcohol policy system in place. There is no country where one could practice this trade completely free of restrictions. (Parliament of Finland, 1994, p. 2109)

I believe that a Medicare drug benefit should achieve the following goals, and I am eager to work with my colleagues to achieve them: […] (2) Provide relief from the high and escalating cost of prescription drugs. Prescription drugs cost more in the United States than in any other nation in the world. Medicare should have the ability to negotiate lower prices for senior citizens as part of a drug benefit. (U.S. Congressional Record, 2002b, p. H4290)

In both cases, the speakers respond to claims that the citizens of the country suffer – or could end up suffering – from an unfair legislation that puts them in a worse situation than the people in neighbouring countries. In the Finnish case the question is about excessive regulation, while in the American case the critique focuses on the price of medicine. In both cases, other countries are used to construct an objective looking yardstick, which can be used to evaluate the fairness of a reform. This rhetorical tactic places all the citizens of
every country in a comparable situation and recognises them as equal actors in relation to their respective governments. If the citizens of one country are shown to be treated worse than their peers in neighbouring countries, the situation can be presented as a case of inequality on the global scale, and as proof of defective government on the part of the national government.

**The modern condition – depicting progressive and modern nation-states**

Cross-national comparisons help to frame almost any issue in terms of modernisation. Cross-national comparisons can be used to show what is up-to-date and what kinds of trends are emerging worldwide. Accordingly, they can always be used to draw out the current prerequisites for a modern nation-state. These types of statements comprise 8 percent \( (N = 168) \) of all the cross-national comparisons in the data.

As a rhetorical frame of reference, modernisation translates the differences between national policies into a question of stages of progress on a shared historical trajectory. Sometimes it is not even felt necessary to prove that one solution to a problem is more effective than the other. Instead, it is possible to dismiss certain alternatives by just defining them as ‘out-dated’. As a concept, modernity has a normative edge to it. It does not define what is current. There may be many different practices currently in use, but only one of them is defined as modern. The group of alternative solutions is not presented as a choice between a parallel set of policy options, but as a choice between staying behind or moving ahead on the road to progress, as we can see from the following quote from Trinidad & Tobago:

> Trinidad and Tobago is one of the few countries that are clinging to what I would call the last bastion of colonialism. This is neo-colonialism at its worst. Why should we do that in this modern world, in this 21st Century, when in virtually every country in the world there is reform, in terms of regulatory agencies for professions, whether legal, engineering or medical, to introduce civil society into the process? (Parliament of Trinidad & Tobago, 2007, p. 527)

The argument is not that the reform would offer a more just or more effective solution to a given problem. Instead, the reform is simply said to bring the country in line with other progressive countries. Appearing modern is considered as a sufficient justification for a reform.

It is easy to see how these arguments concerning modernity and progress may turn in to self-fulfilling prophecies. If a group of states adopt a similar model and it is successfully constructed as ‘the modern solution’ by decision-makers in other states, it is likely that their countries will in turn adopt it. If that happens, others will be likely to view it as an emerging trajectory of progress, because yet again one state had adopted it. This in turn can be used as an argument for the need to adopt the same model in other countries. When enough national governments fall in line and decide to adopt the model, it really becomes the way of the future – in the sense that everybody is doing it.

**Scaling – defining the weight of an issue**

A smaller proportion of cross-national comparisons simply deal with scaling political issues. In these cases, comparisons are used to determine whether an issue is really a
serious topic and something worth political deliberation. Comparisons can be used to show how widespread a phenomenon is or how difficult it is to manage it. Referencing other countries can be used to prove that the issue at hand is a far-reaching challenge that many other countries are dealing with. These statements comprise 2 percent \( (N = 48) \) of all the cross-national comparisons. Consider the following quote from Kenya:

Kenya is not the only African country that has that challenge. Many West African countries have a big problem in relation to trafficking in persons. Countries like Nigeria and several other countries have had a big problem especially of their young women who are trafficked to Italy especially for purposes of sexual exploitation. (National Assembly of the Republic of Kenya, 2010, p. 48)

Here a cross-national comparison is used to show that one is dealing with a serious issue, which affects not only one’s own country. The speakers try to convince the audience that behind the challenges facing the nation there is a wider problem that many nations are battling with at the same time. This rhetorical strategy has two benefits. On the one hand, it helps to demonstrate that the problem is really a significant global question. On the other hand, it frames the matter as a general problem that no country is specifically responsible for. The speakers are saying that there is a serious problem, but we are not the only ones struggling with it. Cross-national comparisons help both to highlight the significance of the problem and to diminish the accountability of national decision-makers for its existence.

**Picking apples and oranges: assessing harmonisation and comparability**

Finally, there is the category of cross-national comparisons that concerns the similarity of nation-states in the most basic sense. These statements make up only 2 percent \( (N = 34) \) of all of the cross-national comparisons found. The statements can be divided into two types. The first one is used to show whether the policies and institutions of a country are in harmony with those of others. In these cases, comparisons are used to assess the conformity of national policies to international agreements and standards, without evaluating the rationality or ethics of those shared practices. As the following excerpt from Kenya shows, the purpose can simply be to point out whether national policies are in line with the international community:

Mr. Temporary Deputy Speaker, Sir, I salute the Office of the Vice-President and Ministry of Home Affairs, for having brought this Bill to this House. The Bill merely seeks to domesticate international law so that we are in tandem with other countries. (National Assembly of the Republic of Kenya, 2003, p. 3984)

The second type of these comparisons questions whether it makes sense to make comparisons between the policies of certain countries at all. These comparisons can be considered *meta-level comparative talk*. They make comparisons between countries in order to evaluate whether those countries should be considered comparable at all – whether one is comparing apples to oranges. Consider the following example from the parliament of Australia:

I would like the minister at the table to tell us in his summing up: is he going to blindly adopt and apply the number of lines for an employee that they have managed to follow in European countries or in countries that are much smaller, that do not have the vast rural distances that
we have in Australia and that do not have the smaller exchanges that we have in electorates such as Bass? It is ridiculous to say that we should have the same number of lines per employee in a country the size of Australia as there are in Luxembourg, Belgium or some other country that should not be compared to Australia. (Parliament of Australia, 1996, p. 475)

What the speaker is saying is that one should not apply the same criteria of rationality to the policies of Australia as one does to the policies of much smaller and densely populated countries in Europe. How the ‘proper’ reference group for a country is constructed in each instance – how the apples are separated from the oranges – is crucial for the epistemic work involved (cf. Pi Ferrer et al., 2019). In most cases, Australian MPs are likely to affiliate their country with well-off Western nations such as Luxembourg and Belgium. However, in specific cases, it may seem rhetorically more advantageous to emphasise features that place the countries in separate categories: they are too different for meaningful comparisons.

Discussion

Cross-national comparisons are not just a technical answer to the information needs of decision-makers in an increasingly complex world. They are tools of epistemic governance that are actively utilised in shaping people’s conceptions of reality and of the actors inhabiting it. Through cross-national comparisons a wide variety of activity, institutions and groups of people is subsumed into the ‘national order of things’ (cf. Malkki, 1995). The comparisons invite people to perceive issues from a collective perspective and may help to position certain actors as spokespeople for nations.

The prevalence of cross-national comparisons in political rhetoric cannot be explained by a recent emergence of a ‘competitive state’, which would cause a rising demand for this type of knowledge through its inherent governmental logic. There has not been any significant temporal change in the frequency of the comparisons from 1994 to 2013 and a competitive framework only covers a third of all the comparisons. One should note that the studied period is not ideal for analysing the influence of the emergence of the ‘competition state’ on the discourse in national parliaments. Although scholars do not usually try to give exact dates for the gradual rise of the competition state, its development can be said to start already from the late 1970s or early 1980s (Cerny, 1997, 2010; Fougner, 2006). However, the competition state scholars view the rise and spread of the competition state model as an ongoing process. Hence, one would expect to see the competitive logic gaining more ground and spreading increasingly to new countries and policy areas during the 1990s and 2000s.

By pitting the countries against each other, international rankings are themselves as much a source for competitive reasoning as they are a response to it. It is, in large part, these comparisons themselves that construct the very image of competing nations, which is then used to justify various policies and to demand evaluations of the relative standings of ‘national representatives’. While something like the competitive state has emerged on the political stage, it does not determine the way the MPs discuss the community of nation-states in their statements.

Part of what makes cross-national comparisons so prevalent in political talk is their malleability as tools of epistemic governance. They can be incorporated into several rhetoric strategies, which do not favour any political party or a governmental rationality from the
outset. Cross-national comparisons are not just about assessing achievements or resources of countries, but also about constructing guidelines for rational and moral behaviour. Hence, cross-national comparisons can be as much about generating shared practices and common lessons among countries as they can be about highlighting an image of battle between nation-states. Depending on the objective, the right kind of comparison may make the actions of the government appear safe and normal, which reduces their perceived level of risk. In other cases, one can use them to make reforms seem more ‘modern’ and innovative.

The world depicted through parliamentary debates is not so much a world of competition among nation-states as it is a world of shared practices and common lessons. As Figure 2 demonstrates, competitive framing among nation-states comprises only a third of all the cross-national comparisons used in the data:

While the MPs do underline the competitive advantages of their countries in their statements, they also constantly look to other countries for constructing rules of appropriate and rational behaviour. MPs use examples of developments in other countries as vehicles for distributing blame for local political decisions and for forecasting future national developments. This means that the criteria for moral and rational decision-making for nation-states are as much in flux as is the conception of the modern condition for nation-states. This is very much in line by what has also been observed by the proponents of constructivist scholarship in the field of International Relations (Wendt, 1992; Zehfuss, 2002, p. 4).

The findings also shed more light on the synchronisation of national policies (Alasuutari, 2016). As many studies have shown, nation-states are surprisingly similar in terms of their key institutions and policies (Meyer et al., 1997, 2009). To some extent this can be explained by the role of international governmental and non-governmental organisations in transnational governance (Boli & Thomas, 1997; Finnemore, 1993; Kentikelenis & Seabrooke, 2017; Park & Vetterlein, 2010). They act as conveyor belts of worldwide models, which they codify and promote to countries where they do not yet exist. However, similarities in policies and political discussions among countries are not just due to international organisations pushing ready-made solutions for nation-states. Local actors have a key role in the process. For example, MPs constantly keep an eye on what is happening

Figure 2. The share of different types of cross-national comparisons in the data % (N).
in other countries and justify their arguments by constructing images of what is happening in the world by using cross-national comparisons, as this study shows. With MPs relying heavily on depictions of what is taking place in other countries to justify policies, the political discussions in various countries become synchronised. All of the countries do not necessarily end up actually implementing the same policies, but their political deliberation gets entangled with global trends in the process (Alasuutari, 2016). One could even say that they end up creating global trends through the use of comparisons.

Some could argue that these types of comparisons are quite an obvious strategy for political deliberation as nation-states form a group of very similar units. What this viewpoint misses is that a key reason for the isomorphism among nation-states is the use of cross-national-national comparisons as basis for reforming national institutions and policies in order to be more in line with others. To be recognised as a legitimate nation-state by the international community, one has to resemble others. Depending on the perspective, similarity between nation-states can be viewed either as the starting point for or the outcome of cross-national comparisons. In either case, one can distinguish a shared, self-reinforcing process, where the criteria for respectable and modern statehood gets constantly re-negotiated. This is why there is a need to analyse the constantly changing rules for defining acceptable state behaviour, the seriousness of political issues, rational decision-making and modern statehood from the viewpoint of global and transnational sociology.

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Notes on contributor

Valtteri Vähä-Savo, PhD, is a researcher at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University. He is a member of the Tampere Research Group for Cultural and Political Sociology (TCuPS) and a board member of the European Sociological Association RN-15: Global, transnational and cosmopolitan sociology. His research interests include global and transnational sociology, global governance and neo-institutionalist sociology.

ORCID

Valtteri Vähä-Savo http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5641-0952

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