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MEASUREMENT TOOLS FOR COMPARATIVE POLITICAL FINANCE: EXCESSIVE REDUCTIONISM OR VALUABLE SIMPLICITY?[1]

William C.R. Horncastle[2]

(Department of Political Science and International Studies, University of Birmingham)

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[1] This working paper is part of a wider thesis chapter which aims to produce an effective measurement tool to comparatively analyse political finance systems worldwide. The information in this paper provides the basis and justifications around producing an updated measurement tool, informing subsequent methodological decision making. Any comments or observations would be welcomed.

[2] Email: Wxh723@student.bham.ac.uk

Abstract

This working paper examines how we might better develop measurement tools for comparative political finance. This paper evaluates the current measurement tools that are available to comparatively analyse political finance regulations and then outlines future directions.

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The act of contesting political elections is a cornerstone of democracy, making them an inherently important part of the political process. As the electorate within a nation can often be measured in the millions, projecting political messages can be an expensive task, with patterns indicating that costs are rising in some areas. The 2018 US midterm elections, for example, were the most expensive on record, costing more than $5.7billion (USD)(Center for Responsive Politics, 2019). With the inflated cost of elections over time, all nations now utilise ‘at least some regulations concerning political finance’ (Ohman, 2014b: p.2). Research in recent years has attempted to produce a method for comparatively measuring political finance regulations around the world, with the use of composite index scores being preferred over proxy measures. The methodologies in use range from additive index models, which assume that an overall score can be built on each regulation having equal impact, to factor analysis models, which empirically calculate the weight of each regulation in the overall system. In most cases, the index scores are derived from data provided by International IDEA’s ‘Political Finance Database’ (International IDEA, 2018).

Whilst the idea of a single score to measure a political finance system provides a simple and easy to implement measure, is this approach entirely justified? International IDEA’s Political Finance Database, for example, structures information on 74 political finance regulations around *four* strands. A possibility exists, therefore, that index scores reducing a system of political finance regulation to a single score may be oversimplifying a regulatory system that, in reality, contains several dimensions to be measured. This paper will evaluate the current measurement tools that are available to comparatively analyse political finance regulations, beginning by introducing International IDEA’s Political Finance Database.

Political Finance Database (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance)

International IDEA's Political Finance Database (PFD) is a large scale and open source dataset which provides 'the leading global resource of comparative political finance data for those interested in money in politics' (International IDEA, 2018). The PFD contains data for 180 nations where political parties are legally permitted to exist and where elections have taken place in the past 30 years. First established in 2003, the PFD has since been revised in 2012, 2016, and 2018. In its current format, the number of data points have been increased from 43 to 74. Comprised of a mixture of binary and qualitative data, these 74 questions are grouped thematically into four sections; *Bans and Limits on Private Income, Public Funding, Regulations on Spending,* and *Reporting, Oversight and Sanctions* (International IDEA, 2018). Answers to all questions are given based on official legislative or policy reports that can be found in each nation, ensuring that data is valid and free of bias.

Although the PFD provides a rich resource for the study of political finance, there is an additional point to consider when using the PFD in research. Whilst the PFD provides a comparative assessment of the *de jure* political finance regulations in place around the world, its scope does not extend to assessing the *de facto* implementation of regulations. A possibility exists where a nation may be heavily regulated in terms of official legislation and policy, but parties and candidates ignore regulations in practice (Global Integrity *et al*., 2014b). This provides limitations to the use of the PFD, with the regulatory approaches that are employed potentially not showing an accurate image of reality. Whilst this is the case, the 2018 iteration of the PFD has added variables to combat this issue, with a small number of questions ascertaining whether rules are followed in practice (International IDEA, 2018). In adding new variables such as these, the updated PFD has gone some way to addressing the issue of measuring the *de facto* implementation of political finance regulations. This is commendable, however measuring the full extent to which political finance regulations are followed may be an impossible task, as deviant actors within the political finance system are likely to behave in a secretive manner. Despite this, the PFD has provided a platform on which to build, becoming the basis of several datasets designed to measure political finance, such as the 'Money, Politics, and Transparency' campaign finance indicators (Global Integrity et al., 2014b) and the 'Political Finance Regulation Index' (van Es, 2016b).

The following sections of this paper will focus on evaluating the current variables that are available to measure political finance regulations. For the purpose of this paper, these measures will be pooled into groups which highlight their methodological similarities. These groups are; *Simple Additive Approaches, Complex Additive Approaches, Survey Oriented Approaches,* and *Combined Methods Approaches.*[3]

A Review of Existing Approaches to Political Finance Measurement

Simple Additive Approaches

The first group of measures is the 'Simple Additive Approach'. These approaches assume equal weighting of political finance regulations and their simple nature is exhibited by focusing on a single data source (Cordis and Milyo, 2013), or a single point in time (Whiteley, 2011). Simple Additive measures provide an easy to interpret scale for the measurement of levels of political finance regulation, often being used as control variables in regression models. They are commonly produced by taking the *total number* of regulations that are in place, using this figure as the score for the related nation/state. Examples of this approach include the 'Party Regulation Index' (PRI), produced by Whiteley (2011), and the 'Campaign Finance Regulation Index' (CFRI), produced by Cordis and Milyo (2013).

The PRI was produced to account for differing regulatory frameworks when testing the hypothesis that an increased focus on campaign contributions may be a contributing factor in declining party membership (Whiteley, 2011). In producing the PRI, data linked to 14 types of political finance regulation was extracted from the PFD, producing a score for each nation that lies between 0 (no regulation) and 14 (fully regulated). In a similar manner, Cordis and Milyo (2013) produced the CFRI to study the links between campaign finance regulations and corruption, measuring the levels of regulation over time. The CFRI differs from the PRI, as it measures regulation across US states. As such, data for the CFRI was taken from a previous study by Milyo (2012). Values range from 0 (no contribution limits) to 4 (contributions limits and public funding of gubernatorial and state legislative elections), with the CFRI having much narrower scope than the PRI. This raises concerns about the CFRI's explanatory power as a variable, with a narrow scope potentially sacrificing some validity for increased simplicity.

The main benefit of using a Simple Additive measure is that there is a simplicity in producing and interpreting results. This makes these measures an attractive option to make results accessible to non-specialist audiences. However, whilst the benefit of simplicity is visible, this simplicity can also be viewed as a limitation. Treating each type of regulation as independent is not recommended, due to the key relationships that exist between regulations (van Es,

[3] See Appendix 1 for an overview.

2016b). Further research suggests that the impacts of individual political finance regulations are unlikely to be observed in isolation. Ohman (2014a) discusses this issue in the context of public funding, suggesting that, if public subsidies are introduced to enhance pluralism and reduce the power of large donors, their impacts are only likely to be felt if they are implemented alongside donation limits. In this manner, it should not be assumed that each regulation has an independent and identical impact in the restrictiveness of a nation's political finance system. Thus, when approaching the study of legal frameworks in this way, validity may be lost at the expense of increased simplicity.

Complex Additive Approaches

In addition to 'Simple Additive Approaches,' some measures implement a 'Complex Additive Approach'. Although these measures assume equal weighting of regulation, their methodologies are more complex than simple approaches as they gather data from a range of differing sources *and* produce a measure for more than one time period. Examples of this approach are the 'Campaign Finance Regulatory Stringency Index' (CFRSI), produced by Witko (2005) and updated by Kulesza *et al*. (2015), and the 'Political Finance Regulation Index' (ERCAS-PFRI),[4] produced by Lopez *et al*. (2017).

The updated version of the CFRSI was produced to measure the 'stringency' of campaign finance regulations across American States, with the aim to assess how regulations had evolved between 1996 and 2016. Using a mixture of official FEC data, documentary analysis through the LexisNexis database, and telephone interviews with state regulators, the CFRSI produced an additive index for the three subcategories of Public Financing/Spending Limits, Contribution Limits, and Disclosure. These subcategory measures were then aggregated to produce a composite measure for the overall stringency of campaign finance regulations across states and over time (Kulesza et al., 2015). The composite indicator for overall campaign finance stringency ranges from 0, where no regulations exist, to 22, where all regulations under review are present.

[4] The index is abbreviated in this way to allow this paper to decipher between the Political Finance Regulation Index produced by Lopez *et al* (2017) and the one produced by van Es (2016b), which will be introduced in the subsequent section. As they both have the same name, this paper includes a reference to the text in which they are developed. As Lopez *et al*'s (2017) index is cited from a 'European Research Centre for Anti-Corruption and State-Building' working paper, the abbreviation 'ERCAS' has been added as a prefix. As van Es' (2016b) index comes from a book titled 'Checkbook Elections? Political Finance in Comparative Perspective', the prefix 'CE' has been added.

An additional measure that accounts for the evolution of political finance regulations comes from Lopez *et al*. (2017), who produce the ERCAS-PFRI. Although data for this measure is taken from the PFD, the ERCAS-PFRI differs from other measures as it utilises the legal and legislative references that are available, in order to determine the year of implementation for each regulation. In doing so, a panel dataset is produced which spans 19 years (1996-2015), tracing each nation's additive score at annual points over this period. By utilising the data in this way, the ERCAS-PFRI can trace the trends in political finance regulation within *and* across nations, by triangulating cross national and longitudinal trends.

In producing a wide reaching and robust panel dataset, the ERCAS-PFRI data provide a unique and pertinent insight into political finance trends worldwide. The CFRSI provides a similar insight into the evolution of campaign finance regulations across American states, with triangulation across cases and over time being key strengths of these approaches. However, despite the introduction of a longitudinal element and the aggregation of data from different sources, Complex Additive Approaches suffer from the same limitation as Simple Additive Approaches, in assuming equal weighting of all regulations.

Survey Oriented Approaches

The third group, 'Survey Oriented Approaches', build a measure based solely upon survey responses provided by political finance experts. They are mostly built around data gathered through Likert style responses and are often part of broader research projects. For example, the 'Perceptions of Electoral Integrity Database' (PEI) is a bi-annual study which assesses the quality of worldwide elections, being developed through questionnaires given to experts in each nation that is holding elections within the study period. Questionnaires are broken down into eleven sections, with the *Campaign Finance* module being of interest in this context. This section of the PEI is based upon five questions related to the effectiveness of regulations in the nation under study. Answers are provided on a 5-point Likert scale, with a cumulative score being provided, standardised to a 100-point scale (Norris *et al*., 2018a).

The PEI offers a useful interpretation as to the strengths and weaknesses of electoral regulations around the world. When specifically focussing on campaign finance, however, there are limitations with its use. As the PEI measures eleven aspects of elections, the campaign finance section is only comprised of five data points, lacking substantive variance in scores. An additional limitation of Survey Oriented Approaches is that they are focussed upon expert opinions of the *qualities* of campaign finance regulations. Whilst this data may prove useful in a variety of contexts, it does not objectively focus upon the measurable *levels* of political finance regulation. As a result, the Survey Oriented Approach is not best suited to all types of political finance research.

Combined Methods Approaches

The final group of 'Combined Methods Approaches' utilise a number of methods, relying on a multitude of quantitative methods, or on a mixture of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Examples of these approaches include the 'Money, Politics, and Transparency, Campaign Finance Indicators' (MPT) (Global Integrity et al., 2014b) and the 'Political Finance Regulation Index' (CE-PFRI) (van Es, 2016b).

As a joint venture between Global Integrity, the Sunlight Foundation, and the Electoral Integrity Project, the MPT utilises political finance experts to produce 'Campaign Finance Indicators' for 54 nations around the world (Global Integrity *et al*., 2014b). Each nation has scores for five categories; *Direct and Indirect Public Funding, Contribution and Expenditure Restrictions, Reporting and Public Disclosure, Third-Party Actors,* and *Monitoring and Enforcement*. A unique strength of the MPT dataset is that each nation has a score for *de jure* regulations, *de facto* implementation, and a composite for each section. These different measurements allow for an insight into the *reality* of political finance regulation in these nations. In addition to the quantitative indicators, each nation has several supporting statements provided by political finance experts, ensuring that the MPT is a 'rich source of granular information' (Global Integrity *et al*., 2014a). The array of different categories and scores makes the MPT a useful resource, and the authors remain sympathetic to the view that a single aggregated score cannot fully encapsulate the measurement of a political finance system, stating: 'quantitative scores fail to capture the scope of an indicator answer or full country scorecard, as do aggregated scores' (Global Integrity et al., 2014a).

Whilst the MPT is a useful resource for the measurement of political finance regulations, it comes with a few limitations. Firstly, in a similar manner to Survey Oriented Approaches, the focus of the indicators is not exclusively upon revealing the dimensions of political finance regulation, but upon transparency and integrity. In addition, the deep levels of information sacrifice some breadth from the dataset, with only 54 of the 180 PFD nations being studied. This may be problematic when undertaking quantitative research, as statistical methods often become more reliable with a larger sample size, potentially rendering the depth of the MPT to be obsolete.

A further Combined Methods Approach is the CE-PFRI, produced by van Es (2016b) as part of *Checkbook Elections? Political Finance in Comparative Perspective*. This is an edited volume which aims to describe and evaluate the types of regulations that are in use around the world, as well as developing an understanding as to why regulations may be used. Within this text, the CE-PFRI is developed in order to produce an empirically robust measure for assessing the 'degree of state interventionism' in each nation's political finance system.

The CE-PFRI differs from any of the measures discussed thus far, as it utilises statistical analysis as part of its methodology. In doing so, van Es treats political finance regulation in a different way, 'conceptualising de jure political finance regulations as a single continuum defined by the degree of state intervention' (2016b: p.209), recognising that:

> the degree of state interventionism in political finance … is only an indirectly observable characteristic of a political economic system in the following sense: we observe actions and behaviours that indicate state interventionism (van Es, 2016b: p.210)

Like several previous measures, the CE-PFRI is produced based on data from the PFD. Each nation is first given an average summed score from the binary variables in each of the four modules of the PFD. These four scores consequently enter a Bayesian Factor Analysis model, with subsequent factor loadings indicating the weights to be applied when creating an average of the previous four scores. This produces a single comparative index score which integrates all binary responses from the PFD, whilst also considering the varied impacts of differing types of regulation.

In structuring the methodology in this way, the CE-PFRI moves beyond a simple additive model, to a more complex model which accounts for nuances in different types of regulation. This provides a measure which produces different results to a linear model, with the correlation between the weighted and unweighted calculations being .79 (van Es, 2016a). When taking the United Kingdom and United States as examples, Table 1 displays the impact of a weighted approach:

Table 1 - Table Showing the Differences between Weighted and Unweighted Approaches in the CE-PFRI

	Weighted	Unweighted
United Kingdom	0.77	0.57
United States	0.56	0.81

Source: Adapted from van Es (2016a: p.276)

As shown in Table 1, when using a weighted approach, the United Kingdom displays higher levels of state interventionism than the United States, however when the variables are aggregated with the inclusions of weighting, this observation is reversed. These observations highlight the importance of methodology selection in producing a measure for political finance regulations, with differing approaches having the potential to produce significantly different results.

The CE-PFRI clearly shows a strong methodology and produces an indicator that can measure political finance systems on a single scale. However, is this approach warranted? As the PFD is broken into four main groups, with a total of 74 variables, is it possible to reduce this information into a single score, whilst still maintaining enough of the original variance? The decision to group the PFD in four separate groups appears to indicate that these variables are measuring *at least* four different aspects of political finance regulation. Reducing the PFD data into a single variable clearly provides simplicity, but this may be counterintuitive. This is an area which certainly warrants further research.

Towards a new measure for political finance

All the measures discussed thus far have their own strengths in measuring different aspects of political finance,[5] from measuring transparency to electoral integrity. However, whilst several strengths can be found in the differing approaches, none of these measures comes without limitation. The most common issue with preceding measures has been a propensity to utilise an additive approach (Whiteley, 2011; Cordis and Milyo, 2013; Lopez *et al.*, 2017; Norris *et al.*, 2018a), with the assumption that each additional piece of regulation has the same effect on regulatory restrictiveness as any previous regulation, regardless of its focus. As discussed previously, approaching legal frameworks in this way has the potential to downplay the

[5] See Appendix 1 for overview of approaches and Appendix 2 for strengths and limitations of different methodological approaches.

complex relationships that exist between each type of regulation, as well as potentially garnering significantly different results (van Es, 2016a).[6]

An additional point of note is the recent update of the PFD. As the strength of a quantitative indicator relies heavily on the validity of the data upon which it is based, previous indicators must be restructured to account for the updated political finance data (International IDEA, 2018). This would ordinarily be a simple task, however the updated PFD has expanded from 43 variables to 74, suggesting that calculations must be tailored to account for these changes. Thus, if previous measures are to retain their validity as an indicator of political finance going forward, they must be updated to account for new data.

In addition to this, several robust measures exist that measure subjects such as 'transparency' (Global Integrity *et al*., 2014b) and 'integrity' (Norris *et al*., 2018b). The objective of this paper is not to denigrate previous works, as they undoubtedly offer pertinent insight into their subject areas, however these measures do not provide an objective indicator of *levels of* regulation across nations. As eluded to previously, none of the previous indicators fully meet this target. Additional research is warranted to ascertain whether complex political finance systems *can* be measured in this way and, if so, *how* measurements should be produced and kept up to date.

Conclusion: Beyond libertarian vs egalitarian

General debates in political finance research are centred on the notion of 'libertarian' vs 'egalitarian' approaches to regulation, suggesting a one-dimensional approach to political finance measurement. Those who support a libertarian view conflate political spending with a declaration of political speech, supporting a political finance system which is unregulated and allows for unencumbered political spending by private interests. On the contrary, those who adopt an egalitarian standpoint focus their ideals on equality, supporting a restrictive political finance system that equalises the power of political donations (Sunstein, 1995; Smilov, 2007). As this is the dominant debate in political finance, it may be assumed that it is possible to categorise political finance systems on a continuum that ranges from libertarian focussed, to egalitarian focussed systems. Previous efforts at comparative political finance measurement have often worked with this assumption, however this is a theoretical assumption which has yet to be empirically analysed. Research that focusses on these issues should be prioritised before further measurement tools are produced.

[6] See Table 1 on page 8 for an example.

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Appendix 1 – Comparison Table Showing Available Measures for Political Finance Regulation

Methodological Approach	**Name of Measure**	**Number and type of cases**	**Methodology**	**Focus**	**Available Values**	**Strengths**	**Limitations**
Simple Additive Approaches	Party Regulation Index	36 nations	Non-weighted, additive model. Based on 14 data points from PFD	Levels of regulation	1 to 14	Simple methodology provides an easy to interpret scale	Additive measure assumes equal weight; may reduce validity
	Campaign Finance Regulation Index	50 US states	Non-weighted, additive model. Based on data from **Milyo (2012).**	Comparing levels of regulation across states and over time	0 to 4	Simple methodology provides an easy to interpret scale. Triangulation across states and over time	Additive measure assumes equal weight; may reduce validity. Focussed on US states and not cross-national
Complex Additive Approaches	Campaign Finance Regulatory Stringency Index	50 US states	Uses a mixture of FEC data, telephone interviews, and LexisNexis searches to produce an additive index. Comparative index uses data from 1996 and 2016 to assess how overall stringency of regulations has changed.	'Stringency' of campaign finance regulations	0 to 22	Simple methodology provides an easy to interpret scale. Triangulation across states and over time	Additive measure assumes equal weight; may reduce validity. Focussed on US states and not cross-national. Only has data for two time points; not enough years to utilise time series element
	ERCAS Political Finance Regulation Index	180 nations	Utilises data from PFD, as well as supplementary legal sources, to produce a panel dataset for nations over 19 years (1996-2015). Non-weighted, additive model.	Comparing levels of regulation across continents and over time	0 to 100	Provides data from 1996-2015; could be utilised in time series. Triangulation across nations and over time	Additive measure assumes equal weight; may reduce validity
Survey Oriented Approaches	Perceptions of Electoral Integrity Database	285 elections in 164 countries	Uses five questions on a five-point Likert scale. Non-weighted summation of responses from these variables is transposed into a 100-point scale	Electoral integrity around the world	0 to 100	May be useful to use alongside a comparative index to assess effectiveness of de jure implementation of regulations. Provides data from 2012 to 2017; could be utilised in time series	Additive measure assumes equal weight; may reduce validity. Political finance is not the primary focus; there are only five variables that make up this measure
Multiple Methods Approaches	Money, Politics and Transparency Database	54 nations	Mixed methods approach utilises data from PFD as well as qualitative statements from experts in each nation	Transparency in the political process	0 to 100 (also backed up with qualitative data)	Measures de facto regulations, as well as how they are implemented in practice. Mixed methods improve validity through triangulation	Focussed on transparency, not restrictiveness of the system as a whole. Only focussed on 54 nations when the PFD has 180
	CE Political Finance Regulation Index	169 nations	Uses factor analysis to determine the weights of regulation types on the latent trait of 'state interventionism'	Levels of state interventionism in political finance regulations	-3 to 3	Strong methodology which incorporates empirical testing on weighting of variables.	Does not contain time series data so is only fully accurate at one point in time.

Sources: **Witko (2005); Whiteley (2011); Cordis and Milyo (2013); Global Integrity et al. (2014a); (2014b); Kulesza et al. (2015); van Es (2016a); (2016b); Lopez et al. (2017); Norris et al. (2018a); (2018b)**

Appendix 2 – Strengths and Limitations of Approaches to Political Finance Measurement

	Strengths	*Limitations*
Simple Additive Approach	Simple to use, easy to interpret, and easily replicated	Potentially sacrifices some validity at the expense of increased simplicity
Complex Additive Approach	Simple to use, increased validity in relation to Simple Additive Approach	Although validity may be increased, additive approach still has potential validity issues
Survey Oriented Approach	Utilises the expertise of political finance experts around the world	May suffer from subjective biases
Combined Methods Approach	Can potentially increase the validity of the measure through methodological triangulation	Methodologies may be complex and challenging to interpret or replicate