Case studies are an interesting phenomenon in the social sciences. On the one hand, they have played a pivotal role in theory development and are still popular in almost all fields of the social sciences, with the notable exception of economics. On the other hand, they have been treated by most methodologists with skepticism and disdain. Many classic works in the social sciences illustrate the relevance – even prevalence – of case study research for most of the twentieth century. Developments in ontological reasoning, theory building, and epistemology, together with the sophistication of statistical techniques, seemed to reduce the appeal of the case study approach in the last decades of the twentieth century and led to the rise of large-N studies. Nevertheless, in recent years, we have witnessed a resurgent interest in case study research, accompanied by intensive methodological reflection.

In this first chapter, we begin by illustrating the theoretical relevance of case studies to the scientific discourse in many fields of research with some illustrative examples (Section 1.1). Second, we point to recent changes in social reality and in the social sciences that have revived interest in case studies (Section 1.2). Third, we clarify our epistemological stance as anti-fundamentalist and differentiated. All three case study approaches that we present are located in the ‘epistemological middle-ground’, but they have distinct affinities with the main epistemological/methodological camps that currently populate the literature on the philosophy of science (Section 1.3). Before we define our own understanding of case studies (Section 1.5), we briefly address some major contributions to case study methodology (Section 1.4) and explain where we agree with and build on these contributions and where we diverge. In addition, we clarify what we mean when we talk about ‘observations’ (Section 1.6). We close our introduction with an
overview of the main features of our three approaches to case study research (Section 1.7).

1.1 Case studies as cornerstones for theories and research programs

In many disciplines and fields in the social sciences, we can point to case studies that have attained the status of classics, because they have strongly influenced the scientific discourse and triggered broad-based research programs. In political science, for instance, Robert E. Goodin and Hans-Dieter Klingemann (1996) identify as classics Robert A. Dahl’s *Who Governs?* (1967 [1961]), Graham T. Allison’s *Essence of Decision* (1971), and Theda Skocpol’s *States and Social Revolutions* (1979), among other works. In what follows, we discuss the core contributions and impact of these three studies and of Arend Lijpharts’ *The Politics of Accommodation* (1975 [1968]), an influential work in comparative politics.

Robert A. Dahl’s case study *Who Governs?* focuses on power, a core concept in political science. His intensive investigation of the formal and informal power structures in the city of New Haven was a landmark work. He showed that governance is not characterized by a single power structure or one single power elite, as was previously commonly believed, but is rather characterized by pluralism. He found that, in the three areas he studied, urban renewal, public education, and primary elections, different actors hold power. This pluralist vision of power in democracies has strongly influenced empirical work in public policy making, urban politics, and interest group research. It has also provided a foundation for further theoretical work by Theodor Lowi, Mancur Olson, and others. That work has culminated in what is now known as ‘neopluralism’ in interest group research and related areas of studies (see McFarland 2007). Bibliometric data have provided empirical evidence of the enormous academic reach of Dahl’s case study of a single American city. Dahl’s book has been cited in more than 1,600 academic journal articles covered by the *Web of Science* and in more than 4,000 studies covered by *Google Scholar*. In methodological terms, Dahl’s approach to the study of power favors the intensive analysis of policy processes in specific policy areas. To reveal the exercise of power, actors’ preferences and behaviors need to be identified, and there must be an emphasis on the temporal dimension of politics or on the time and timing of political action. This emphasis resonates well with one of the approaches we present in this book: causal-process tracing.