

TOPIC ONE: THE COMPARATIVE METHOD

Political scientists sometimes argue about exactly what and how countries should be studied and compared. One approach is to emphasize **empirical data** based on factual statements and statistics, and another is to focus on **normative** issues that require value judgments. For example, the first approach might compare statistics that reflect economic development of a group of countries, including information about Gross National Product, per capita income, and amounts of imports and exports. The second approach might not reject those statistics, but would focus instead on whether or not the statistics bode well or ill for the countries. Empiricists might claim that it is not the role of political scientists to make such judgments, and their critics would reply that such an approach leads to meaningless data collection. Both approaches give us different but equally important tools for analyzing and comparing political systems.

How do we go about comparing countries? The model most frequently used until the early 1990s was the **three-world approach**, largely based on cold war politics. The three worlds were 1) the United States and its allies; 2) the Soviet Union and its allies; and 3) **“third world”** nations that did not fit into the first two categories and were all economically underdeveloped and deprived. Even though the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, this approach is still taken today by many comparative textbooks. Comparisons are based on democracy vs. authoritarianism and communism vs. capitalism. Even though this method is still valid, newer types of comparisons are reflected in these trends:

- **The impact of informal politics** – Governments have formal positions and structures that may be seen on an organizational chart. For example, Great Britain is led by a prime minister and has a House of Lords and a House of Commons. In comparison, the United States has a President, a Senate, and a House of Representatives. You may directly compare the responsibilities and typical activities of each position or structure in Britain to its counterpart in the United States. However, you can gain a deeper understanding of both political systems if you connect **civil society** – the way that citizens organize and define themselves and their interests – to the ways that the formal government operates. **Informal politics** takes into consideration not only the ways that politicians operate outside their formal powers, but also the impact that beliefs, values, and actions of ordinary citizens have on policy-making.
- **The importance of political change** – One reason that the three-world approach has become more problematic in recent years is that the nature of world politics has changed. After 1991, the world was no longer dominated by two superpowers, and that fact has had consequences that have reverberated in many areas that no one could have predicted. However, what better opportunity to compare the impact of change on different countries!
- **The integration of political and economic systems** – Even though we may theoretically separate government and politics from the economy, the two are often intertwined almost inextricably. For example, communism and capitalism are theoretically economic systems, but how do you truly separate them from government and politics? Attitudes and behavior of citizens are affected in many ways by economic inefficiency, economic inequality, and economic decision making. They then may turn to the government for solutions to economic problems, and if the government does not respond, citizens may revolt, or take other actions that demand attention from the political elite.

Keeping these trends in mind, in this book we will study countries in three different groups that are in some ways similar in their political and economic institutions and practices. These groups are:

- **“Advanced” democracies** – These countries have well established democratic governments and a high level of economic development. Of the six core countries, Great Britain represents this group.
- **Communist and post-communist countries** – These countries have sought to create a system that limits individual freedoms in order to divide wealth more equally. Communism flourished during the 20th century, but lost ground to democratic regimes by the beginning of the 21st century. Russia (as a post communist country) and China (currently a communist country) represent this group in our study of comparative government and politics.
- **Less developed and newly industrializing countries** – We will divide the countries traditionally referred to as the “Third World” into two groups, still very diverse within the categories. The newly industrializing countries are experiencing rapid economic growth, and also have shown a tendency toward democratization and political and social stability. Mexico and Iran represent this group, although, as you will see, Iran has many characteristics that make it difficult to categorize in this scheme. Less developed countries lack significant economic development, and they also tend to have authoritarian governments. Nigeria represents this group, although it has shown some signs of democratization in very recent years.

Important concepts that enable meaningful comparisons among countries are introduced in this chapter, and will be addressed in each of the individual countries separately. However, it is important to remember that the main point of comparative government and politics is to use the categories to compare among countries. For example, never take the approach of “Here’s Britain,” “Here’s Russia,” without noting what similarities and differences exist between the two countries.

TOPIC TWO: SOVEREIGNTY, AUTHORITY, AND POWER

We commonly speak about individuals who are powerful, but in today’s world power is territorially organized into **states**, or countries, that control what happens within their borders. What exactly is a state? German scholar Max Weber defined state as the organization that maintains a monopoly of violence over a territory. In other words, the state defines who can and cannot use weapons and force, and it sets the rules as to how violence is used. States often sponsor armies, navies, and/or air forces that legitimately use power and sometimes violence, but individual citizens are very restricted in their use of force. States also include **institutions**, stable, long lasting organizations that help to turn political ideas into policy. Common examples of institutions are bureaucracies, legislatures, judicial systems, and political parties. These institutions make states themselves long lasting, and often help them to endure even when leaders change. States by their very nature exercise **sovereignty**, the ability to carry out actions or policies within their borders independently from interference either from the inside or the outside.

STATES, NATIONS, AND REGIMES

States today do much more than keep order in society. Many have important institutions that promote general welfare – such as health, safe transportation, and effective communication systems - and economic stability. The concept of state is closely related to a **nation**, a group of people that is bound together by a common political identity. **Nationalism** is the sense of belonging and identity that distinguishes one nation from another. Nationalism is often translated as patriotism, or the resulting pride and loyalty that individuals may feel toward their nations. For more than 200 years now, national borders ideally have been drawn along the lines of group identity. For example, people within one area think of themselves as “French,” and people in another area think of themselves as “English.” Even though individual differences exist within nations, the nation provides the overriding identity for most of its citizens. However, the concept has always been problematic – as when “Armenians” live inside the borders of a country called “Azerbaijan.” Especially now that globalization and fragmentation provide counter trends, the nature of nationalism and its impact on policy-making are clearly changing.

The rules that a state sets and follows in exerting its power are referred to collectively as a **regime**. Regimes endure beyond individual governments and leaders. We refer to a regime when a country’s institutions and practices carry over across time, even though leaders and particular issues change. Regimes may be compared by using these categories:

- **Democracies** – This type of regime bases its authority on the will of the people. Democracies may be **indirect**, with elected officials representing the people, or they may be **direct**, when individuals have immediate say over many decisions that the government makes. Most democracies are indirect, mainly because large populations make it almost impossible for individuals to have a great deal of direct influence on how they are governed. Some democracies are **parliamentary systems** – where citizens vote for legislative representatives, which in turn select the leaders of the executive branch. Others are **presidential systems** – where citizens vote for legislative representatives as well as for executive branch leaders, and the two branches function with separation of powers. Democratic governments vary in the degree to which they regulate/control the economy, but businesses, corporations, and/or companies generally operate somewhat independently from the government.
- **Authoritarian regimes** – In this type of regime, decisions are made by political **elites** – those that hold political power – without much input from citizens. These regimes may be ruled by a single dictator, an hereditary monarch, a small group of aristocrats, or a single political party. The economy is generally tightly controlled by the political elite. Some authoritarian regimes are based on **communism**, a theory developed in the 19th century by Karl Marx and altered in the early 20th century by Vladimir Lenin. In these regimes, the communist party controls everything from the government to the economy to social life. Others practice **corporatism** – an arrangement in which government officials interact with people/groups outside the government before they set policy. These outside contacts are generally business and labor leaders, or they may be heads of huge **patron-client systems** that provide reciprocal favors and services to their supporters.

LEGITIMACY

Who has political power? Who has the authority to rule? Different countries answer these questions in different ways, but they all answer them in one way or another. Countries that have no clear answers often suffer from lack of political **legitimacy** – or the right to rule, as determined by their own citizens.

Legitimacy may be secured in a number of ways, using sources such as social compacts, constitutions, and ideologies. According to political philosopher Max Weber, legitimacy may be categorized into three basic forms:

- **Traditional legitimacy** rests upon the belief that tradition should determine who should rule and how. For example, if a particular family has had power for hundreds of years, the current ruling members of that family are legitimate rulers because it has always been so. Traditional legitimacy often involves important myths and legends, such as the idea that an ancestor was actually born a god or performed some fantastic feat like pulling a sword out of a stone. Rituals and ceremonies all help to reinforce traditional legitimacy. Most monarchies are based on traditional legitimacy, and their authority is symbolized through crowns, thrones, scepters, and/or robes of a particular color or design.
- **Charismatic legitimacy** is based on the dynamic personality of an individual leader or a small group. Charisma is an almost indefinable set of qualities that make people want to follow a leader, sometimes to the point that they are willing to give their lives for him or her. For example, Napoleon Bonaparte was a charismatic leader that rose in France during a time when the traditional legitimacy of the monarchy had been challenged. By force of personality and military talent, Napoleon seized control of France and very nearly conquered most of Europe. However, Napoleon also represents the vulnerability of charismatic legitimacy. Once he was defeated, his legitimacy dissolved, and the nation was thrown back into chaos. Charismatic legitimacy is notoriously short-lived because it usually does not survive its founder.
- **Rational-legal legitimacy** is based neither on tradition nor on the force of a single personality, but rather on a system of well-established laws and procedures. This type of legitimacy, then, is highly **institutionalized**, or anchored by strong institutions (such as legislatures, executives, and/or judiciaries) that carry over through generations of individual leaders. People obey leaders because they believe in the rules that brought them to office, and because they accept the concept of a continuous state that binds them together as a nation. Rational-legal legitimacy is often based on the acceptance of the **rule of law** that supersedes the actions and statements of individual rulers.

Most modern states today are based on rational-legal legitimacy, although that does not mean that traditional and charismatic legitimacy are not still important. Instead, they tend to exist within the rules of rational-legal legitimacy. For example, charismatic leaders such as Martin Luther King still may capture the imagination of the public and have a tremendous impact on political, social, and economic

developments. Likewise, modern democracies, such as Britain and Norway, still maintain the traditional legitimacy of monarchies to add stability and credibility to their political systems.

POLITICAL CULTURE AND POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES

Historical evolution of political traditions shape a country's concept of who has the authority to rule and its definition of legitimate political power. This evolution may be gradual or forced, long or relatively brief, and the relative importance of tradition varies from country to country. **Political culture** refers to the collection of political beliefs, values, practices, and institutions that the government is based on. For example, if a society values individualism, the government will generally reflect this value in the way that it is structured and in the way that it operates. If the government does not reflect basic political values of a people, it will have difficulty remaining viable.

Political culture also shapes political ideologies that a nation's citizens hold. **Political ideologies** are sets of political values held by individuals regarding the basic goals of government and politics. Examples of political ideologies are:

- **Liberalism** places emphasis on individual political and economic freedom. Do not confuse liberalism as an ideology with its stereotype within the U.S. political system. As a broad ideology, liberalism is part of the political culture of many modern democracies, including the United States. Liberals seek to maximize freedom for all people, including free speech, freedom of religion, and freedom of association. Liberals also believe that citizens have the right to disagree with state decisions and act to change the decisions of their leaders. For example, in recent years many U.S. citizens have openly expressed their disagreements with the Bush administration concerning the war in Iraq and homeland security issues. The U.S. political culture supports the belief that government leaders should allow and even listen to such criticisms. Public opinion generally has some political impact in liberal democracies, such as the U.S. and Britain.
- **Communism**, in contrast to liberalism, generally values equality over freedom. Whereas liberal democracies value the ideal of equal opportunity, they usually tolerate a great deal of inequality, especially within the economy. Communism rejects the idea that personal freedom will ensure prosperity for the majority. Instead, it holds that an inevitable result of the competition for scarce resources is that a small group will eventually come to control both the government and the economy. For communists, liberal democracies are created by the rich to protect the rights and property of the rich. To eliminate the inequalities and exploitation, communists advocate the takeover of all resources by the state that in turn will insure that true economic equality exists for the community as a whole. As a result, private ownership of property is abolished. Individual liberties must give way to the needs of society as a whole, creating what communists believe to be a true democracy.
- **Socialism** shares the value of equality with communism but is also influenced by the liberal value of freedom. Unlike communists, socialists accept and promote private ownership and free market principles. However, in contrast to liberals, socialists believe that the state has a strong role to play in regulating the economy and providing benefits to the public in order to ensure some measure of equality. Socialism is a much stronger ideology in Europe than it is in the United States, although both socialism and liberalism have shaped both areas of the world.

- **Fascism** is often confused with communism because they both devalue the idea of individual freedom. However, the similarity between the two ideologies ends there. Fascism also rejects the value of equality, and accepts the idea that people and groups exist in degrees of inferiority and superiority. Fascists believe that the state has the right and the responsibility to mold the society and economy and to eliminate obstacles (including people) that might weaken them. The powerful authoritarian state is the engine that makes superiority possible. The classic example is of course Nazi Germany. No strictly fascist regimes currently exist, but fascism still is an influential ideology in many parts of the world.
- **Religions** have always been an important source of group identity and continue to be in the modern world. Many advanced democracies, such as the United States, have established principles of separation of church and state, but even in those countries, religion often serves as the basis for interest groups and voluntary associations within the civil society. Even though some European countries, such as Great Britain, have an official state religion, their societies are largely secularized, so that religious leaders are usually not the same people as political leaders. In our six countries we will see religion playing very different roles in all of them – from China, whose government has recently squelched the Falon Gong religious movement, to Iran, that bases its entire political system on ShiiI Islam.