Introduction

This introduction does three things. First, it explains why we should bother to study comparative politics at all. Why is it important to know how foreign political systems work? Second, it considers the strengths and weaknesses of the comparative approach to political science. It argues that, in spite of its problems, comparative politics adds something of great importance to our ability to understand what goes on in the political world. Moreover, it is of practical importance for policy making in the real world because it helps us reject false explanations of political phenomena and broadens our understanding of what is possible by examining how things are done in other countries. And third, it provides some signposts to guide you through the general themes that re-occur throughout the book to make it easier and more interesting for you to understand and absorb its contents.

Why comparative politics?

Why do we bother to study comparative politics and government? There are many good reasons, but three of the most important are: (1) we cannot understand our own country without a knowledge of others; (2) we cannot understand other countries without a knowledge of their background, institutions and history; and (3) we cannot arrive at valid generalisations about government and politics without the comparative method.

Understanding our own country

To understand our own country, we must study other countries as well. This may sound strange, but it has some powerful logic to support it. We often take the political institutions, practices and customs in our own country for granted, assuming that they are somehow natural and inevitable. Only when we start looking around at other countries do we understand that our own ways of doing things are sometimes unique or unusual, even odd or peculiar. It is said that fish will be the last form of life on earth to realise the existence of water: since they spend their whole life in water with no experience of anything else, they have no reason even to imagine that anything else could exist. For this reason, the writer Rudyard Kipling wrote, 'What knows he of England, who only England knows?', making the point that people who have no knowledge of other countries cannot begin to understand their own.

Understanding other countries

It is obvious that we cannot begin to understand the politics of other countries unless we know something about their history, culture and institutions. And this, in turn, is important because what these countries do often affects us directly or indirectly: they impose import duties on our goods, refuse to sign trade agreements, do not contribute to international peacekeeping forces, threaten us with military force, or are unhelpful in trying to solve international economic problems. On the other hand, they may support us in fighting crime, sign international agreements for pollution control, contribute to international projects, or collaborate to improve infrastructures across national borders. Why do they act this way? Knowing their history, culture and institutions helps us to understand and explain their actions and perhaps change the situation for the better. Ignorance is a recipe for complication and failure; knowledge can help us improve matters.

Constructing valid generalisations

The purpose of science is to arrive at valid generalisations about the world. Such generalisations take the form of 'if–then' statements – if A then B, but if X then Y. Aeroplane designers need to know that if their planes exceed the speed of sound, they will break the sound barrier, affecting how the planes handle and the stress on their structures. Doctors need to know that if a certain drug is administered, then a patient's disease is likely to be cured. Chemists need to know that if two substances are mixed then a third substance may be produced that is useful to us.

To arrive at these if–then statements, scientists carry out systematic experiments in their laboratories, comparing what happens under different circumstances. Aeroplane designers have wind tunnels; drug companies and chemists have laboratories where they manipulate the conditions of their experiments

in a careful and systematic manner. Political scientists also try to arrive at valid generalisations about the world of government and politics, but, unfortunately, they can rarely experiment so they rely on comparison instead. For example, political scientists are interested in the effect of different voting systems on the fairness of election results, and it would be nice if we could order our government to use a new voting system to see what happens. Obviously this is not possible. An alternative might be to set up a quasi-experiment that tries to measure how people behave using different voting systems, but laboratory experiments can only approximate the conditions of the real political world. They cannot reproduce them exactly. And political scientists have to be exceedingly careful in their experiments not to break any moral rules or to do harm to their experimental subjects. For the most part, controlling variables in an experimental manner and in laboratory conditions is not an approach open to a good deal of political science research, though not impossible in some.

What political scientists can do, however, is compare things that happen 'naturally' in the real world. For example, different countries have different voting systems and we can compare them to estimate their effects. We can note that countries with voting system A have a higher voting turnout than countries using system B. However, we cannot immediately conclude that A causes a higher voting turnout than B until we are sure that this effect is not caused by factors other than voting systems. Perhaps system A countries happen to be smaller, wealthier or better educated than system B countries and it is size, wealth or education that influences voting turnout. We cannot control (hold constant) all other variables, as laboratory scientists do, but we can use methods to simulate the holding constant of variables. In this way we can make statements such as: 'All other things being equal (size, wealth, education), if a country has a type A voting system, then it will tend to have a higher voting turnout than countries with type B voting systems.'

It would be unwise to try to make general 'if–then' generalisations based on a study of only one country, or even a small handful of them, because it is easy to jump to false conclusions. In fact, this frequently happens when people with an inadequate understanding of the subject conclude that something must be true based on their limited experience of what happens in their own country (see briefing). What we need to do is compare a range of countries of different size, wealth and education to estimate the independent effects of these and voting systems on turnout. Studying one or a few countries might not be enough; we need a range of countries with a spread of characteristics that we think might influence voting turnout.

Comparative politics has increasingly turned to the comparison of either a few carefully selected countries or a large number of them. To study a number of countries using both type A and type B electoral systems we can concentrate on a few countries which are very similar in most of their characteristics but organise their elections differently. In this way we can conduct a 'natural experiment' that provides us with a few countries that have different electoral systems but little variation in other respects that might affect voting

Briefing

Is widespread gun ownership in the USA responsible for its high gun crime figures?
It is commonly claimed that the widespread ownership of guns in the United States is responsible for the country's high gun crime and murder rate. Yet both Switzerland and Israel have a high proportion of guns, partly because they train all men (in Switzerland) and all men and women (in Israel) for military service and because, depending on their duties, those in service routinely carry small arms or keep them at home. Law-abiding citizens in both countries are entitled to own guns and in Israel a high proportion of people carry concealed weapons in their everyday life. In Switzerland, shooting is a popular sport. In Israel, gun crime and the murder rate is low by international standards and in Switzerland it is so low that there is no need to keep records of gun crime and gun control is not an issue. Comparison shows that widespread gun ownership is not the only explanation for the USA's high gun crime and murder rate.

Is the very high population density of Manhattan responsible for its high crime rate?
Experiments with rats show that overcrowding causes aggression and compulsive eating. Does the high population density of New York (especially Manhattan) have the same effect on its population of increasing aggression and crime? Some other cities (Hong Kong, Singapore, Tokyo) with similar or higher density ratios have much lower violent crime and murder rates than New York, and relatively low crime rates. The conclusions seem to be that: (1) it can be misleading to draw conclusions about human beings based on animal experiments; and (2) comparison of New York with other crowded cities suggests that population density is not a powerful cause of New York's high level of aggression and crime.

The comparison of gun ownership, population density, gun crime and aggression does not end here, because quite possibly a combination of causes – guns and density and other factors – account for gun crime and aggression. The point is that the causes and effects can only be unravelled by comparing, and cross-national comparisons may be particularly helpful in this respect.

turnout. Alternatively, comparing a large number of countries with different voting systems and with a wide variety of other characteristics can reduce the chances of arriving at false conclusions. In this way, we can see if countries with one particular kind of voting system have a higher turnout than countries with other voting systems, irrespective of other variations.

The strengths and weakness of cross-national comparative political science

Political scientists can compare in different ways; they can compare across time, across countries and across different places or population sub-groups within a country. For example, if we want to generalise in an if–then manner about the effects of age, gender and religion on voting turnout, we might compare, within our own country, the voting turnout of old and young people, males and females, and different religious groups. This would be using the

comparative method but not the cross-national comparative method. As things have developed in political science, however, the term 'comparative politics' has come to mean research on two or more countries. Although all scientists rely on comparisons, when political scientists use the term 'comparative politics', they are most generally referring to the comparison of political patterns in different countries. Sometimes this is referred to as 'cross-national' research.

Cross-national comparative research has some great strengths. Although we can compare within a given country as well as across different countries, we have already noted that one-country studies can run into problems. For example, we might want to know the effect of different electoral systems on turnout, but could not do this in a single country which had only one electoral system. Of course, it might change its system, in which case we could compare turnout before and after the change, but then other things might also have changed – the parties competing, economic circumstances, composition of the electorate – in which case we would still not know what had caused any alteration in voting unless we took account of all the possible causes. The cross-national method is essential, because it allows us to test generalisations about politics in one set of circumstances against those in a wide variety of circumstances. This means we can put greater confidence in the reliability of our generalisations.

Comparing countries with a broad spread of characteristics also opens up horizons that those stuck in their own narrow surroundings do not know exist. If we know little about the wider world it is easy to slip into the mistake of believing that our way of doing things is the natural or only way. When we start looking around we start noticing that others do things differently which may be better, worse or just different in some respects than ours. For this reason governments thinking of introducing a new policy often send abroad little teams of researchers to see how other countries manage and to pick up bright ideas and get wise to the pitfalls of new policies. There are a great many different ways to bake a cake and, thankfully, the modern global world has widened our appreciation of the possibilities.

The problems of cross-national comparative research

In spite of these advantages, comparative politics has its fair share of deficiencies. Common criticisms are:

- It cannot answer questions of values.
- It often lacks evidence.
- It deals in probabilities, not certainties or laws.
- It suffers from the flaw that what is important is often difficult to compare and that what can be measured and compared may not be worth studying.
- It neglects that every country in the world is unique, so comparisons are impossible.

We will now look at these in turn.

It cannot answer questions of values

Questions such as 'Is democracy the best form of government?', 'Should we value freedom more than equality?' and 'Which party should we vote for?' are matters of values and subjective judgements. They are not, in the final analysis, a matter for empirical research. Like all sciences, comparative politics can never answer value questions or matters of subjective opinion, although it may provide evidence that helps some people to make up their mind about them.

It lacks evidence

Although comparative politics deals in facts and empirical evidence, it often lacks even an adequate supply of facts and data. Rarely do we have adequate or comparable measures for a large number and variety of countries. By and large we have more evidence about the wealthiest countries in the world because they are better organised and equipped to produce statistics about themselves. For the same reason, we have more evidence about recent years. But even in the most advanced societies we often lack even the minimum quantity and quality of evidence necessary to answer our research questions satisfactorily. This state of affairs is rapidly improving as data becomes more plentiful and easier to access on the internet, but, meanwhile, the data problem remains a severe one as, indeed, it does for many other branches of the social sciences. The same is true of the natural sciences, which lack information about many things, from the small atomic particles to far distant galaxies, and from global warming to the causes and cures of dementia.

It deals in probabilities not certainties or laws

Comparative politics does not provide us with laws about how government and politics work. It can only make if–then statements of a probable or likely kind. We can reach the conclusion that one voting system is likely to encourage a higher voting turnout than another, but cannot say that this will always or inevitably happen in every case. First, there is the unpredictable human factor and, second, there are large numbers of causal factors involved, some of which can interact in a complex way. Rarely are matters so simple that we can say that A produces B. Most usually it is A, interacting with X, Y and Z but only in the absence of C, D, and E that produces B, or something like it. As a result, comparative politics cannot tell us what will happen with a high degree of certainty but only, at best, what is likely to happen under certain circumstances, and the circumstances may not be present in any given case. Therefore comparativists are fond of the caution words – 'tends to', 'often', 'in some cases', 'probably', 'likely', 'may', 'in a percentage of cases'. Comparativists rarely use the word 'never' and rarely use the word 'always'. In the political world there is almost always an exception to the general rule, and usually a number of them.

We should not be put off by the fact that comparative politics is not a laboratory subject and cannot manipulate its variables at will. Quite a few sciences suffer from the same problem. The human body is such a complex thing that doctors can rarely be certain that a given drug will cure a disease in all cases and are often unsure about its side effects. Similarly, the world's climate system is so complicated that climate specialists cannot tell us whether it will rain or not on a given day, so they talk about the probability of rain. Cosmologists can only speculate about some aspects of the big bang that created the universe, and astronomers cannot get close enough to black holes to tell us what is in them and on the other side of them. Civil engineers cannot be sure that their buildings and structures will survive earthquakes, hurricanes and terrorist attacks. Note that in all these cases, as in comparative politics, scientists cannot control their variables in a laboratory, either because of moral limits (experiments on human beings) or the inability to manipulate the world's weather or its earthquakes. Comparative politics struggles to be as scientific as possible, but, like some other sciences, it falls short of the ideal.

It suffers from the flaw that what is important is often difficult to compare and that what can be measured and compared may not be worth studying

Some critics argue that the information used by comparativists is misleading, false or meaningless, especially the statistics about large numbers of nations. The claim is that what can be studied using such information is of little or no value. The strongest criticism states bluntly that empirical social science is limited to 'counting manhole covers' – something that can be done with great precision by people of the meanest intelligence but is of little interest to anybody and little importance for anything.

It is certainly true that comparative politics is limited in what it can study, and that it can say little or nothing about the important value questions of political theory and philosophy. But comparative politics has things to say of interest and importance about many subjects of concern in modern society. To continue with our example of voting turnout, politicians and political commentators are worried that low or declining turnout shows that something is wrong with the democracies, and comparative politics can say something about whether and why this might be true. The critics might respond with the 'lies, damned lies and statistics' argument that voting turnout figures are of little use because they are inaccurate, misleading or (sometimes) fake – they overlook the possibility of corrupt election practices, compulsory voting, totalitarian countries with a 99 per cent turnout, or the fact that turnout can be calculated in different ways to produce different conclusions. The comparativists would reply that this is all the more reason for knowing about the problems of turnout figures, which means understanding how they are

produced in different countries, and when the statistics lie and deceive, and when they are reliable and useful for study.

In the end the debate boils down to how one evaluates the different kinds of question that political science can tackle. Critics argue that comparative politics cannot deal with the big issues of truth, beauty, freedom and justice; comparativists know this but claim they can study some factual matters that throw light on important questions. The critics argue that comparative politics deals with trivial matters, especially the large-scale data being collected in some current surveys. Comparativists acknowledge that this is sometimes true, not always, and that, in any case, science does not always advance in giant leaps and bounds but by inching along in tiny steps before making breakthroughs. And sometimes the study of comparative politics comes up with well-founded, hard evidence that is important, surprising and unexpected, as we shall see in the following chapters.

It neglects that every country in the world is unique so comparisons are impossible

One argument against comparative politics is that since every country is unique, all cross-national comparisons are like comparing apples with oranges. We cannot, according to this thinking, ever learn from other countries because everything is different there. We cannot benefit from studying how the Swedes subsidise their political parties, how the Japanese manage their national economy or how the New Zealanders reformed their political system because each country is special and particular. There is some truth in this argument. The practices that work well in some countries do not always travel well to other places. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that we can often borrow from other countries without much modification: the idea of the Ombudsman (see chapter 4) has been adopted successfully in many countries; the basic ideas of proportional voting systems (chapter 12) have spread throughout the world after its first use in Belgium in 1900; the principle of the separation of powers (chapter 4) as discussed by Montesquieu (1689–1755) is now found in every democracy in the world.

It is true that every country is unique, but it is also true that all countries are the same at a general level. At first sight this is a strange statement, so how do we explain it? An analogy is helpful. Every human being is unique with respect to DNA, physical appearance, personality, background and abilities. At another level, human beings are exactly the same: among other things, they are all *homo sapiens*, warm-blooded primates and vertebrate mammals. At a still more general level, human beings are similar to other primates, especially chimpanzees, gorillas and orang-utans and share 96 per cent of their DNA profile with them. At a still more general level, human beings have something in common with pigs, to the extent that pig organs can be transplanted into human beings.

What is unique and what is comparable depends on the level of analysis and what is being compared. A silly-but-serious question asks, 'Is a mouse more like a frog or a whale?' The critic of comparative politics might answer that these creatures are all different and unique and cannot be compared. The answer of the comparativist is that it depends on what you want to compare. The frog and the mouse are of similar size, but the frog and the whale can live in water, and the mouse and the whale give birth to live young. In some ways Costa Rica is more like the USA than Sweden because Costa Rica and the USA have presidential systems of government (chapter 5). In other respects Costa Rica is more like Sweden because both have unitary forms of government, whereas the USA is federal (chapter 6). At one level each political system is unique; at another level some systems are similar in some respects. What countries you select for comparison depends crucially on what you want to study (see the Postscript). This makes comparative politics both more possible and more complicated than its critics assert.

The themes that run through the book – what to watch for

Although each and every system of government is unique, there are broad similarities between different groups of countries. This makes the job of the comparative political scientists easier because instead of listing the many particularities of each system, which would result in a mind-boggling and fruitless task rather like reading a telephone directory, we can often reduce this great mass of detail and complexity to a few general themes. These themes running through the book are:

- the importance of institutions
- that history matters
- the social and economic basis of politics
- the importance of politics
- the way in which the infinite variety of detail combines with a few general patterns
- that there are many ways of achieving the same democratic goals.

The importance of institutions

Much of comparative politics focuses on the attitudes and behaviour of individuals: how they vote, their political values, the political culture, the ways in which they engage in politics, and so on (see chapters 9–11). At the same time we should not lose sight of the great influence and importance of institutions – the structures of government that distinguish federal and unitary systems, presidential and parliamentary systems, pluralist and corporatist systems, and so on. As you progress through the chapters you can note the ways in which institutions matter, and how and why they do so.

History matters

History throws a long shadow. Major events centuries ago, and the outcomes they produced, can affect us strongly even now. Sometimes, it seems, a political decision or turning point can create what is known as 'path dependency'. By this we mean that decisions taken in the past can narrow the options that are available to us today, and decisions taken today may limit options in the future. For example, it would be exceedingly difficult for a unitary state to convert itself into a federal one (and vice versa – see chapter 6), so difficult in fact that few states have ever contemplated such reform unless it was seen as absolutely essential. Institutions also tend to develop a life of their own and to preserve themselves because of institutional inertia or the excessive costs of change. This means that an institution that has developed strong roots in government in the past may well influence current events. As we move through our chapters we will see how historical events, sometimes a long time ago, have implications for political patterns and practices today.

The social and economic basis of politics

One school of thought in political science explains political patterns in terms of social and economic patterns or prerequisites. It points out that different social groups think and behave in different ways and draws the conclusion that social conditions have a strong influence on politics (see chapter 2). Some writers go further than this and claim that all politics can be explained in terms of economic models. The chapters that follow will explain the social and economic basis of politics, but they will also deal with the limitations of these explanations.

Politics matters

The social and economic explanations of politics are useful but limited, because they tend to ignore or overlook the importance of political institutions, events, ideas and cultures. Social and economic factors may have a powerful influence, but so also do political considerations – how political elites react to events, how political ideals affect the way people think and behave, how political institutions have an impact, how electoral systems influence electoral outcomes. It may seem like trying to have one's cake and eat it when we insist that social *and* economic *and* political factors influence government and politics, but, in fact, this simply acknowledges the fact that the social, economic and political are tightly interwoven aspects of the same thing in the real world.

From a mass of detail to general types

As we have emphasised, every political system is unique in many ways, but fortunately for the student of comparative politics we do not have to keep track of each and every particularity because, at a more general level, political

systems tend to cluster around a few general types. Whether we are discussing executive and legislative power, multi-level government, pressure group systems, electoral systems, the mass media, party systems, party ideologies and so on, we will see how a huge variety of detailed and particular differences between countries often break down into a few general types. This is a blessing for comparative political scientists because it turns a job that would be like reading the telephone directory, where every entry is different from every other in some crucial but boring detail, into the more exciting task of constructing general models and theories that apply to a wide variety of democratic nations across the world. Instead of describing each and every political system, we can analyse their contrasts and similarities in terms of a few general characteristics. We can see families of similar political systems among the huge and bewildering variety of detail. The chapters that follow describe these patterns, types and clusters of characteristics when they arise.

There are many ways of achieving the same democratic goals

The point has already been made that there are different ways of achieving the same democratic goals. No country has a monopoly of the best ways. In the first place, different institutional arrangements are suited to different national conditions – large states may be better run along federal lines, but small ones more suited to unitary government, unless they are marked by deep regional divisions, in which case federalism may be the best option (chapter 6). Similarly, democracy requires a division of powers that place checks and balances on each other, but exactly how this is achieved differs between presidential and parliamentary systems, and both can work well or badly (chapter 5).

In some instances, the choice of means to achieve democratic ends depends on what is wanted. Single-party governments may be able to implement bold and innovative policies, but governments that make big mistakes can also be produced. By comparison, coalition governments may be more centralist and cautious, which may be good or bad in different circumstances.

The study of comparative politics shows how often it is wrong to assume that there is a single best way of achieving democratic government. The chapters that follow analyse the merits and deficiencies of the various options and the arguments surrounding them. In this way, the study of comparative government and politics is not an academic exercise of interest to a few ivory tower scholars, but a practical exercise with far reaching implications for the real world. We can learn an awful lot by comparing countries. This can help us discount false explanations based on limited information, shows the strengths and weaknesses of policies applied in other countries and opens up new possibilities and ways of doing things.