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Excerpt

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What Is Comparative Politics?

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Introduction

Imagine that you could design the political order for a country of your choosing. Where would you start? Who would get to rule? What rules for political life would you choose? Could you make rules that would be fair to everyone? If not, whom would these rules favor and whom would they disadvantage? Would they be rules that even those at the bottom of the social order, the poorest and least powerful people, would agree to? What would be the procedures for changing the rules? These are difficult questions because to answer them in a meaningful way requires an understanding of why and how different countries of the world are governed differently. With so many choices to make, it is easy to see why the job of designing a constitution would be such a difficult one.

It could, however, be made easier. One might start by evaluating the existing possibilities as exemplified by the various forms of government in the states of the world. The state is an organization that possesses sovereignty over a territory and its people. Yet, within our world of states, no two are ruled in exactly the same way. Why should this be the case? Why are societies run, and political orders designed, in so many different ways? What consequences do these differences hold for a people's well-being?

Comparativists (i.e., political scientists who study and compare the politics of different countries) believe it is possible to provide answers to these questions. In this book students will begin to understand the craft of comparative politics. Even if it is not possible to design a country as one sees fit, it is possible to understand why countries develop the way they do and why they are ruled as they are. By comparing the range of possible political responses to global opportunities and constraints, we can begin to account for the emergence of various political orders and evaluate the trade-offs involved in constructing each type. Understanding and evaluating the differences among the politics of countries are really the core concerns of comparative politics.

Comparative Politics and Political Science

Within political science, comparative politics is considered one of the major “subfields.” How is it situated in relation to other subfields? Let us consider two that are among the most closely related: political theory and international relations.

In some ways, the first comparativists were political theorists. More than two thousand years ago, the ancient Greek political theorists Plato and Aristotle identified different kinds of political orders – such as aristocracy (literally “the rule of the best”), oligarchy (“the rule of the few”), democracy (“the rule of the people”), and tyranny (“the rule of the tyrant”) – and wrote carefully argued treatises and dialogues on which form of government is the best. Although they offered basic explanations for why one type of government changed into another, they were more interested in justifying their judgments about the right kind of government than in telling us systematically why we get the kind of government that we do. Contemporary political theorists within political science continue this venerable tradition. They continue to write about different kinds of political orders and analyze the structure of ideas about those orders primarily to help us form judgments about them. They continue to teach us what democracy and its rivals are about.

Comparativists, by contrast, tend to suspend their normative evaluation of the world in favor of describing the political world and explaining why it is the way it is. It is important to remember that comparativists do this not because they lack preferences or are unwilling to make normative judgments but rather because as social scientists they are committed first to offering systematic explanations for the world as it is. A comparativist may not like fascism or communism (or even democracy!) but nevertheless considers it important to answer the question of why some countries become fascist, communist, or democratic in the first place. Comparativists may disagree about whether the knowledge they acquire may help make the world a better place or help us make better moral judgments about politics, but they usually agree that the job of describing and explaining is big enough, and perhaps some of the deeper philosophical meanings of our findings can be left to the political theorists. So, for example, rather than evaluating whether democracy is good or not, comparativists spend a great deal of time trying to understand and identify the general conditions – social, economic, ideological, institutional, and international – under which democracies initially appear, become unstable, collapse into dictatorship, and sometimes reemerge as democracies.

What is the relationship between comparative politics and international relations? Like comparativists, most students of international relations consider themselves to be social scientists. In addition, like comparative politics the subfield of international relations can also trace its roots to ancient Greek political theory. In this case, the person of interest is Thucydides, who attempted to understand the origins and consequences of the Peloponnesian Wars (431 BCE to 404 BCE) between the Greek city-states. War, as we know, is unfortunately an important part of the human condition. Modern scholars of international relations understandably devote a great deal of time and energy to explaining why states go to war with each other. Of course, peoples of different states do not only fight with each other. They also trade goods and services with each other and interact in many

different ways. It is not surprising then that scholars of international relations also study trade between countries.

Comparativists, although acknowledging the importance of war and international trade, concentrate on politics within countries rather than the politics that occurs between them. The intellectual division of labor between comparativists, who study “domestic politics,” and international relations specialists, who study the “foreign politics” of states, has long-characterized political science. With so much to learn, it seemed a sensible way of dividing up the discipline.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, this division began to change. For one thing, most scholars of international relations now recognize that what happens within a country may determine whether it wages war or makes peace. Would there have been a Second World War without the electoral success of Hitler’s Nazi Party in Germany in 1932? It is difficult to say for certain, but there is no doubt that politics *between* the European states during the 1930s would have been very different than they were if politics *within* one of them, Germany, had not led to Hitler’s rise to power.

Comparativists have also come to understand the huge impact that international relations has upon the politics of almost every country in the world. War and preparing for war have always influenced domestic politics. So has international trade. Today, the ease with which goods and services, people and the ideas they espouse, move around the world have made our planet a much smaller place. Clearly, what transpires between countries influences what happens within them.

Rather than sustain an artificial division between comparative politics and international relations, in this book we explicitly take account of the global context in which the politics of a country takes shape. The international environment often provides a political challenge to which countries have no choice but to respond. In responding as they do, however, they may introduce a new kind of domestic political order that other countries find appealing or threatening and to which they in turn also feel compelled to respond. There is an intimate connection between international and domestic politics, and in the next chapter we offer a framework for thinking about this connection.

How Comparativists Practice Their Craft: Concepts and Methods

Regime Types

Although comparativists think about a broad range of questions, they are most frequently interested in the origins and impact of different kinds of government, or what they refer to as “regime types.” That is, if we accept that there are different kinds of political orders in the world, what are the main characteristics of those orders, and why do they appear where and when they do? For example, all of the chapters in this book consider why democracy took root or did not take root in the country in question.

Before inquiring into the origins of democracy, however, one must have a fairly clear concept of what democracy is and what it is not. The classification of countries into regime

types is tricky. Most comparativists do not simply accept the word of the rulers of a country that its political institutions are democratic. Instead, they operate with a definition of democracy that contains certain traits: competitive, multiparty elections, freedom of speech and assembly, and the rule of law are the minimum that most comparativists require for a country to be classified as a democracy.

Similarly, when comparativists classify a country as communist, they usually mean that it is ruled by a communist party that seeks to transform the society it rules according to the tenets of an ideology, Marxism-Leninism. Real countries, of course, never practice perfectly all the traits of any regime type. They are never perfectly democratic, communist, fascist, or Islamist. Democracies sometimes violate their own laws or conduct elections that are not perfectly free and fair. Beyond a certain point, however, it makes little sense to categorize a country as democratic if it prohibits free speech or falsifies election results. Was the United States a democracy before the era of civil rights? Or, to take an example from this book, if a communist country, such as China today, allows markets to determine much of economic life, at what point do we cease categorizing it as communist? Comparativists do not agree on the answer to these questions, but clearly they are important ones because before we can understand why certain regime types exist in one place and not in another, we have to agree on what that regime type looks like.

Tools of Analysis: Interests, Identities, and Institutions

Even when they agree on the important differences among democratic, communist, fascist, and Islamist states, comparativists frequently disagree on how best to evaluate the conditions that produce political regime types. This is also a very tricky question. Let us say that you were parachuted into a country and had to figure out quickly what the most important facts about that country were for determining its politics. On what would you choose to concentrate? Comparativists do not always agree on this either.

In general, we can divide comparative politics into three basic schools of thought. A first group of comparativists maintains that what matters most is material interests. People are rational calculators. They organize politically when it serves their interests and support political regime types that maximize their life chances. They are rational in the sense that they minimize their losses and maximize their gains. If you accept this assumption, then, to get a handle on the politics of a given country, what you should be studying is the structure of material interests in its society and how people with those particular interests organize themselves to gain power.

In democratic states, interest groups are usually mobilized by formal organizations such as trade unions, social movements, and political parties. In nondemocratic states, it may be illegal for individuals to come together in interest groups or competing political parties, but even in communist and fascist states, political scientists have identified many ways in which people pursue their interests to the kinds of public policies that benefit them the most.

A second group of comparativists maintain that there is no such thing as “objective” interests outside some set of ideals and ideas that defines the interests in the first place.

Who you think you are – your identity – determines what you really want. Yes, all people require food and shelter, but beyond this minimum what people value most in this world may have very little to do with maximizing their material lot. Compelling ideas on their own may influence politics in profound ways. It is all too easy to find people who are willing to die for what they believe in (that is, to act against the most important material interest of all – physical survival). Instead, what people demand out of their rulers and what rulers do is pursue the ideals that they most cherish and enact policies that are consistent with their identities. So, rather than focusing on material interests, to understand politics, you are much better off concentrating on the dominant ideas and identities of a given society.

Religion and ethnicity are two of the most common forms of identity. In democracies, political scientists have consistently shown that religion and ethnicity are very good (although not perfect) predictors of how people vote and what kinds of policies they favor. In the United States, for example, most Jews vote for the Democratic Party and most Southern Baptists vote Republican because these respective parties are considered by both groups as having ideas similar to their own on important issues. In India, a state that consists of a multitude of nationalities and religions, parties based primarily on particular ethnic and religious groups have successfully competed against parties that run on a nonethnic platform. And it is not only ethnic and religious minority groups that engage in identity politics. The success of anti-immigrant parties throughout Europe and also the importance of the Hindu nationalist party in India show that majorities engage in identity politics too.

Modern societies constantly generate new identities based not only on religion and ethnicity but also on gender, sexual orientation, and care for the environment. Democratic societies now have strong and important women’s rights, gay rights, and environmental movements. And, of course, identity politics matters not only in democratic settings but also in nondemocratic ones. Communist revolutionaries hoped that if they built a better society, people would begin to define themselves and their interests in new ways and that a new “socialist man” would appear who would subordinate his selfish desires to the greater needs of society as a whole. Part of what makes the study of politics so interesting is the constant proliferation of new identities and ideals and the myriad ways in which these new ideals are either accommodated or rejected by the political order or can undermine the existing order.

A third set of comparativists maintains that neither material interests nor identities really determine on their own how a country’s politics works. What matters most are institutions, that is, the long-term, authoritative rules and procedures that structure how power flows. People may deeply desire a certain kind of policy (a new health-care system, for example) and have an identity that would support this (say, a widespread ethic of care that reflects the simple maxim “I am my brother’s keeper”), but the rules of the political game may be structured in such a way that numerical minorities can easily block all attempts to change this policy. So, if you want to get a quick analysis of a country’s politics, what you should concentrate on are the authoritative rules for organizing human behavior: the institutions.

Political life is teeming with institutions. Democracies have institutions for electing their leaders, for channeling the flow of legislation, and for determining whether the laws

are just or “constitutional.” Some of these institutions are so important, such as regularly held free and fair elections, that they are part of what we mean by democracy. Other institutions, such as the rules for electing leaders, have a great impact on the politics of a country but no single set of electoral rules can be held to be more “democratic” than another. In Great Britain, parliamentary leaders are elected much as in the United States, in local electoral districts in which the leading vote getter wins the election – in other words, “first past the post” elections. In Germany, members of the Parliament, the Bundestag, are elected primarily in a multimember district, “proportional representation” contest in which parties are represented in the legislature according to their share of the popular vote. Both systems have strengths and weaknesses but are equally democratic.

Of course, nondemocratic countries have institutions, too. The most important institution in a communist state is the Communist Party, which has small party cells at all political levels spread throughout the society. Communist states also have elaborate institutions for economic planning and administration. And, of course, there is the institution of the secret police. Iran, as an Islamic republic, not only has an elected parliament but standing over this parliament is an unelected Supreme Revolutionary Council of religious leaders that possesses the right to declare invalid legislation that contradicts its interpretation of Islamic law. As in democratic countries, the institutions of nondemocratic countries shape the political arena and influence what kinds of policies are enacted.

In this textbook, we combine the three major approaches to studying why political regimes work as they do. These three ways of studying the determinants of politics – interests, identities, and institutions – represent the dominant modes of inquiry in comparative politics, and some admixture of them is present in virtually all studies, including the chapters of this book. They give us a powerful set of tools for grappling with some of the most important things that comparativists think about.

Consider again the question of why some countries (or “cases,” as comparativists often refer to them) are democratic and others are not. Scholars who stress the importance of interests often argue that democracy depends on the size of a country’s middle class, and hold that poorer countries have diminished chances for sustaining democracy. Comparativists who study ideals and identities explain the presence or absence of democracy by the strength of the commitment to representative government and democratic participation of the leadership and the population. Institutionalists, by contrast, focus on which kinds of political arrangements (U.S.-style presidentialism or British-style parliamentary government, for example) best ensure that elections, freedom of speech, and the rule of law will continue to be practiced. All of these approaches contribute to our understanding of democracy in the modern world.

Comparativists apply the tools of interests, identities, and institutions not only to the determinants of regime type but also use these concepts to understand why countries have the kinds of public policies they do. Even among democracies, one finds important differences. For example, some have large and extensive welfare states – systems to reduce people’s material inequality. Others have much smaller welfare states. Consider the issue of publicly financed health insurance. It is generally acknowledged that most wealthy democratic countries have universal systems of government-funded health insurance and

tightly controlled regulations for the provision of medical services. The big exception to this rule historically has been the United States, where health insurance and service provision remain mostly private and largely unregulated, even after new legislation in 2010. Why is this the case? What accounts for this American exceptionalism? An analysis based on interests might point to the influence of powerful groups, such as insurance companies and physicians, who oppose government interference in the market for health care because it would reduce their profits and incomes. An analysis based on identities and ideas would stress the value most Americans place on individual responsibility and the suspicion they generally harbor toward governmental intervention in the market. An institutional analysis of this question would point to the structure of political institutions in the United States in order to show how health insurance legislation can be blocked relatively easily by a determined minority of legislators at several points along its way to passage. Which of these different approaches to the question yields the most powerful insights is, of course a matter of debate. What comparativists believe is that the answer to the question of U.S. exceptionalism can only be found by comparing U.S. interests, identities, and institutions with those of other countries.

In fact, the concepts of interests, identities, and institutions can be used to assess a broad range of themes that comparativists study. Why do some democratic countries have only two parties, whereas others have three, four, or more? Why do minority ethnic groups mobilize politically in some countries and during some eras but not in others? Why do some people enter politics using parties and elections, whereas others turn to street demonstrations, protest, or even terrorism?

A question that many comparativists have studied using interests, identities, and institutions is that of when revolutions occur. Of course addressing the issue means having a clear notion of what a revolution is. Did Egypt experience a revolution in the spring of 2011 when thousands of ordinary Egyptians came out into the street to overthrow their dictator, or was it something else? Even if we can agree on what a revolution is, however, explaining when one occurs is especially fascinating for students of comparative politics because political change does not always occur peacefully or gradually. Some of the truly momentous changes in political life of countries throughout the world occur quickly and entail a great deal of violence. Notice, for example, that most of the countries in this book have experienced political revolutions at some time in their histories. Their political orders, especially in those countries that became democratic early in their history, were born as much through violent revolutionary conflict as through peaceful compromise. Comparativists frequently deploy the concepts of interests, identities, and institutions in order to identify the conditions under which revolutions occur.

Using these tools and the cases they study, comparativists often establish explanations for general families of events such as revolutions, elections, and the onset of democracy itself. When the explanations works so well (that is, when they can account for the same phenomenon across a sufficiently large range of cases) and the family of events is general enough, comparativists will use the term “theory” to describe what they are talking about. Theories are important because they help us discover new facts about new cases, and cases are important because they help us build new and more powerful theories.

Comparative Politics and Developmental Paths

A Changing Field

Comparative politics grew as a subdiscipline in the United States after World War II. At that time, Americans suddenly found themselves in a position of leadership, with a need for deep knowledge about a huge number of countries. The Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union raised the question of whether countries around the world would become increasingly democratic and capitalist or whether some version of communism would be more appealing. A few prominent comparativists initially provided an answer to this question by maintaining that over time most countries would look more and more alike; they would “converge” with each other. Others, while rejecting “convergence theory,” nevertheless argued that as countries became wealthier, industrialized, educated, and less bound by unquestioned tradition, states throughout the world would become more democratic. In other words, as societies changed, “political development” would occur. This approach to comparative politics was called modernization theory.

Even though it yielded important insights and inspired a great deal of research throughout the world, by the late 1960s modernization theory confronted withering criticism on a number of fronts. First, it universalized the particular experience of the West into a model that all countries, independent of time or place, would also follow. Political scientists doing field research in other areas of the world maintained that this was simply not happening. In poorer countries, in particular, democracies often collapsed into dictatorships. Second, and more important, political scientists working in poorer regions of the world argued that even if the history of Europe and North America (the “West”) did represent a shift from traditional to modern society, the fact of the West’s existence changed the context in which poorer countries had to develop. Some political scientists maintained that the poorer nations of the world lived in a condition of “dependence” on the West. Large Western corporations, so the argument of the dependency theorists ran, supported by their governments at home and by the regimes they controlled in the poorer countries of the world, economically exploited these countries. As long as this relationship existed, the people of these poorer countries (called the “developing world”) would remain poor and would live in undemocratic conditions. Even those who did not share this view came to believe that the notion of a unilinear path to the modern world was not supported by the facts and that the West’s existence at a minimum changed the context in which the poorer countries of the world had to live. In the face of these trenchant criticisms, most comparativists backed away from thinking in such broad terms and began to concentrate on “smaller” and more tractable questions such as public policy, taxation, political parties, and health care.

During the 1970s, however, a new wave of democratization began and dozens of countries that had been dictatorships for decades or that had never known democracy at all became democratic. Rather than return to modernization theory, with its sweeping generalizations about the intimate tie between industrial and capitalist society on the one hand and democracy on the other, comparativists have attempted to develop theories that are more sensitive to historical and geographic contexts. That is the point of departure in our

book. Although we share the long-held interest of comparativists in the conditions that produce and sustain democracy, our approach acknowledges the uniqueness of the experience of the West and the huge impact that this experience has had and continues to exercise on the political development of the rest of the world.

Our approach is thus “developmental” in that we place the analysis of each country within the context not only of its own history but also within a broader global history of political development. The initial breakthrough of the West into industrial capitalism and political democracy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries set out a challenge for the rest of the world. The responses to this challenge sometimes took a democratic form, as in the case of France’s response to Great Britain’s power in the nineteenth century, but sometimes they did not, as in the cases of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. In fact, all of the nondemocratic regime types examined in this book were responses to the challenge posed by the most powerful capitalist and democratic countries. The international context provides the impetus through which domestic interests and identities create new institutions.

Not every comparativist will agree with our approach. Some maintain that the perspective emphasizing the Western developmental challenge to the rest of the world is too focused on the “West” and ignores indigenous developments that have little to do with the West. Others contend that it is best to leave these large questions aside altogether because they are basically unanswerable and that the purpose of comparative politics is to approach matters of the “middle range” (that is, questions amenable to neat generalizations). Although we acknowledge the hazards of starting with the West and proceeding to the frequently poorer and less democratic areas of the world – the “East” and the “South” – the West’s impact is too important to ignore. It is entirely possible that some time in the future political scientists will start this kind of book with the more “advanced” East and analyze the East’s decisive impact on the development of the West but that day has not yet arrived. Even when it does, however, it will still be necessary to account for the East’s rise to power as a response to the initial breakthrough made by the West.

Equally, although we understand that theorizing about such large questions as why countries have the political orders they do is asking a great deal, comparativists have never shied away from asking big questions about the origins of regime types and their impact on world history. Furthermore, as the country chapters make clear, there is no reason smaller and more tractable questions cannot be pursued within our framework of interests, identities, and institutions.

Paths of Development

We divide our country chapters into four groups. Each group represents a distinct developmental path. The first group we term “early developers,” and we use the examples of Great Britain and France to illustrate what is distinctive about this group. We could also have chosen other Northern and Western European cases such as the Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland, as well as the United States and Canada. Great Britain and France, however, offer important features that make them worth studying. In both cases, long-term economic changes created urban middle classes who used their new social power to demand a

great say in the affairs of government. In Great Britain the economic growth that produced the new middle class was so rapid and decisive that it has been termed by economic historians an “industrial revolution” and caused Britain to become the most powerful country in the world and remain so for over a century. France, too, became very powerful and created an overseas empire that competed with Great Britain’s. In both cases, however, democracy became firmly rooted. In Great Britain, it was never questioned, even if it took a long time to encompass all of society. In France, where the struggle for democracy was much more intense, the proponents of democratic government time and again gained the upper hand.

A second group of countries took a different developmental path. We term them “middle developers.” We include in this group Germany and Japan, although we could also have included Italy, Spain, Austria, and several other countries of Central Europe. The key feature of this pattern of development is that these countries all got a “late start” in economic development and had to catch up with the early developers if they were to compete militarily and satisfy the material desires of their people. In all cases, the state played a much larger role in fostering economic development, the traditional agrarian nobility did not really leave the political scene until well into the twentieth century, the military wielded a great deal of influence, and the middle classes were socially far weaker and politically more timid than in the early developers. The combination of external pressure to develop, the dominance of traditional social classes in the modern world, and the relative weakness of the middle classes laid the groundwork for episodes of uncertain democratic politics and authoritarian rule. In the twentieth century, both Germany and Japan developed indigenous responses to the early developers that political scientists have termed “fascist.” Fascism offered an alternative way of looking at the world compared with the liberal democracy of the early developers. It stressed ethnic and racial hierarchy over liberal democracy’s legal equality, dictatorship over representative government, and military conquest over international trade. Although the fascist response to the challenge of the West was largely defeated in World War II, and both Germany and Japan subsequently entered the family of democratic states, fascist ideology continues to attract support in parts of Europe and Asia.

Our third group of countries we term “late developers.” We include here Russia and China, although we could also have included other countries in Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia. In both Russia and China, economic development occurred so late after its initial breakthrough in the West that the state was forced to play the dominant role. As both societies entered the twentieth century, the middle class was relatively small and weak. The industrial working class was also small, deeply disaffected, and lived in horrible conditions. The majority of both societies consisted of illiterate and landless peasants. The response in both cases was a communist revolution based on an intellectual elite leading the mass peasantry in the name of a yet-to-be-created industrial working class. Communism promised a world based on material equality and a nonmarket planned economy under the leadership of a communist party that supposedly understood the scientific “laws” of historical development. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the late developers cast off their communist economies. China, and, after a decade of serious economic crisis, Russia as well experienced rapid economic growth. Both, however, remained less than democratic – China continues to be formally ruled by a communist one-party dictatorship and Russia