

Directions:

- a) Read the following article from the College Board.
- b) Practice taking margin notes, including questions you have so you can ask them in class.
- c) As you read, create a glossary of EACH of the **bold words** AND create a usable definition of each word.

Comparative Politics Made Simple

Making Comparisons

Most people are subliminal comparativists; others make comparisons their vocation. If you made a decision this morning concerning what to eat, what to wear, and how you should get to work or school, chances are you did so by considering alternatives and choosing the one, for whatever reason, that “made sense” (cereal and milk or eggs and toast? Jeans and t-shirt or suit? Scenic country road or freeway?). You engage in this listing of and picking among alternatives every day, sometimes consciously but often less so. Some decisions you make quickly; for others you insist on taking your time, usually to think through the consequences of each option, before choosing the one that is “best” (that is, the one that is likely to meet your goal with the least possible adverse consequences or costs). To decide is to compare, and most of us decide (and therefore compare) all the time.

Comparative politics is about classifying, comparing, and sometimes even choosing, except that the “things” that are of interest to comparative politics specialists are the really big ones: states, societies, ideologies, political systems, countries, regions, time periods, worlds, and so on. At its most basic, then, comparative politics is a **method of study** (by comparison) and a **field of study** (of macrosocial and political phenomena). Comparativists are interested in these phenomena not for their own sake (that’s the job of area studies specialists) but rather for the purpose of drawing attention to similarities and differences — especially the latter, of understanding why things are the way they are in one locale but not another — and of comparing and evaluating realities (for example, public policies).

Looking at Specific Country Examples

A comparativist might observe that the United States’ health-care system is funded mainly by private sources, while the United Kingdom’s system is funded by government (through the National Health Service, or NHS). She further notices that in the U.K. health care is guaranteed to all. But she also notes that those Americans with health insurance have an easier time receiving certain medical procedures (kidney dialysis and transplants, triple-bypass heart surgeries) than their counterparts across the Atlantic. All of the aforementioned differences between the U.S. and U.K. health-care systems are, in and of themselves, interesting, but you probably want to know more, such as why the two countries’ health-care systems are different, and which one is “better.”

Our comparativist is like you, so she investigates. She is not likely to confine herself to health care in the U.S. and the U.K. (her dependent variable): she will focus on other issues that she thinks might have caused health-care systems between the two countries to be so different. These factors (independent variables) would likely include U.S. and U.K. history, geography, demography, economy, political institutions, interest groups, and citizen attitude toward government and the private sector.

She spends hours reading about many possible factors: the insular history of the U.S. and the empire-making history of the U.K. (which favored the formation of a healthy army and civil servants who could be dispatched around the world); the virtual absence of socialist ideology in the mainstream of American politics and the existence of Fabian

socialist ideology in the U.K.; the division of policy making between separate, if not to say competing, branches of government in the United States and the fusion of executive and parliamentary powers in the U.K. (which makes for less contention in policy making and implementation); and, above all, her own survey, which indicates that Britons trust government more than Americans do. Our comparativist may now feel that she knows why the health-care systems are different, and may conclude that, although these differences have many causes, one seems to be stronger than all the others: Britons trust government more than Americans. (In some studies comparativists are able to measure, together and separately, the effects of each independent variable, or cause, on the dependent variable, the effect. Even when they cannot do this, they can make plausible arguments about causes and effects.)

What has our comparativist done thus far, and how? First, she observes a “problem” or “case.” Second, she investigates its cause(s). In the process, she reads extensively about not only the health-care systems in the two countries but also their history, political systems, and so forth. The knowledge gained is supplied by **secondary sources** (for example, the internet, books, or journal articles). To find out about public attitudes toward government and the private sector, the comparativist decides to do a survey. Information supplied by this survey may be said to have come from **primary sources**. The comparativist therefore uses two types of sources to gather facts, which she analyzes meticulously to make a case as to why health-care systems in the U.S. and the U.K. are different. But she may go even further than that, based on what she has learned from her study. She may conclude that, given the evidence, one country has a “better” health-care system than the other. Here, however, she would be expressing a preference: her research would thus have a **normative** (or value-based) dimension, not just an **empirical** (value-neutral fact-based) one. Furthermore, she may develop a **theory**, which is a general statement intended to explain or account for a given phenomenon, about health-care systems: citizen trust in government is the reason why countries have government-funded health-care systems.

National and Global Contexts

The terms in bold are at the heart of comparative politics. The U.S. and the U.K. are countries, or, in comparative politics language, **nation-states**. A **nation** (a and b below) **-state** (c below) is a large group of people who share (a) the characteristics of history, language, religion, ethnicity, race, political and economic values, and so forth; (b) occupy the same (usually contiguous) territory; and (c) have a set of governing institutions that they recognize as “theirs,” which makes, enforces and adjudicates laws and regulations and is expected to defend them in case of an attack by some other actor. Few countries neatly fit this definition. The U.S., for example, has many ethnic groups and religions. Perhaps a better concept than nation-state is a national state, in which a large group of people living under one authority (or **state**) have come together to forge a common or national identity, regardless of other things that may separate them. Nation-states are usually the **units of analysis** in comparative research, but comparativists can focus on almost anything. A unit of analysis is the main object or actor in an argument, hypothesis, or theoretical framework. It is different from the **levels of analysis**, which are the primary analytical focus of the researcher, which in our example would be American and British health-care systems or policies.

Nevertheless, comparativists almost never ignore certain macrosocial factors, even when they are not their primary focus of study. These would include **the economy**, which is whatever arrangement people make to produce and trade the goods and services that they think they need to survive, or otherwise make money; **the state**, which is the centralized authority that rules over a territory thanks to its monopolistic ownership of force (armies, police, militias, etc.); and **political institutions**, or the means by which state power is organized (including the **government**, which

is the group of executive officials who hold their offices “temporarily.”) Macrosocial factors also include **ideology**, or the worldview by which people make sense of reality and, at the same time, serves as a guide for them to do what is “right”; **culture**, which is the purported collective experience, characteristics, values, beliefs and orientation of a large group of people (closely related to ideology, but not the same: ideology is a cognitive road map usually produced by elites [intellectuals no less], and culture is how people actually live); **civil society**, which refers to nonstate organizations that people voluntarily join, usually to defend their interests against the state or express themselves peacefully and nonpolitically (political parties, labor unions, Girl Scouts, etc.); and, finally, the **international environment**, which refers to actors external to the typical units of analysis (nation-states) of comparativists. The international environment is composed of other nation-states or countries, **multinational, government-sanctioned institutions**, which are institutions created by many nation-states to address matters of common concern (for example, the United Nations or ECOWAS [Economic Community of West Africa States]); **multinational, privately owned corporations**, which are profit-seeking business organizations that operate in more than one country (for example Wal-Mart); and **international nongovernmental organizations** (INGOs), which are non-profit-seeking organizations that operate on a charity basis and deliver services to the poor and needy across countries (such as Doctors Without Borders). INGOS also serve as advocates when they do not provide services (for example, Amnesty International).

You can pick almost any book on comparative politics and you will find at least a mention of the concepts defined above. Sometimes one is the focus of comparison in a two-country study, as when comparativists study political parties in the U.S. and Italy. Sometimes they are bundled with others in a multicountry study, as when comparativists study democracy and economic development all over the world. The relative weight of specific concepts as explanatory variables in the analysis of comparativists largely determines the “school” to which they may be said to belong.

Schools of Analysis

Three of the most prominent schools in comparative politics in the past 50 years have been **political economy, modernization theory, and dependency theory**. They are chosen here only to give you an idea of the sharply different perspectives that exist in comparative politics. The political economy approach emphasizes, as its name suggests, the nexus between economy and politics. A classic case is Robert Bates’s *States and Markets in Tropical Africa: The Political Basis of Agricultural Policy* (University of California Press, 1981), in which the author examines how state economic policy in Africa, especially in agriculture, undermines development, and why policy continues in light of failure. Political economy, in turn, is composed of subschools, among them rational choice theory, which attempts to use (neoclassical liberal) economic reasoning to explain collective decisions.

Like political economy, modernization theory focuses on domestic forces, but its concern is more about how certain cultural aspects that retard development may be overcome. Modernization theory generally divides society between a “modern” sector and a “backward” sector. The challenge of development is how to overcome the latter. In addition, modernization theory tends to emphasize culture rather than the political economy, which it sees as a dependent variable to be acted upon. Still, the units of analysis in both schools are nation-states, and their levels of analysis, although different, are internal to the units.¹

The same cannot be said of dependency theory, for which the global system, not nation-states, is the focus of analysis. In dependency theory, poverty is due to neither so-called backward culture nor deleterious state actions in

the political economy but rather the global system itself: a relatively small number of “core” countries specialize in high-value-added manufactured goods, while a large number of “peripheral” countries specialize in primary commodity production. Thus poverty in dependency theory stems from the position countries occupy in the international division of labor or system.

Methods of Comparison

The scientific method of the hard sciences like biology and chemistry was adapted by political scientists to study political systems. The **Systems Approach** looks at the big picture or inputs, policy-making, the outputs and the broad feedback. However, this approach is often too broad and fails to address in-depth details, institutions or use social science tools to help to explain behaviors of the actors within the political system.

The discipline of comparative politics was significantly influenced by the seminal work of Gabriel Almond and Sydney Verba, who adapted the social science method of **structural functionalism** to political science. This method of analysis zooms into the specific structures and their functions within a system. However, this method fails to address in any meaningful way the **history and culture** of the *nation* governed by the political system that impact the system. Therefore, due to the strengths and weaknesses of these other approach to analysis, this course will borrow from all of them by analyzing the political systems and the types of each, analyzing the specific institutions and their functions, delve into the cultures of these 6 *nations* and place the systems within their national and international environments.

Conclusion

To conclude, comparative politics is about serious issues: war and peace, democracy and authoritarianism, market-based and state-based economies, prosperity and poverty, health-care coverage, and so on. However, its *raison d'être* is quite simple: the world is diverse, not monolithic. Furthermore, the world is getting smaller, literally and figuratively. Given the tremendous diversity that exists on our planet, and the fact that no one country is “better” than all the others on every count, there is always room for learning. Furthermore, knowledge is a precondition for success in an interdependent – less isolated, more interconnected, and therefore “smaller” – world. How can we relate to another country if we know nothing about its institutions, culture, or history? The job of the comparativist researcher is to make comparisons less subliminal and random, and more deliberate and systematic, especially in the things that are critical to human life.

Note

1. I am simplifying somewhat here. Allowance should be made for international political economy, which emphasizes the role of external forces in the politics of countries. Also, modernization theory stresses the demonstration effect that “modern” countries have on their nonmodern cousins.

Authored by

- **Jean-Germain Gros**
University of Missouri-St. Louis
St. Louis, Missouri
- **Mr. Klein** made a few edits for consistency with the CB West AP Comp Gov course.