



**CHAPTER ONE:  
INTRODUCTION TO COMPARATIVE  
GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS:  
A CONCEPTUAL APPROACH**

Comparative government and politics provides an introduction to the wide, diverse world of governments and political practices that exist in modern times. Although the course focuses on specific countries, it also emphasizes an understanding of conceptual tools and methods that form a framework for comparing almost any governments that exist today. Additionally, it requires students to go beyond individual political systems to consider international forces that affect all people in the world, often in very different ways. Six countries form the core of the course: Great Britain, Russia, China, Mexico, Iran, and Nigeria. The countries are chosen to reflect regional variations, but more importantly, to illustrate how important concepts operate both similarly and differently in different types of political systems: “advanced” democracies, communist and post-communist countries, and newly-industrialized and less-developed nations. This book includes review materials for all six countries.

Goals for the course include:

- Gaining an understanding of major comparative political concepts, themes, and trends
- Knowing important facts about government and politics in Great Britain, Russia, China, Mexico, Iran, and Nigeria
- Identifying patterns of political processes and behavior and analyzing their political and economic consequences
- Comparing and contrasting political institutions and processes across countries

- Analyzing and interpreting basic data for comparing political systems

**WHAT IS COMPARATIVE GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS?**

Most people understand that the term **government** is a reference to the leadership and institutions that make policy decisions for a country. However, what exactly is **politics**? Politics is basically all about power. Who has the power to make the decisions? How did power-holders get power? What challenges do leaders face from others – both inside and outside the country’s borders – in keeping power? So, as we look at different countries, we are not only concerned about the ins and outs of how the government works; we will also look at how power is gained, managed, challenged, and maintained.

College-level courses in comparative government and politics vary in style and organization, but they all cover topics that enable meaningful comparisons across countries. These topics are introduced in the pages that follow, and will be addressed in greater depth when each of the countries is covered separately.

The topics are:

- The Comparative Method
- Sovereignty, Authority, and Power
- Political and Economic Change
- Citizens, Society, and the State
- Political Institutions
- Public Policy

**TOPIC ONE: THE COMPARATIVE METHOD**

Political scientists sometimes argue about exactly what countries should be studied and how they should be 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 builds on those facts to 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 the empirical approach alone leads to meaningless data collection. The approaches give us different but equally important tools for analyzing and comparing political systems.

As with research in any social science, comparative government and politics relies on scientific methods to objectively and logically evaluate data. After reviewing earlier research, scholars formulate a **hypothesis**, a speculative statement about the relationship between two or more factors known as **variables**. Variables are measurable traits or characteristics that change under different conditions. For example, the poverty level in a country may change over time. One question that a comparative researcher might ask is, "Why are poverty rates higher in one country than in others?" In seeking to answer this question, the researcher wants to identify which variable or variables may contribute to high levels of poverty. In other words, the researcher is trying to discover **causation** – the idea that one (or more) variable causes or influences another. So a credible hypothesis might be that higher poverty levels are caused by lower levels of formal education. In this hypothesis, one variable (the poverty level) is called the **dependent variable** because it is caused or influenced by another variable (the level of formal education), which is called the **independent variable**. A **correlation** exists when a change in one variable coincides with a change in the other. Correlations are an indication that causality *may* be present; they do not necessarily indicate causation. Comparative researchers seek to identify the causal link between variables by collecting and analyzing data.

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 economically underdeveloped and deprived. Even though the



### TOPICS IN COMPARATIVE GOVERNMENT: VARIABLES, CAUSATION, AND CORRELATION

**Variables** – measurable traits that change under different conditions.

**Causation** – the idea that one variable (the independent variable) causes another (the dependent variable)



**Correlation exists when a change in one variable accompanies a change in another.**

Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, this approach is still taken today by many comparative textbooks, whose comparisons are based on democracy vs. authoritarianism and communism vs. capitalism. Even though this method is still valid, newer types of comparisons between countries are reflected in the following three trends:

- **The impact of informal politics** – Governments have formal positions and structures that may be seen on an organizational chart, but these formal elements are not all that there is to political systems. For example, in formal terms 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 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 politi-

cians 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. Since 1991, the world no longer is dominated by two superpowers, and that fact has had consequences that have reverberated in many areas that no one could have predicted. However, it creates an opportunity to compare the impact of change on many 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. If citizens turn to the government for solutions to economic problems and government does not respond, they 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 that we study in this course, 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 20<sup>th</sup> century, but lost ground to democratic regimes by the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> 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 as one or the other. 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 with 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 powerful individuals, 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



## TOPICS IN COMPARATIVE GOVERNMENT: SOVEREIGNTY AND INSTITUTIONS

**Sovereignty** – the ability of a state to carry out actions or policies within its borders independently

**Institutions** – stable, long-lasting organizations that help to turn political ideas into policy.



them to endure even when leaders change. By their very nature, states exercise **sovereignty**, the ability to carry out actions or policies within their borders independently from interference either from the inside or the outside.

A state that is unable to exercise sovereignty lacks autonomy, and because it is not independent, it may be exploited by leaders and/or organizations that see the state as a resource to use for their own ends. Frequently, the result is a high level of corruption. The problem is particularly prevalent in newly-industrializing and less-developed countries, largely because their governments lack autonomy. For example, military rulers in Nigeria stole vast amounts of money from the state during the 1990s, making it one of the most corrupt countries in the world. Today Nigeria's tremendous revenues from oil largely evaporate before they reach ordinary citizens, providing evidence that corruption is still a major issue in Nigeria.

### States, Nations, and Regimes

States 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 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 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 has provided 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 policymaking are clearly changing.

### Variations of the Nation State

A **binational** or **multinational state** is one that contains more than one nation. The former Soviet Union is a good example of a multinational state. It was divided into fifteen “soviet republics” that were based on nationality, such as the Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. When the country fell apart in 1991, it fell along ethnic boundaries into independent nation-states. Today Russia (one of the former soviet republics) remains in itself a large multinational state that governs many ethnic groups. Just as ethnic pressures challenged the sovereignty of the Soviet government, the Russian government has faced “breakaway movements” – such as in Chechnya – that have threatened Russian stability. Minority ethnic groups may feel so strongly about their separate identities that they demand their independence. **Stateless nations** are a people without a state. In the Middle East the Kurds are a nation of some 20 million people divided among six states and dominant in none. Kurdish nationalism has survived over the centuries, and has played an important role in the politics that followed the reconfiguration of Iraq after the Iraqi War that began in 2003.



**A Stateless Nation.** The Kurds have had a national identity for many centuries, but they have never had a state. Instead, 20 million Kurds are spread in an area that crosses the formal borders of six countries: Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

### Core Areas

Most of the early nation-states grew over time from **core areas**, expanding outward along their frontiers. Their growth generally stopped when they bumped up against other nation-states, causing them to define boundaries. Today most European countries still have roughly the same core areas as long ago, and many countries in other parts of the world also have well-defined core areas. They may be identified on a map by examining population distributions and transportation networks. As you travel away from the core area, into the state's **periphery** (outlying areas), towns get smaller, factories fewer, and open land more common. Clear examples of core areas are the Paris Basin in France and Japan's Kanto Plain, centered on the city of Tokyo. States with more than one core area – **multicore states** – may be problematic, especially if the areas are ethnically diverse, such as in Nigeria. Nigeria's northern core is primarily Muslim and its southern core is Christian, and the areas pull the country in different directions. To compensate for this tendency for the country to separate, the capital city was moved from Lagos (in the South) to Abuja, near the geographic center of the state.

A multicore character is not always problematic for a country. For example, the United States still has a primary core area that runs along

its northeastern coastline from Washington D.C. to Boston. A secondary core area exists on the West Coast that runs from San Diego in the south to San Francisco in the north. Arguably, other core areas have developed around Chicago and other Midwestern cities, and Atlanta in the South. Despite the multiple core areas, regional differences do not threaten the existence of the state, as they do in Nigeria.

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 two categories: democracies and authoritarian systems.

### 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. Democratic governments typically have three major branches: executives, legislatures, and judicial courts. Some democracies are **parliamentary systems** – where citizens vote for legislative representatives, who 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.

- **Parliamentary systems** – In this type of democracy, the principle of **parliamentary sovereignty** governs the decision-making process. Theoretically, the legislature makes the laws, controls finances, appoints and dismisses the prime minister and the cabinet (the other ministers), and debates public issues. In reality, however, strong party discipline within the legisla-