INTRODUCTION

What can political science tell us that we don't already know?

Who would have predicted 10 years ago that the Middle East would change so much in such a short period of time? Dramatic historical events often take scholars, politicians, and even participants by surprise. For example, in the 1980s few people expected that communism would come to a dramatic end in Eastern Europe—if anything, modest reforms in the Soviet Union were expected to give communist institutions a new lease on life. Following the collapse of communism and increased democratization in parts of Asia and Latin America, many scholars expected that regimes in the Middle East would be next. But by the turn of the century, these expectations appeared unfounded; authoritarianism in the region seemed immune to change. Scholars chalked this up to a number of things—the role of oil, Western economic and military aid, lack of civic institutions, or the supposedly undemocratic nature of Islam.

Yet again, history took us by surprise. The opening events of the Arab Spring were disarmingly simple. In December 2010, a young Tunisian man, Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself on fire to protest police corruption and government indifference. Angry protests broke out shortly thereafter, and the long-standing government was overthrown within weeks. New protests then broke out across the region in January and February 2011. In Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak was forced to resign after 30 years in office. In Libya, protests turned to widespread armed conflict and

led to the killing of Muammar Gaddafi after more than 40 years of rule. In Syria, Bashar al-Assad clung to power as peaceful protests eventually turned into a civil war that has devastated the country, killed over 400,000 people, and triggered a migration crisis.

The immediate political future of these and other countries in the region is uncertain. Tunisia has transitioned into a fragile democracy, while Egypt has returned to dictatorship; Libya is plagued by regional and tribal conflict, while Syria has drawn in foreign forces, some bent on establishing an Islamist political system across the region. At the same time, an entire range of countries in the region have faced down public protests or not faced them at all. This is especially true among the monarchies of the Persian Gulf, where one might have imagined that these anachronistic forms of rule would have been the first to fall.

We are thus left with a series of puzzles. Why did the Arab Spring take place? What was the source of these tumultuous changes—revolution, civil war, and one of the largest refugee crises in recent history? Why did these uprisings take different forms and differ in the level of violence from place to place? Finally, why did some countries not see significant public protest to begin with? The hopeful nature of an Arab Spring has since been replaced by a much darker sense of the future politics of the region. Democracy, even political stability, seems further away than ever, and there are serious repercussions for the Middle East and beyond. Can political science help us answer these questions? Can it provide us with the tools to shape our own country's policies in this regard? Or are dramatic political changes, especially regional ones, simply too complex?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Explain the methods political scientists use to understand politics around the world.
- Discuss whether comparative politics can be more scientific and predict political outcomes.
- Define the role and importance of institutions in political life.
- Compare freedom and equality and consider how politics reconciles the two across countries.

During the past 25 years, the world has seen an astonishing number of changes: the rise of new economic powers in Asia, the collapse of communism, revolutions across the Middle East, the return of religion to politics, the spread of information technology and social media, and the shifting effects of globalization. Many of the traditional assumptions and beliefs held by scholars, policy makers, and citizens have been overturned. New centers of wealth may reduce poverty, but they may also increase domestic inequality. Democracy, often seen as an inexorable force, can founder on such obstacles as religious or economic conflict. Technological change may create new, shared identities and sources of cooperation, but it can destabilize and fragment communities.

One pertinent example, which we have seen emerge in the civil wars in Syria and Iraq, is the role of ethnic and religious conflict. Why does this form of political violence occur? Is it a response to inequality or political disenfranchisement? Is it a function of cultural differences, a "clash of civilizations"? Is it fostered or tempered by globalization? Perhaps the explanation lies somewhere else entirely, beyond our purview or comprehension. How can we know what is correct? How do we scrutinize a range of explanations and evaluate their merits? Competing assumptions and explanations are at the heart of political debates and policy decisions, yet we are often asked to choose in the absence of reliable evidence or a good understanding of cause and effect. To be better citizens, we should be better students of political science and **comparative politics**—the study and comparison of domestic politics across countries. Comparative politics can be contrasted with another related field in political science, **international relations**. While comparative politics looks at the politics inside countries (such as elections, political parties, revolutions, and judicial systems), international relations concentrates on relations between countries (such as foreign policy, war, trade, and foreign aid). Of course the two overlap in many places, such as in ethnic or religious conflict, which often spills over borders, or political change, which can be shaped by international organizations or military force. For now, however, our discussion will concentrate on political structures and actions within countries.

This chapter lays out some of the most basic vocabulary and structures of political science and comparative politics. These will fall under three basic categories: *analytical concepts* (assumptions and theories that guide our research), *methods* (ways to study and test those theories), and *ideals* (beliefs and values about preferred outcomes). Analytical concepts help us ask questions about cause and effect, methods provide tools to seek out explanations, and ideals help us compare existing politics with what we might prefer.

Our survey will consider some of the most basic questions: What is politics? How does one compare different political systems around the world? We will

spend some time on the methods of comparative politics and how scholars have approached its study. Over the past century, political scientists have struggled with the challenge of analyzing politics and have asked whether such analysis can actually be considered a science. Exploring these issues will give us a better sense of the limitations and possibilities in the study of comparative politics. We will consider comparative politics through the concept of **institutions**—organizations or activities that are self-perpetuating and valued for their own sake. Institutions play an important role in defining and shaping what is possible and probable in political life by laying out the rules, norms, and structures in which we live. Finally, in addition to institutions, we will take up the ideals of freedom and equality. If institutions shape how the game of politics is played, then the goal of the game is the right mix of freedom and equality. Which ideal is more important? Must one come at the expense of the other? Perhaps some other ideal is preferable to both? With the knowledge gained by exploring these questions, we will be ready to take on complex politics around the world.

What Is Comparative Politics?

First, we must identify what comparative politics is. **Politics** is the struggle in any group for power that will give one or more persons the ability to make decisions for the larger group. This group may range from a small organization to the entire world. Politics occurs wherever there are people and organizations. For example, we may speak of "office politics" when we are talking about power relationships in a business. Political scientists in particular concentrate on the struggle for leadership and power in a political community—a political party, an elected office, a city, a region, or a country. It is therefore hard to separate the idea of politics from the idea of **power**, which is the ability to influence others or impose one's will on them. Politics is the competition for public power, and power is the ability to extend one's will.

In political science, comparative politics is a subfield that compares this pursuit of power across countries. The method of comparing countries can help us make arguments about cause and effect by drawing evidence from across space and time. For example, one important puzzle we will return to frequently is why some countries are democratic, while others are not. Why have politics in some countries resulted in power being dispersed among more people, while in others power is concentrated in the hands of a few? Why is South Korea democratic, while North Korea is not? Looking at North Korea alone won't necessarily help us understand why South Korea went down a different path, or vice versa. A comparison of the

two, perhaps alongside similar cases in Asia, may better yield explanations. As should be clear from our discussion of the Arab Spring, these are not simply academic questions. Democratic countries and pro-democracy organizations actively support the spread of like-minded regimes around the world, but if it is unclear how or why this comes about, democracy becomes difficult or even dangerous to promote. It is therefore important to separate ideals from our concepts and methods and not let the former obscure our use of the latter. Comparative politics can inform and even challenge our ideals, providing alternatives and questioning our assumption that there is one right way to organize political life.

The Comparative Method

If comparison is an important way to test our assumptions and shape our ideals, how we compare cases is important. If there is no criterion or guide by which we gather information or draw conclusions, our studies become little more than a collection of details. Researchers thus often seek out puzzles—questions about politics with no obvious answer—as a way to guide their research. From there, they rely on some **comparative method**—a way to compare cases and draw conclusions. By comparing countries or subsets within them, scholars seek out conclusions and generalizations that could be valid in other cases.

To return to our earlier question, let us say that we are interested in why democracy has failed to develop in some countries. This question was central to debates in the West over the future of the Middle East and elsewhere. We might approach the puzzle of democracy by looking at North Korea. Why has the North Korean government remained communist and highly repressive even as similar regimes around the world have collapsed?

A convincing answer to this puzzle could tell scholars and policy makers a great deal and even guide our tense relations with North Korea in the future. Examining one country closely may lead us to form hypotheses about why a country operates as it does. We call this approach **inductive reasoning**—the means by which we go from studying a case to generating a hypothesis. But while a study of one country can generate interesting hypotheses, it does not provide enough evidence to test them. Thus we might study North Korea and perhaps conclude that the use of nationalism by those in power has been central to the persistence of nondemocratic rule. In so concluding, we might then suggest that future studies look at the relationship between nationalism and authoritarianism in other countries. Inductive reasoning can therefore be a foundation on which we build greater theories in comparative politics.

Comparative politics can also rely on **deductive reasoning**—starting with a puzzle and from there generating some hypothesis about cause and effect to test against a number of cases. Whereas inductive reasoning starts with the evidence as a way to uncover a hypothesis, deductive reasoning starts with the hypothesis and then seeks out the evidence. In our example of inductive reasoning, we started with a case study of North Korea and ended with some testable generalization about nationalism; in deductive reasoning, we would start with our hypothesis about nationalism and then test that hypothesis by looking at a number of countries. By carrying out such studies, we may find a **correlation**, or apparent association, between certain factors or variables. If we were particularly ambitious, we might claim to have found cause and effect, or a **causal relationship**.[1] Inductive and deductive reasoning can help us to better understand and explain political outcomes and, ideally, could help us predict them.

Unfortunately, inductive and deductive reasoning, or finding correlation and causation, is not easy. Comparativists face seven major challenges in trying to examine political features across countries. Let's move through each of these challenges and show how they complicate the comparative method and comparative politics in general. First, political scientists have difficulty controlling the variables in the cases they study. In other words, in our search for correlations or causal relationships, we are unable to make true comparisons because each of our cases is different. By way of illustration, suppose a researcher wants to determine whether increased exercise by college students leads to higher grades. In studying the students who are her subjects, the researcher can control for a number of variables that might also affect grades, such as the students' diet, the amount of sleep they get, or any factor that might influence the results. By controlling for these differences and making certain that many of these variables are the same across the subjects with the exception of exercise, the researcher can carry out her study with greater confidence.

But political science offers few opportunities to control the variables because the variables are a function of real-world politics. As will become clear, economies, cultures, geography, resources, and political structures are amazingly diverse, and it is difficult to control for these differences. Even in a single case study, variables change over time. At best, we can control as much as possible for variables that might otherwise distort our conclusions. If, for example, we want to understand why gun ownership laws are so much less restrictive in the United States than in most other industrialized countries, we are well served to compare the United States with countries that have similar historical, economic, political, and social experiences, such as Canada and Australia, rather than Japan or South Africa. This approach allows us to control our variables more effectively, but it still leaves many variables uncontrolled and unaccounted for.

A second, related problem concerns the interactions between the variables themselves. Even if we can control our variables in making our comparisons, there is the problem that many of these variables are interconnected and interact. In other words, many variables interact to produce particular outcomes, in what is known as **multicausality**. A single variable like a country's electoral system or the strength of its judicial system is unlikely to explain the variation in countries' gun control laws. The problem of multicausality also reminds us that in the real world there are often no single, easy answers to political problems.

A third problem involves the limits to our information and information gathering. Although the cases we study have many uncontrolled and interconnected variables, we often have too few cases to work with. In the natural sciences, researchers often conduct studies with a huge number of cases—hundreds of stars or thousands of individuals, often studied across time. This breadth allows researchers to select their cases in such a way as to control their variables, and the large number of cases prevents any single unusual case from distorting the findings. But in comparative politics, we are typically limited by the number of countries in the world—fewer than 200 at present, most of which did not exist a few centuries ago. Even if we study some subset of comparative politics (like political parties or acts of terrorism), our total number of cases will remain relatively small. And if we attempt to control for differences by trying to find a number of similar cases (for example, wealthy democracies), our total body of cases will shrink even further.

A fourth problem in comparative politics concerns how we access the few cases we do have. Research is often further hindered by the very factors that make countries interesting to study. Much information that political scientists seek is not easy to acquire, necessitating work in the field—that is, conducting interviews or studying government archives abroad. International travel requires time and money, and researchers may spend months or even years in the field. Interviewees may be unwilling to speak on sensitive issues or may distort information. Libraries and archives may be incomplete, or access to them restricted. Governments may bar research on politically sensitive questions. Confronting these obstacles in more than one country is even more challenging. A researcher may be able to read Russian and travel to Russia frequently, but if he wants to compare authoritarianism in Russia and China, it would be ideal to be able to read Chinese and conduct research in China as well. Few comparativists have the language skills, time, or resources to conduct field research in many countries. There are almost no comparativists in North America or Europe who speak both Russian and Chinese. As a result, comparativists often master knowledge of a single country or language and rely on deductive reasoning. Single-case study can be extremely valuable—it gives the researcher a great deal of case depth and the ability to tease out novel

observations that may come only from close observation. However, such narrow focus can also make it unclear to researchers whether the politics they see in their case study has important similarities to the politics in other cases. In the worst-case scenario, scholars come to believe that the country they study is somehow unique and fail to recognize its similarities with other cases.

Fifth, even where comparativists do widen their range of cases, their focus tends to be limited to a single geographic region. The specialist on communist Cuba is more likely to study other Latin American countries than to consider China or North Korea, and the specialist on China is more likely to study South Korea than Russia. This isn't necessarily a concern, given our earlier discussion of the need to control variables—it may make more sense to study parts of the world where similar variables are clustered rather than compare countries from different parts of the world. This regional focus, however—often referred to as **area studies**—is distributed unevenly around the world. For decades, the largest share of research tended to focus on Western Europe, despite the increasing role of Asia in the international system.[2] Why? As mentioned earlier, some of this is a function of language; many scholars in the West are exposed to European languages in primary or secondary school, and in many European countries the use of English is widespread, thus facilitating research. English is also widespread in South Asia, yet scholarship has lagged behind. For example, we find that over the past 50 years one of the top journals in comparative politics published as many articles on Sweden as on India. To be fair, much of this is changing thanks to a new generation of scholars. Yet overall, comparative politics remains slow to redirect its attention when new issues and questions arise.

Sixth, the problem of bias makes it even harder to control for variables and to select the right cases. This is a question not of political bias, though that can sometimes be a problem, but of how we select our cases. In the natural sciences, investigators randomize case selection as much as possible to avoid choosing cases that support one hypothesis or another. But for the reasons mentioned earlier, such randomization is not possible in political science. Single-case studies are already influenced by the fact that comparativists study a country because they know its language or find it interesting. Yet even if we rely instead on deductive reasoning—beginning with a hypothesis and then seeking out our cases—we can easily fall into the trap of **selection bias.**

For example, say we want to understand revolutions, and we hypothesize that the main cause is a rapid growth in inequality. How should we select our cases? Most of us would respond by saying that we should find as many cases of revolution as possible and then see whether an increase in inequality preceded the

revolutions. We might focus on revolutions in France, Mexico, Russia, China, and Iran. But this is a mistake—by looking only at cases of revolution, we miss all the cases where inequality grew but revolution did *not* take place. For example, we would overlook Brazil, South Africa, India, and Nigeria, four of the world's most unequal countries that never experienced a revolution. Indeed, there may be many more cases of unequal growth without revolution than with it, disproving our hypothesis. So, we would do better to concentrate on what we think is the cause (growth in inequality) rather than on what we think is the effect. While this may seem the obvious choice, it is a frequent mistake among scholars who are often so drawn to particular outcomes that they start there and then work backward.

A seventh and final concern deals with the heart of political science—the search for cause and effect. Let us for the sake of argument assume that the half-dozen problems we have laid out can be overcome through careful case selection, information gathering, and control of variables. Let us further imagine that with these problems in hand, research finds, for example, that countries with a low rate of female literacy are less likely to be democratic than countries where female literacy is high. Even if we are confident enough to claim that there is a causal relationship between female literacy and democracy—a bold statement indeed—a final and perhaps intractable problem looms. Which variable is cause and which is effect? Do low rates of female literacy limit public participation, empowering nondemocratic actors, or do authoritarian leaders (largely men) take little interest in promoting gender equality? This problem of distinguishing cause and effect, known as **endogeneity**, is a major obstacle in any comparative research. Even if we

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Problems in Comparative Research

- Controlling a large number of variables.
- Controlling for the interaction of variables (multicausality).
- Limited number of cases to research.
- Limited access to information from cases.
- Uneven research across cases and regions.
- Cases selected on the basis of effect and not cause (selection bias).
- Variables may be either cause or effect (endogeneity).

are confident that we have found cause and effect, we can't easily ascertain which is which. On reflection, this is to be expected; one political scientist has called endogeneity "the motor of history," for causes and effects tend to evolve together, each transforming the other over time. Thus early forms of democracy, literacy, and women's rights may well have gone hand in hand, each reinforcing and changing the others. In short, many things matter, and these many things affect each other. This makes an elegant claim about cause and effect problematic, to say the least.[3]

Can We Make a Science of Comparative Politics?

We have so far elaborated many of the ways in which comparative politics—and political science in general—makes for difficult study. Variables are hard to control and can be interconnected, while actual cases may be few. Getting access to information may be difficult, and comparisons may be limited by regional knowledge and interests. What questions are asked may be affected by selection bias and endogeneity. All these concerns make it difficult to generate any kind of political science **theory**, which we can define as an integrated set of hypotheses, assumptions, and facts. At this point, you may well have concluded that a science of politics is hopeless. But it is precisely these kinds of concerns that have driven political science, and comparative politics within it, toward a more scientific approach. Whether this has yielded or will yield significant benefits, and at what cost, is something we will consider next.

Political science and comparative politics have a long pedigree. In almost every major society, there are masterworks of politics, prescribing rules or, less often, analyzing political behavior. In the West, the work of the philosopher Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) departed from the traditional emphasis on political ideals to conduct comparative research on existing political systems (what we will call *regimes*), eventually gathering and analyzing the constitutions of 158 Greek city-states. Aristotle's objective was to delineate between what he took to be "proper" and "deviant," or despotic political regimes. He also framed this discussion in terms of a puzzle—why were some regimes despotic and others not? With this approach, Aristotle conceived of an empirical (that is, observable and verifiable) science of politics with a practical purpose: statecraft, or how to govern. Aristotle was perhaps the first Westerner to separate the study of politics from that of philosophy.[4]

Aristotle's early approach did not immediately lead to any systematic study of politics. For the next 1,800 years, discussions of politics remained embedded in the realm of philosophy, with the emphasis placed on how politics should be rather than on how politics was actually conducted. Ideals, rather than conclusions

drawn from evidence, were the norm. Only with the works of the Italian Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) did a comparative approach to politics truly emerge. Like Aristotle, he sought to analyze different political systems—those that existed around him as well as those that had preceded him, such as the Roman Empire—and even tried to make generalizations about success and failure. These findings, he believed, could then be applied by statesmen to avoid their predecessors' mistakes. Machiavelli's work reflects this pragmatism, dealing with the mechanics of government, diplomacy, military strategy, and power.[5]

Because of his emphasis on statecraft and empirical knowledge, Machiavelli is often cited as the first modern political scientist, paving the way for other scholars. His writings came at a time when the medieval order was giving way to the Renaissance, with its emphasis on science, rationalism, secularism, and real-world knowledge over abstract ideals. The resulting work over the next four centuries reinforced the idea that politics, like any other area of knowledge, could be developed as a logical, rigorous, and predictable science.

During those centuries, a number of major thinkers took up the comparative approach to the study of politics, which slowly retreated from moral, philosophical, or religious foundations. In the seventeenth century, authors like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke followed in Machiavelli's footsteps, advocating particular political systems on the basis of empirical observation and analysis. They were followed in the eighteenth century by such scholars as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Baron de Montesquieu, whose studies of the separation of power and civil liberties would directly influence the writing of the American Constitution and other constitutions to follow. The work of Karl Marx and Max Weber in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries would further add to political science, with analyses of the nature of political and economic organization and power. All these developments reflected widespread changes in scholarly inquiry and often blended political ideals with analytical concepts and some attempt at a systematic method of study.

Thus, by the turn of the twentieth century, political science formally existed as a field of study, but it still looked much different from the way it does now. The study of comparative politics, while less focused on ideals or philosophy, resembled a kind of political journalism: largely descriptive, atheoretical, and concentrated on Europe, which still dominated world politics through its empires. Little in this work resembled a comparative method.

The two world wars and the rise of the Cold War would mark a turning point in political science and comparative politics, particularly in the United States. There were several reasons for this. First, a growing movement surfaced among universities toward applying more rigorous methods to studying human behavior, whether in sociology, economics, or politics. Second, the world wars raised serious questions

about the ability of scholars to meaningfully contribute to an understanding of world affairs. The creation of new countries, the rise of fascism, and the failure of democracy throughout much of interwar Europe were vital concerns, but political scholarship did not seem to shed enough light on these issues and what they meant for international stability. Third, the Cold War with a rival Soviet Union, armed with nuclear weapons and revolutionary ideology, made understanding comparative politics seem a matter of survival. Finally, the postwar period ushered in a wave of technological innovation, such as early computers. This development generated a widespread belief that through technological innovation, many social problems could be recast as technical concerns, finally to be resolved through science. The fear of another war was thus married with a belief that science was an unmitigated good that had the answers to almost all problems. The question was how to make the science work.

Although these changes dramatically transformed the study of politics, the field itself remained a largely conservative discipline, taking capitalism and democracy as the ideal. In comparative politics, these views were codified in what was known as **modernization theory**, which held that as societies developed, they would become capitalist democracies, converging around a set of shared values and characteristics. The United States and other Western countries were furthest ahead on this path, and the theory assumed that all countries would eventually catch up unless "diverted" by alternative systems such as communism (as fascism had done in the past).

During the 1950s and 1960s, comparativists influenced by modernization theory expanded their research to include more cases. Field research, supported by government and private grants, became the normal means by which political scientists gathered data. New computer technologies combined with statistical methods were also applied to this expanding wealth of data. Finally, the subject of investigation shifted away from political institutions (such as legislatures and constitutions) and toward individual political behavior. This trend came to be known as the **behavioral revolution**. Behavioralism hoped to generate theories and generalizations that could help explain and even predict political activity. Ideally, this work would eventually lead to a "grand theory" of political behavior and modernization that would be valid across countries.

Behavioralism and modernization theory were two different things—modernization theory was a set of hypotheses about how countries develop, and behavioralism was a set of methods with which to approach politics. However, both were attempts to study politics more scientifically to achieve certain policy outcomes.[6] Behavioralism also promoted deductive, large-scale research over

Major Thinkers in Comparative Politics

Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.)	First separated the study of politics from that of philosophy; used the comparative method to study Greek city-states; in *The Politics*, conceived of an empirical study of politics with a practical purpose.
Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527)	Often cited as the first modern political scientist due to his emphasis on statecraft and empirical knowledge; analyzed different political systems, believing the findings could be applied by statesmen; discussed his theories in *The Prince*.
Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679)	Developed the notion of a "social contract," whereby people surrender certain liberties in favor of order; advocated a powerful state in *Leviathan*.
John Locke (1632–1704)	Argued that private property is essential to individual freedom and prosperity; advocated a weak state in *Two Treatises of Government*.
Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu (1689–1755)	Studied government systems; advocated the separation of powers within government in *The Spirit of Laws*.
Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78)	Argued that citizens' rights are inalienable and cannot be taken away by the state; influenced the development of civil rights; discussed these ideas in *The Social Contract*.
Karl Marx (1818–83)	Elaborated a theory of economic development and inequality in *Das Kapital*; predicted the eventual collapse of capitalism and democracy.
Max Weber (1864–1920)	Wrote widely on such topics as bureaucracy, forms of authority, and the impact of culture on economic and political development; developed many of these themes in *Economy and Society*.

the single-case study common in inductive reasoning. It seemed clear to many that political science, and comparative politics within it, would soon be a "real" science.

By the late 1970s, however, this enthusiasm began to meet with resistance. New theories and sophisticated methods of analysis increased scholars' knowledge about

politics around the world, but this knowledge in itself did not lead to the expected breakthroughs. The theories that had been developed, such as modernization theory, increasingly failed to match politics on the ground; instead of becoming more capitalist and more democratic, many newly independent countries collapsed in the face of violent conflict and revolution, to be replaced by authoritarianism that in no way reflected Western expectations or ideals. What had gone wrong?

Some critics charged that the behavioral revolution's obsession with appearing scientific had led the discipline astray by emphasizing methodology over knowledge and technical jargon over clarity. Others criticized the field for its ideological bias, arguing that comparativists were interested not in understanding the world but in prescribing the Western model of modernization. At worst, their work could be viewed as simply serving the foreign policy interests of the United States. Since that time, comparative politics, like all of political science, has grown increasingly fragmented. While few still believe in the old descriptive approach that dominated the earlier part of the century, there is no consensus about where scholarship is going and what research methods or analytical concepts are most fruitful. This lack of consensus has led to several main divisions and lines of conflict.

RESEARCH METHODS

One area of conflict is over methodology—how best to gather and analyze data. We have already spoken about the problems of comparative methodology, involving selecting cases and controlling variables. Within these concerns are further questions of how one gathers and interprets the data to compare these cases and measure these variables. Some comparative political scientists rely on **qualitative methods**, evidence, and methodology, such as interviews, observations, and archival and other forms of documentary research. Qualitative approaches are often narrowly focused, deep investigations of one or a few cases drawing from scholarly expertise. However, some qualitative studies (such as work on modernization or revolution) do involve numerous cases spread out across the globe and spanning centuries. Either way, qualitative approaches are typically inductive, beginning with case studies to generate theory.

For some political scientists, a qualitative approach is of dubious value. Variables are not rigorously defined or measured, they argue, and hypotheses are not tested by using a large sample of cases. Asserting that qualitative work fails to contribute to the accumulation of knowledge and is little better than the approach that dominated the field a century ago, these critics advocate **quantitative methods**

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Trends in Comparative Politics

TRADITIONAL APPROACH	Emphasis on describing political systems and their various institutions.
BEHAVIORAL REVOLUTION	The shift from a descriptive study of politics to one that emphasizes causality, explanation, and prediction; emphasizes the political behavior of individuals more than larger political structures and quantitative more than qualitative methodology; modernization theory predominates.

instead. They favor a wider use of cases unbound by area specialization, greater use of statistical analysis, and mathematical models often drawn from economics. This quantitative methodology is more likely to use deductive reasoning, starting with a theory that political scientists can test with an array of data. Many advocates of qualitative research question whether quantitative approaches measure and test variables that are of any particular value or simply focus on the (often mundane) things that can be expressed numerically. Overdependence on quantifiable measures can lead scholars to avoid the important questions that often cannot be addressed using such strict scientific methods.

THEORY

A second, related debate concerns the theoretical assumptions of human behavior. Are human beings rational, in the sense that their behavior conforms to some generally understandable behavior? Some say yes. These scholars use what is known as **rational choice** or **game theory** to study the rules and games by which politics is played and how human beings act on their preferences (like voting, choosing a party, or supporting a revolution). Such models can, ideally, lead not only to explanation but also to prediction—a basic element of science. As you might guess, rational choice theory is closely associated with quantitative methods. And like the critics of quantitative methods in general, those who reject rational choice theory assert that the emphasis on individual rationality discounts the importance of things like historical complexity, unintended outcomes, or cultural factors. In fact, some consider rational choice theories, as they do behavioralism, to be Western

(or specifically American) assumptions about self-interest, markets, and individual autonomy that do not easily describe the world.

As these debates have persisted, the world around us continues to change. Just as the wrenching political changes in the Middle East were not anticipated, neither was the end of the Cold War some twenty years earlier. Few scholars, regardless of methodology or theoretical focus, anticipated or even considered either dramatic set of events. Similarly, religion has reemerged as an important component in politics around the globe—a force that modernization theory (and research focused on Europe) told us was on the wane. New economic powers have emerged in Asia, coinciding with democracy in some cases but not in others. Terrorism, once the tactic of secular revolutionary groups in the 1970s, has also resurfaced, albeit in the hands of different actors. It seems that many political scientists, whatever their persuasion, have had little to contribute to many of these issues—time and again, scholars have been caught off guard.

Where does this leave us now? In recent years, some signs of conciliation are emerging. Scholars recognize that careful (and sloppy) scholarship and theorizing are possible with both qualitative and quantitative methods. Inductive and deductive reasoning can both generate valuable theories in comparative politics. Rational choice and historical or cultural approaches can contribute to and be integrated into each other. One finds more mixed-method approaches that use both quantitative and qualitative research. As a result, some scholars have spoken optimistically of an integration of mathematics, "narrative" (case studies), and rational choice models, each contributing to the other. For example, large-scale quantitative studies

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Quantitative Method versus Qualitative Method

QUANTITATIVE METHOD	Gathering of statistical data across many countries to look for correlations and test hypotheses about cause and effect. Emphasis on breadth over depth.
QUALITATIVE METHOD	Mastery of a few cases through the detailed study of their history, language, and culture. Emphasis on depth over breadth.

of political activity can be further elucidated by turning to individual cases that investigate the question in greater detail. Such mixed-method research is growing, though skeptics remain who argue that simply expanding the number and kinds of methods does not lead to more reliable outcomes.[7] These ongoing problems are not limited to comparative politics, political science, or the social sciences. It is worth noting that even in such fields as biology, much research suffers from design flaws, leading to results that cannot be reproduced.

A final observation is in order as we bring this discussion to a close. Irrespective of methodology or theory, many have observed that political science as a whole has lost touch with real-world concerns, has become inaccessible to laypersons, and has failed to speak to those who make decisions about policy—whether voters or elected leaders. Following the surprise of the Arab Spring, commentators resurrected the long-standing criticism that political science has created "a culture that glorifies arcane unintelligibility while disdaining impact and audience."[8] This is somewhat unfair—for some years, there has been an increasing emphasis on reconnecting political science to central policy questions and also on reengaging political ideals, something in the past discarded as "unscientific."

This new emphasis is not a call for comparativists' research to be biased in favor of a particular 'ideal'—rather, comparative politics should not simply be about what we can study or what we want to study but also about how our research can reach people, empower them, and help them be better citizens and leaders. After decades of asserting that political science should have an objective and scientifically neutral approach, this call for greater relevance and contribution to the ideals of civic life represents a change for many scholars, but relevance and rigor are not at odds. They are in fact central to a meaningful political science and comparative politics.

A Guiding Concept: Political Institutions

A goal of this textbook is to provide a way to compare and analyze politics around the world in the aftermath of recent changes and uncertainties. Given the long-standing debates within comparative politics, how can we organize our ideas and information? One way is through a guiding concept, a way of looking at the world that highlights some important features while deemphasizing others. There is certainly no one right way of doing this; any guide, like a lens, will sharpen some features while distorting others. With that said, our guiding concept is institutions,

defined at the beginning of this chapter as organizations or patterns of activity that are self-perpetuating and valued for their own sake. In other words, an institution is something so embedded in people's lives as a norm or value that it is not easily dislodged or changed. People see an institution as central to their lives, and, as a result, the institution commands and generates legitimacy. Institutions embody the rules, norms, and values that give meaning to human activity.

Consider an example from outside politics. We often hear in the United States that baseball is an American institution. What exactly does this mean? In short, Americans view baseball not simply as a game but as something valued for its own sake, a game that helps define society. Yet few Americans would say that soccer is a national institution. The reason is probably clear: we do not perceive soccer as indispensable in the way that baseball is. Whereas soccer is simply a game, baseball is part of what defines America and Americans. Even Americans who don't like baseball would probably say that America wouldn't be the same without it. Indeed, even at the local level, teams command such legitimacy that when they merely threaten to move to another city, their fans raise a hue and cry. The Brooklyn Dodgers moved to Los Angeles in 1958, yet many in New York still consider them "their" team half a century later. For many Canadians, while baseball is important, hockey is a national institution, thought of as "Canada's Game" and an inextricable part of Canadian identity and history. In Europe and much of the world, soccer reigns as a premier social institution, and teams provoke such fervent loyalty that fan violence is quite common. Because of their legitimacy and apparent indispensability, institutions command authority and can influence human behavior; we accept and conform to institutions and support rather than challenge them. Woe betide the American, Canadian, or European who derides the national sport!

Another example connects directly to politics. In many countries, democracy is an institution: it is not merely a means to compete over political power but a vital element in people's lives, bound up in the very way they define themselves. Democracy is part and parcel of collective identity, and some democratic countries and their people would not be the same without it. Even if they are cynical about democracy in practice, citizens of democracies will defend and even die for the institution when it is under threat. In many other countries, this is not the case: democracy is absent, poorly understood, or weakly institutionalized and unstable. People in such countries do not define themselves by democracy's presence or absence, and so democracy's future there is more insecure. However, these same people might owe a similar allegiance to a different set of institutions, such as their ethnic group or religion. Clearly, no single, uniform set of institutions holds

power over people all around the world, and understanding the differences among institutions is central to the study of comparative politics.

What about a physical object or place? Can that, too, be an institution? Many would argue that the World Trade Center was an American institution—not just a set of office buildings, but structures representing American values. The same can be said about the Pentagon. When terrorists attacked these buildings on September 11, 2001, they did so not simply to cause a great loss of life but also to show that their hostility was directed against America itself—its institutions, as they shape and represent the American way of life, and its relation to the outside world. Like the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the city of Jerusalem is a powerful cultural and national institution, in this case reflecting the identity and ideals of two peoples: Israelis and Palestinians. Both groups claim it as their capital, and for both the city holds key historical, political, and religious significance.

The examples just described raise the distinction between formal and informal institutions. When we think of **formal institutions**, we assume they are based on officially sanctioned rules that are relatively clear. Yet there are also **informal institutions**—unwritten and unofficial, but no less powerful as a result. And of course, institutions can be a combination of both.

Because institutions are embedded in each of us, in how we see the world and what we think is valuable and important, it is difficult to change or eliminate them. When institutions are threatened, people will rush to their defense and even recreate them when they are shattered. This bond is the glue of society. However, one problem that institutions pose is this very "stickiness," in that people may come to resist even necessary change because they have difficulty accepting the idea that certain institutions have outlived their value. Thus, while institutions can and do change, they are by nature persistent. This, however, is not to say that institutions are eternal. Such structures can decline in power in the face of alternative norms, or be swept away when people find them too constraining or outmoded. The rise and institutionalization of soccer in the United States may mirror the decline of baseball, which is viewed by many young Americans as an outdated sport.

Politics is full of institutions. The basic political structures of any country are composed of institutions: the army, the police, the legislature, and the courts, to name a few. We obey them not only because we think it is in our self-interest to do so but also because we see them as legitimate ways to conduct politics. Taxation is a good example. In many Western democracies, income taxes are an institution; we may not like them, but we pay them nonetheless. Is this because we are afraid of going to jail if we fail to do so? Perhaps. But research indicates that a major source of tax compliance is people's belief that taxation is a legitimate way to fund the

programs that society needs. We pay, in other words, when we believe that it is the right thing to do, a norm. By contrast, in societies where taxes are not institutionalized, tax evasion tends to be rampant; people view taxes as illegitimate and those who pay as suckers. Similarly, where electoral politics is weakly institutionalized, people support elections only when their preferred candidate wins, and they cry foul, take to the streets, and even threaten or use violence when the opposition gains power. Institutions can thus be stronger or weaker, and rise or decline in power, over time.

Institutions are a useful way to approach the study of politics because they set the stage for political behavior. Because institutions generate norms and values (good and bad), they favor and allow certain kinds of political activity and not others, making a more likely "path" for political activity (what is known as *path dependence*). As a result, political institutions are critical because they influence politics; and how political institutions are constructed, intentionally or unintentionally, will profoundly affect how politics is conducted.

In many ways, our institutional approach takes us back to the study of comparative politics as it existed before the 1950s. Prior to the behavioral revolution, political scientists spent much of their time documenting and describing the institutions of politics, often without asking how those institutions actually shaped politics. The behavioral revolution that followed emphasized cause and effect but turned its attention toward political actors and their calculations, resources, or strategies. The actual institutions were seen as less important. The return to the study of institutions in many ways combines these two traditions. From behavioralism, institutional approaches take their emphasis on cause-and-effect relationships, something that will be prevalent throughout this book. However, institutions are not simply the product of individual political behavior; they powerfully affect how politics

IN FOCUS

Institutions

- Organizations or patterns of activity that are self-perpetuating and valued for their own sake.
- Embody norms or values that are considered central to people's lives and thus are not easily dislodged or changed.
- Set the stage for political behavior by influencing how politics is conducted.
- Vary from country to country.
- Exemplified by the army, taxation, elections, and the state.

functions. In other words, institutions are not merely the result of politics; they can also be an important cause. Their emergence—and disappearance—can have a profound impact on politics.

As recent events have shown us, there is still a tremendous amount of institutional variation around the world that needs to be recognized and understood. This textbook will map some of the basic institutional differences between countries, acknowledging the diversity of institutions while pointing to some features that allow us to compare and evaluate them. By studying political institutions, we can hope to gain a better sense of the political landscape across countries.

A Guiding Ideal: Reconciling Freedom and Equality

At the start of this chapter, we spoke about analytical concepts (such as institutions), methods (such as inductive or deductive, quantitative or qualitative), and political ideals. We defined politics as the struggle for power people engage in to make decisions for society. The concept of institutions gives us a way to organize our study by investigating the different ways that struggle can be shaped. Yet this raises an important question: People may struggle for political power, but what are they fighting for? What do they seek to achieve once they have gained power? This is where ideals come in, and we will concentrate on one core debate that lies at the heart of all politics: the struggle between freedom and equality. This struggle has existed as long as human beings have lived in organized communities, and it may be that these are more than ideals—they are a part of our evolutionary history as we transitioned from small, nomadic bands to larger, settled communities.

Politics is bound up in the struggle between individual freedom and collective equality and in how these ideals are to be reconciled. Since *freedom* and *equality* can mean different things to different people, it is important to define each term. When we speak of **freedom**, we are talking about an individual's ability to act independently, without fear of restriction or punishment by the state or other individuals or groups in society. At a basic level, freedom connotes autonomy; in the modern world, it encompasses such concepts as free speech, free assembly, freedom of religion, and other civil liberties. **Equality** refers to a material standard of living shared by individuals within a community, society, or country. The relation between equality and freedom is typically viewed in terms of justice or injustice—a measurement of whether our ideals have been met.

Freedom and equality are tightly interconnected, and the relation between the two shapes politics, power, and debates over justice. It is unclear, however, whether one must come at the expense of the other. Greater personal freedom, for example, may imply a smaller role for the state and limits on its powers to do such things as redistribute income through welfare and taxes. As a result, inequality may increase as individual freedom trumps the desire for greater collective equality. This growing inequality can in turn undermine freedom if too many people feel as though the political system no longer cares about their material needs. Even if this discontent is not a danger, there remains the question of whether society as a whole has an obligation to help the poor—an issue of justice. The United States, as we shall see, has one of the highest degrees of economic inequality among developed democracies. Is this inequality undermining democratic institutions, as some suggest?

Alternatively, a focus on equality may erode freedom. Demands for greater material equality may lead a government to take greater control of private property and personal wealth, all in the name of redistribution for the "greater good." Yet when economic and political powers are concentrated in one place, they may threaten individual freedom since people control fewer private resources of their own. In the Soviet Union, under communism, for example, the state held all economic power, giving it the ability to control people's lives—where they lived, the education they received, the jobs they held, the money they earned. Levels of inequality were in turn quite low.

Is the balance between freedom and equality a zero-sum game, in which the gain of one represents the loss of the other? Not necessarily. Some would assert that freedom and equality can also reinforce each other: material security can help to secure certain political rights, and vice versa. In addition, while a high degree of state power may weaken individual freedom, the state also plays an important role in helping to define individual freedom and protect it from infringement by other individuals. Finally, the meaning of freedom and equality may change over time as the material world and our values change. For some, managing freedom or equality necessitates centralized political power. Others view such power as the very impediment to freedom and equality. We will look at these debates more closely when we consider political ideologies in subsequent chapters.

In short, politics is driven by the ideal of reconciling individual freedom and collective equality. This inevitably leads to questions of power and of the people's role in political life. How much should any individual or group be allowed to influence others or impose their will on them? Who should be empowered to make decisions about freedom and equality? Should power be centralized or decentralized, public or private? When does power become a danger to others, and how can

we manage this threat? Each political system must address these questions and in so doing determine where political power shall reside and how much shall be given to whom. Each political system creates a unique set of institutions to structure political power, shaping the role people play in politics.

In Sum: Looking Ahead and Thinking Carefully

Politics is the pursuit of power in any organization, and comparative politics is the study of this struggle around the world. Over the past centuries, the study of politics has evolved from philosophy to a field that emphasizes empirical research and the quest to explain politics and even predict political change. This approach has limitations: despite the earlier desire to emulate the natural sciences, comparative politics, like political science as a whole, has been unable to generate any grand or even smaller theories of political behavior. Yet the need to study politics remains as important as ever; dramatic changes over the past quarter-century have called on comparativists to shed light on these developments and concerns.

Political institutions can help us organize this task. Since institutions generate norms and values, and different configurations of institutions lead to different forms of political activity, they can help us map the political landscape. Specifically, they can show how political activity attempts to reconcile the competing values of individual freedom and collective equality. All political groups, including countries, must reconcile these two forces, determining where power should reside. In the chapters to come, we will return to this question of freedom and equality and to the way in which these values influence, and are influenced by, institutions.

A final thought before we conclude on how to use all this information. Much of our discussion in this chapter has been about the controversies over how best to study politics—What method? What concepts? What role for ideals? In all of this, it may seem that we have gained little understanding of how to "do" political science well. If scholars can't agree on the best way to analyze politics, what hope do we have of making sense of the world?

Our "Institutions in Action" box provides some insight. We note that Philip Tetlock's study of political predictions found that participants can be divided into hedgehogs and foxes; the former look for an overarching explanation that may reject information which challenges their view, while the latter are less confident of their explanations and more willing to change their views in the face of evidence to

Can We Make a Science of Politics?

In much of our discussion, there is a sense that political science remains hindered by problems of data and theory that could prevent explanation, or even prediction, of political behavior. To use a metaphor coined by the philosopher Karl Popper: Do humans function in a regular, clocklike way, such that we can find out "what makes us tick" and predict how we will act? Or are humans more like clouds, shifting and complex? Some people do believe that humans are more clocklike and that science can produce better explanations and perhaps even predictions of human behavior. In this view, the main problem has been a lack of the necessary tools. However, certain scientific advances are under way that some believe will transform the social sciences. Researchers are at work in two interesting areas, both focusing on human nature in different but complementary ways.

The first we can call a macro-level approach to human nature. In this approach, the future of the discipline lies in the integration of life sciences, such as genetics, neuroscience, and related fields. Politics can be investigated by starting with these biological factors as the foundation of political actions and institutions. For example, biological studies of politics increasingly suggest that many key aspects of politics, such as ideological orientation, levels of social trust, and propensity toward political participation, may be as much inherited as learned. This does not suggest that people have a gene for such things as democracy or authoritarianism, conservatism or liberalism. But the macro-level approach does argue that biology can partially shape people's view of some issues and that political orientation is not simply a function of individual preference or existing social structures.

To return to our discussion of the wave of revolutions and civil conflict across the Middle East, macro-level research might focus on demographics, such as the large population under age 30, and the intersection of particular forms of youth behavior (such as risk taking) and institutionalized barriers to opportunity (such as corruption). It might also consider the interaction between culture and biology in levels and sources of shame and humiliation. Mohamed Bouazizi did not set himself on fire because he was crazy, or because he thought it would touch off a revolution. In our understanding, his act was irrational. But if we reconsider it as an explicable psychological response based on his particular environment, we gain a different insight. This of course does not provide any prediction of why a revolution would happen in the first place, or why in Tunisia as opposed to Algeria, which escaped the Arab Spring.

This is where micro-level approaches come into play. If macro-level studies look at how biological forces can interact with the social environment, micro-level research focuses on the science of cognition—how our tools for judgment frequently lead to a range of involuntary cognitive errors, including overconfidence, a misunderstanding of statistics and probability, mental "shortcuts" that lead to biases and stereotypes, and the tendency to discern cause-and-effect relationships where none exist. In this scholarship, the very notion of human rationality is deeply problematic. This understanding can help explain why political scientists were surprised

by the Arab Spring or the collapse of communism. The human tendency to construct narratives that explain the past and downplay the role of chance typically leads humans to mistakenly project the present into the future. This behavior discounts the possibility for dramatic political change.[a]

While this discussion has gone some way to bringing more science into political science, these explanations don't seem to give us more in terms of prediction. Yet there is hope. Political psychologist Philip Tetlock's Good Judgment Project asked several thousand volunteers to regularly make predictions about a range of world events up to one year out. Among them emerged a group of "superforecasters" whose predictions even beat those of intelligence analysts with access to classified information. What made these superforecasters so good? Tetlock noted that forecasters can be divided into two basic categories, borrowed from the late philosopher Isaiah Berlin: hedgehogs and foxes. Hedgehogs know one big thing; they tend to look for a single overarching explanation that can explain many different political events and are more likely to reject information that runs counter to their beliefs. Foxes are less confident in their views, which consist of many small ideas cobbled together and subject to frequent revision. As you might suspect, hedgehogs are much worse predictors of world events and are more interested in trying to fit the world into their preconceptions than revising their beliefs on the basis of new information.

Which approach one uses may simply be inherited, like a particularly open-minded and self-critical mode of thinking. But Tetlock also found that good prediction can be taught, reducing biases and increasing clarity in forecasts. No one believes that superforecasters will be able to predict the next Arab Spring.

Egyptian demonstrators face off against the army in 2011, eventually leading to the downfall of President Hosni Mubarak.

In fact, the majority of forecasters incorrectly predicted that the United Kingdom's 2016 referendum to leave the European Union would fail (see Chapter 8), nor did they predict President Trump's victory. But there is clear evidence that we can approach politics more systematically and draw better conclusions about what might happen in the near future.[b]

1. What are the key differences between micro- and macro-level approaches to political science, as described earlier? Do you think one is more effective than the other? Why?
2. Consider a recent world event from the news this past week. How would researchers apply micro- and macro-level approaches to explain this event? What questions would they ask?
3. What makes superforecasters better than others in predicting world events?

the contrary. The flexibility and even humility of foxes leads to a better track record in forecasting future events.

An important lesson we can take away from these findings is that the most fruitful approach to comparative politics is to be skeptical, not simply of others—that's the easy part—but also of what we believe and take for granted. We should be ready to reconsider our beliefs in the face of new evidence and arguments and to remember that every explanation in this book is conjecture, subject to revision if we can find new or contradictory evidence. With this approach, by the end of this course you will be able to draw your own conclusions about the contours of politics and what combination of values might construct a better political order. So, drop your assumptions about how the world works, and let's begin.

Key Terms

area studies (p. 10)
behavioral revolution (p. 14)
causal relationship (p. 8)
comparative method (p. 7)
comparative politics (p. 5)
correlation (p. 8)
deductive reasoning (p. 8)
endogeneity (p. 11)
equality (p. 23)
formal institutions (p. 21)
freedom (p. 23)
game theory (p. 17)
inductive reasoning (p. 7)
informal institutions (p. 21)
institution (p. 6)
international relations (p. 5)
modernization theory (p. 14)
multicausality (p. 9)
politics (p. 6)
power (p. 6)
qualitative method (p. 16)
quantitative method (p. 16)
rational choice (p. 17)
selection bias (p. 10)
theory (p. 12)

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