

COMPARATIVE POLITICS: WHAT IS IT? WHY STUDY IT? HOW TO STUDY IT?

politics

The process by which human communities make collective decisions

comparative politics

One of the major subfields of political science, in which the primary focus is on comparing power and decision making across countries

political science

The systematic study of politics and power

first dimension of power

The ability of one person or group to get another person or group to do something it otherwise would not do

second dimension of power

The ability not only to make people do something but to keep them from doing something

third dimension of power

The ability to shape or determine individual or group political demands by causing people to think about political issues in ways that are contrary to their own interests

international relations

The study of politics among national governments and beyond national boundaries

Politics can be defined as the process by which human communities make collective decisions. These communities can be of any size, from small villages or neighborhoods to nations and international organizations. **Comparative politics** is one of the major subfields of **political science**, the systematic study of politics. Politics always involves elements of power, the first concept we need to examine closely.

A definition of power may seem pretty straightforward, but political scientists have long debated its exact meaning. Political theorist Steven Lukes (1974) usefully categorized power into three dimensions. The **first dimension of power** is the ability of one person or group to get another person or group to do something it otherwise would not do. The focus here is on behavior: making someone do something. A **second dimension of power**, first articulated by Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz (1962), sees power as the ability not only to make people do something but to keep them from doing something. Bachrach and Baratz argued that a key element of political power is the ability to keep certain groups and issues out of the political arena by creating political processes and setting the political agenda to allow certain groups to participate and voice their concerns while preventing others from doing so. A **third dimension of power**, which Lukes contributed, is the ability to shape or determine individual or group political demands by causing people to think about political issues in ways that are contrary to their own interests. The ability to influence how people think produces the power to prevent certain political demands from ever being articulated. We will examine the role of all three of these dimensions of power in this chapter and in the rest of the book.

What Is Comparative Politics? In comparative politics, the primary focus is on power and decision making within national boundaries. This includes the politics of entire countries as well as more local-level politics. Politics among national governments and beyond national boundaries is generally the purview of the field of **international relations**, and while comparativists certainly take into account the domestic effects of international events, we do not try to explain the international events themselves. Perhaps it is self-evident, but comparativists also compare; we systematically examine political phenomena in more than one place and during more than one period, and we try to develop a generalized understanding of and an explanation for political activity that seem to apply to many different situations.

Why Study Comparative Politics? Studying comparative politics has multiple benefits. First, comparativists are interested in understanding political events and developments in various countries. Why did the peaceful regime change happen in Tunisia in 2011 but not in Bahrain and Syria? Why did the Socialist Party win back the presidency in France in 2012 after seventeen years of conservative presidents? Also,

as the Middle East example shows, understanding political events in other countries can be very important to foreign policy. If the U.S. government had better understood the internal dynamics of Egyptian politics, it would not have been caught so off guard when regime change happened and perhaps could have shaped that regime change more successfully.

Second, systematic comparison of different political systems and events around the world can generate important lessons from one place that can be applied in another. Americans often see their system of government, with a directly elected president, as a very successful and stable model of democracy. Certainly, it has been used successfully elsewhere as well, but not everywhere. Much evidence suggests that in a situation of intense political conflict, such as an ethnically divided country after a civil war, a system with a single and powerful elected president might not be the best option. Only one candidate from one side can win this coveted post, and the sides that lose the election might choose to restart the war rather than live with the results. A democratic system that gives all major groups some share of political power at the national level might work better in this situation. That conclusion is not obvious when examining the United States alone. A systematic comparison of a number of different countries, however, reveals this possibility.

Third, examining politics comparatively helps us develop broad theories about how politics works. A **theory** is an abstract argument that provides a systematic explanation of some phenomenon. The theory of evolution, for instance, makes an argument about how species change over time in response to their environments. The social sciences, including political science, use two different kinds of theories. An **empirical theory** is an argument that explains what actually occurs. Empirical theorists first *describe* a pattern and then attempt to *explain* what causes it. The theory of evolution is an empirical theory in that evolutionary biologists do not argue whether evolution is inherently good or bad; they simply describe evolutionary patterns and explain their causes. A good empirical theory should also allow theorists to *predict* what will happen as well. For example, a comparison of democratic systems in post-civil war situations would lead us to predict that presidential systems are more likely to lead to renewed conflict.

On the other hand, a **normative theory** is an argument that explains what *ought* to occur. For instance, socialists support a normative theory that the government and economy *ought* to be structured in a way that produces a relatively equal distribution of wealth. While comparativists certainly hold various normative theories, most of the discipline of comparative politics focuses on empirical theory. We attempt to explain the political world around us, and we do this by looking across multiple cases to come up with generalizations about politics.

How Do Comparativists Study Politics? Clearly, political scientists do not have perfect scientific conditions in which to do research. We do not have a controlled laboratory, because we certainly cannot control the real world of politics. Physicists

theory

An abstract argument that provides a systematic explanation of some phenomena

empirical theory

An argument explaining what actually occurs; empirical theorists first notice and describe a pattern and then attempt to explain what causes it

normative theory

An argument explaining what ought to occur rather than what does occur; contrast with empirical theory

research methods

Systematic processes used to ensure that the study of some phenomena is as objective and unbiased as possible

single case study

Research method that examines a particular political phenomenon in just one country or community and can generate ideas for theories or test theories developed from different cases



comparative method

The means by which scholars try to mimic laboratory conditions by careful selection of cases

most similar systems design

A common approach of the comparative method that selects cases that are alike in a number of ways but differ on a key question under examination

most different systems design

A common approach of the comparative method that looks at countries that differ in many ways but that are similar in terms of the particular political process or outcome in which the research is interested

can use a laboratory to control all elements of an experiment, and they can repeat that same experiment to achieve identical results because molecules do not notice what the scientists are doing, think about the situation, and change their behavior. In political science, however, political actors think about the changes going on around them and modify their behavior accordingly.

Despite these limitations, comparativists use the scientific method (as explained in the “Scientific Method in Comparative Politics” box) to try to gain as systematic evidence as possible. We use several research methods to try to overcome at least some of the difficulties our complex field of study presents. **Research methods** are systematic processes used to ensure that the study of some phenomena is as objective and unbiased as possible.

One common research method we use is the **single case study**, which examines a particular political phenomenon in just one country or community. A case study can generate ideas for new theories, or it can test existing theories developed from different cases. A single case can never be definitive proof of anything beyond that case itself, but it can be suggestive of further research and can be of interest to people researching that particular country. Deviant case studies that do not fit a widely held pattern can be particularly helpful in highlighting the limits of even widely supported theories. Case studies also deepen our knowledge about particular countries, useful in and of itself. Scholars engaging in case study research search for common patterns within the case or use a method known as process tracing, which involves careful examination of the historical linkages between potential causes and effects. They do this in order to demonstrate as definitively as possible what caused what in the case being studied. Case studies serve as important sources of information and ideas for comparativists using more comparative methods.

Scholars use the **comparative method** to examine the same phenomenon in several cases, and they try to mimic laboratory conditions by selecting cases carefully. Two approaches are common. The **most similar systems design** selects cases that are alike in a number of ways but differ on the key question under examination. For instance, Michael Bratton and Nicholas van de Walle (1997) looked at transitions to democracy in Africa, arguing that all African countries share certain similarities in patterns of political behavior that are distinct from patterns in Latin America, where the main theories of democratization were developed. On the other hand, the **most different systems design** looks at countries that differ in many ways but are similar in terms of the particular political process or outcome in which the research is interested. For instance, scholars of revolution look at the major cases of revolution around the world—a list of seemingly very different countries like France, Russia, China, Vietnam, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Iran—and ask what common elements can be found that explain why these countries had revolutions. Both comparative methods have their strengths and weaknesses, but their common goal is to use careful case selection and systematic examination of key variables to mimic laboratory methods as closely as possible.

Scientific Method in Comparative Politics

Political science can never be a pure science because of imperfect laboratory conditions: in the real world, we have very little control over social and political phenomena. Political scientists, like other social scientists, nonetheless think in scientific terms. Most use key scientific concepts, including the following:

- Theory: An abstract argument explaining a phenomenon
- Hypothesis: A claim that certain things cause other things to happen or change
- Variable: A measurable phenomenon that changes across time or space
- Dependent variable: The phenomenon a scientist is trying to explain
- Independent variable: The thing that explains the dependent variable
- Control: Holding variables constant so that the effects of one independent variable at a time can be examined

In using the scientific method in political science, the first challenge we face is to define clearly the variables we need to include and measure them accurately. For instance, one recent study of civil wars by Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler (2001) included, among other variables, measurements of when a civil war was taking place, poverty, ethnic fragmentation, and dependence on natural resources. They had to ask themselves, What constitutes a "civil war"? How much violence must occur and for how long before a particular country is considered to be having a civil war? In 2007 critics of the U.S. presence in Iraq argued

that Iraq was experiencing a civil war, while defenders of the United States denied this, so should the internal conflict in Iraq in 2007 be counted as a civil war or not?

A second challenge we face is figuring out how to control for all the potentially relevant variables in our research. In a laboratory, scientists control many of the variables they work with, holding them constant so that they can examine the effects of one independent variable at a time. Political scientists can rarely do this directly, as we cannot hold variables constant. A common alternative is to measure the simultaneous effects of all the independent variables through quantitative studies, such as Collier and Hoeffler's study of civil wars. Single-case studies and the comparative method attempt to control variables via careful selection of cases. For instance, a comparative case study examining the same questions Collier and Hoeffler studied might select as cases only poor countries, hypothesizing that the presence of natural resources only causes civil wars in poor countries. The question becomes, In the context of poverty, is ethnic fragmentation or the presence of natural resources more important in causing civil war? If, on the other hand, we think poverty itself affects the likelihood of civil war, we might select several cases from poor countries and several others from rich countries to see if the presence of natural resources has a different effect in the different contexts. None of this provides the perfect control that a laboratory can achieve; rather, it attempts to mimic those conditions as closely as possible to arrive at scientifically defensible conclusions.

With about two hundred countries in the world, however, no one can systematically examine every single case in depth. For large-scale studies, political scientists rely on a third method: **quantitative statistical techniques**. When evidence can be reduced to sets of numbers, statistical methods can be used to systematically compare a huge number of cases. Recent research on the causes of civil war, for instance, looked at all identifiable civil wars over several decades, literally hundreds of cases. The results indicated that ethnic divisions, which often seem to be the cause of civil war, are not as important as had been assumed. Although they may play a role, civil war is much more likely when groups are fighting over control of a valuable resource such as diamonds. Where no such resource exists, ethnic divisions are far less likely to result in war (Collier and Hoeffler 2001).



quantitative statistical techniques
Research method used for large-scale studies that reduces evidence to sets of numbers so that statistical analysis can systematically compare a huge number of cases

Young men look for diamonds in Sierra Leone. Recent statistical research has supported the theory that conflicts such as the civil war in Sierra Leone in the 1990s are not caused primarily by ethnic differences, as is often assumed, but by competition over control of mineral resources.



Web link:
Five misunderstandings about case-study research

Each of these methods has its advantages and disadvantages. A single case study allows a political scientist to look at a phenomenon in great depth and come to a more thorough understanding of a particular case (usually a country). The comparative method retains some, but not all, of this depth and gains the advantage of systematic comparison from which more generalizable conclusions can be drawn. Quantitative techniques can show broad patterns, but only for questions involving evidence that can be presented numerically, and they provide little depth on any particular case. Case studies are best at generating new ideas and insights that can lead to new theories. Quantitative techniques are best at showing the tendency of two or more phenomena to vary together, such as civil war and the presence of valuable resources. Understanding how phenomena are connected, and what causes what, often requires case studies that can provide greater depth to see the direct connections involved.

No matter how much political scientists attempt to mimic laboratory sciences, the subject matter will not allow the kinds of scientific conclusions that exist in chemistry or biology. As the world changes, ideas and theories have to adapt. That does not mean that old theories are not useful; they often are. It does mean, however, that no theory will ever become a universal and unchanging law, like the law of gravity. The political world simply isn't that certain.

Comparative politics will also never become a true science because political scientists have their own human passions and positions regarding the various debates they study. A biologist might become determined to gain fame or fortune by proving a particular theory, even if laboratory tests don't support it (for instance, scientist Woo Suk Hwang of South Korea went so far as to fabricate stem cell research results). Biologists, however, neither become ethically or morally committed to finding particular research results, nor tend to engage in particular kinds of research because of their moral beliefs. Political scientists, however, do act on their moral concerns, and that is entirely justifiable. Normative theories affect political science because our field is the study of people. Our ethical and moral positions often influence the very questions we ask. Those who ask questions about the level of "cheating" in the welfare system, for instance, are typically critics of the system who tend to think the government is wasting money on

welfare. Those who ask questions about the effects of budget cuts on the poor, on the other hand, probably believe the government should be involved in alleviating poverty. These ethical positions do not mean that the evidence can or should be ignored. For example, empirical research suggested that the 1996 welfare reform in the United States neither reduced the income of the poor as much as critics initially feared nor helped the poor get jobs and rise out of poverty as much as its proponents predicted (Jacobson 2001). Good political scientists can approach a subject like this with a set of moral concerns but recognize the results of careful empirical research nonetheless, and change their arguments and conclusions in light of the new evidence.

Normative questions can be important and legitimate purposes for research projects. This book includes extensive discussions of different kinds of democratic political institutions. One of the potential trade-offs, we argue, is between greater levels of representation and participation on the one hand and efficient policymaking on the other. But this analysis is only interesting if we care about this trade-off. We have to hold a normative position on which of the two—representation and participation or efficient policymaking—is more important and why. Only then can we use the lessons learned from our empirical examination to make recommendations about which institutions a country ought to adopt.

Where does this leave the field of comparative politics? The best comparativists are aware of their own biases but still can use various methods to generate the most systematic evidence possible to come to logical conclusions. We approach the subject with our normative concerns, our own ideas about what a “good society” should be, and what role government should have in it. We try to do research on interesting questions as scientifically and systematically as possible to develop the best evidence we can to provide a solid basis for government policy. Because we care passionately about the issues, we ought to study them as rigorously as possible.



**CRITICAL
inquiry**

**An Orientation to
Comparative Politics**

Although you are only starting your study of comparative politics, it is never too early to start developing the ability to understand and ultimately conduct systematic research in the field. Throughout this book, you'll see boxes labeled “Critical Inquiry.” Most of these will present you with some key evidence, such as data on several variables for a select

number of countries. We will ask you to use these data to test or challenge other findings, or to develop hypotheses of your own that attempt to answer some of the key questions we address in that particular chapter. We may invite you to use online and other resources for additional research as well, so you can start to formulate conclusions about whether the hypotheses are true or not. In some chapters, we also present normative questions for consideration, as these are also essential to the study of comparative politics. While you won't be able to come to definitive conclusions, these exercises will give you a taste of how comparative politics is done. They will also allow you to think about the limits of the research you've done or encountered, the role of normative questions in the field, and what could be done to answer the questions more definitively.

THREE KEY QUESTIONS IN COMPARATIVE POLITICS

Comparative politics is a huge field. The questions we can ask are virtually limitless. Spanning this huge range, however, are three major questions. The first two are fundamental to the field of political science, of which comparative politics is a part. The third is comparativists' particular contribution to the broader field of political science.

Probably the most common question political scientists ask is, What explains political behavior? The heart of political science is trying to understand why people do what they do in the world of politics. We can ask, Why do voters vote the way they do? Why do interest groups champion particular causes so passionately? Why does the U.S. Supreme Court make the decisions it does? Why has Ghana been able to create an apparently stable democracy, while neighboring Mali had its own democracy overthrown by the military? By asking these questions, we seek to discover why individuals, groups, institutions, or countries take particular political actions. Political scientists have developed many theories to explain various kinds of political actions. Below, we discuss them in terms of three broad approaches that focus on individual motivation, culture and ideology, and underlying structures.

The second large question animating political science is, Who rules? Who has power in a particular country, political institution, or political situation and why? Formal power is often clear in modern states; particular officials have prescribed functions and rules that give them certain powers. For example, the U.S. Congress passes legislation, which the president has the power to sign or veto and which the U.S. Supreme Court can rule as constitutional or not. But does the legislation Congress passes reflect the will of the citizens? Are citizens really ruling through their elected representatives (as the U.S. Constitution implies), or are powerful lobbyists calling the shots, or can members of Congress do whatever they want once in office? The Constitution and laws can't fully answer these broader questions of who really has a voice, is able to participate, and therefore has power.

Virtually all questions in political science derive from these two fundamental questions, and virtually all empirical theories are involved in the debate these two questions raise. Comparativists add a third particular focus by asking, Where and why do particular types of political behavior occur? If we can explain why Americans on the left side of the political spectrum vote for Democrats, can we use the same explanation for the voting patterns of Germans and Brazilians with left-leaning views? If special interests have the real power over economic policy in the U.S. presidential system, is this the case in Britain's parliamentary democracy as well? Why have military coups d'état happened rather frequently in Latin America and Africa but very rarely in Europe and North America? Comparativists start with the same basic theories used by other political scientists to try to explain political behavior and understand who really has power; we then add a comparative dimension to develop explanations that work in different times and places. In addition to helping develop more scientific theories,

comparing different cases and contexts can help us determine which lessons from one situation are applicable to another.

What Explains Political Behavior?

The core activity in all political science is explaining political behavior: Why do people, groups, and governments act as they do in the political arena? It's easy enough to observe and describe behavior, but what explains it? In daily discussions we tend to attribute the best of motives to those with whom we agree—they are “acting in the best interests” of the community or nation. We tend to see those with whom we disagree, on the other hand, as acting selfishly or even with evil intent. You can see this tendency in the way Americans use the phrase “special interest.” We perceive groups whose causes or ideological leanings we agree with as benevolent and general; those we disagree with are “special interests.” Logically, however, any **political actor**, meaning any person or group engaged in political behavior, can be motivated by a variety of factors. Political scientists have developed three broad answers to the question of what explains political behavior: individual motivation, culture and ideology, and underlying structures. Each answer includes within it several theoretical approaches.

Individual Motivation We commonly assume that most people involved in politics are in it for their own good. Even when political actors claim to be working for the greater good or for some specific principle, many people suspect they are just hiding their own self-interested motives. The assumption of self-interest (broadly defined) is also a major element in political science theories about political behavior.

Rational choice theory assumes that individuals are rational and that they bring a set of self-defined preferences into the political arena. This does not mean that all people are greedy or selfish, but rather that they rationally pursue their preferences, whatever those may be. The theory borrows heavily from the field of economics, which makes the same assumptions in analyzing behavior in the market. Political scientists use this theory to explain political behavior and its results by making assumptions about political actors' preferences, modeling the political context in which they pursue those preferences, and demonstrating how political outcomes can be explained as the result of the interactions of those actors in that context. For instance, the allocation of money for building new roads is the result of an agreement among members of a congressional committee. All of the members of the committee have certain interests or preferences, based mainly on the stated desires of the voters in the districts they represent as well as the members' own desire for reelection. The committee members pursue those interests rationally, and the final bill is a negotiated settlement reflecting the relative power of the various committee members, as well as their interests within the context of the committee and Congress more broadly.

political actor
Any person or group engaged in political behavior

rational choice theory
An explanation for political behavior that assumes that individuals are rational beings who bring to the political arena a set of self-defined preferences and adequate knowledge and ability to pursue those preferences



Sen. Pat Roberts, R-Kans., discusses the Farm Bill at a news conference in 2012. The proposed legislation—authorizing agricultural subsidies, food stamps, and food aid abroad—represents the type of political conflict based on material interests that lends itself particularly well to analysis via rational choice theory.

Rational choice theorists start their analyses at the level of the individual, but they often seek to explain group behavior. They model group behavior from their assumptions about the preferences of individual members of groups. Group behavior is considered a result of the collective actions of rational individual actors in the group in a particular context. Racial or ethnic minority groups, women's groups, or environmental and religious groups can all be analyzed in this way. Rational choice theorists would argue, for instance, that environmentalists are just as rational and self-interested as oil companies but simply have different preferences. Environmentalists gain benefits from breathing clean air and walking through unpolluted forests; they pursue those preferences in the same way that the oil industry pursues its opposition to environmental regulations. While self-defined preferences may be easier to see when analyzing battles over material goods and money, they exist throughout the political arena. Rational choice theorists thus are not interested in the third dimension of power we mentioned earlier, the ability to influence how people think about politics and thus perhaps change people's preferences. They

instead accept people's preferences as given and then ask how those preferences influence political behavior and outcomes.

This raises one of the major criticisms of rational choice theories. Critics contend that rational choice theorists have difficulty explaining outcomes because it is often difficult to know in advance exactly which individuals or groups might be involved in a particular political dispute and exactly how they will define their preferences. When a new political issue arises, individuals or groups have to figure out if they are interested in it and, if so, what preferences they will hold and pursue. In economics, this usually isn't a problem. It's a pretty safe assumption that people engage in economic activity to make money: businesses seek to maximize profits, and workers look for the highest wage. Knowing preferences in advance is much more difficult in political science. For instance, how can a rational choice theorist explain the electoral choice of a voter who is both a devout Catholic and a union member if the two available candidates are (a) a Democrat who favors raising the minimum wage and other workers' benefits but also favors legalized abortion, and (b) a Republican with the opposite views? Will that person vote as a Catholic or as a union member? How can we use rational choice theory to figure out his preferences in this situation?

Many comparativists also ask whether rational choice theories can explain the different political behavior seen around the world. For most of the twentieth century, for example, the most important French labor unions were closely affiliated with the Communist Party and pursued many objectives tied to party beliefs, beyond the basic

“shop floor” issues of wages and working conditions. In the United States, by contrast, no major unions were tied to communist or socialist parties, and unions focused much more on improving wages and working conditions with less concern for broader social changes. In Britain, labor unions were not communists, but they created their own party, the Labour Party, to represent their interests in government. Rational choice theorists might be able to explain political outcomes involving these unions after correctly understanding the preferences of each, but they have a hard time explaining why unions in different countries developed strikingly different sets of preferences. Did something about the working conditions of these three countries produce different definitions of “self-interest,” or do different workers define their interests differently based on factors other than rational calculation?

Psychological theories also focus on individual motivation but question the assumption of rational action and are particularly interested in how political preferences are formed. They explain political behavior on the basis of individuals’ psychological experiences or dispositions. Psychological theories look for nonrational explanations for political behavior. Comparativists who study individual leaders often use this approach, trying to explain leaders’ choices and actions by understanding personal backgrounds and psychological states. Psychological theories are also sometimes used to explain group identity and behavior (e.g., strong attachments to racial or ethnic groups) and the willingness to join a group engaging in political actions outside the bounds of social norms (e.g., revolutions, political violence, and genocide). In sharp contrast to rational choice theory, psychological theories are often interested in the third dimension of power: influences on the formation of individual political demands. Critics of the psychological approach argue that the inherent focus on the individual that is fundamental to psychological theories makes them irrelevant to explaining group behavior. If so, their utility in political science is limited. Explanations beyond the level of individual motivation, however, might help explain these situations.

psychological theories

Explanations for political behavior based on psychological analysis of political actors’ motives

Culture and Ideology Culture and ideology are probably second only to self-interest in popular ideas about political behavior. If people think a political actor is not simply self-interested, they usually assume she is motivated by a value or belief. Environmentalists care about the environment; regardless of their own personal interests, they think everyone ought to have clean air to breathe and forests to walk through. People who are against abortion believe that life begins at conception and therefore abortion is murder; self-interest has nothing to do with it. Political scientists have developed various formal theories that relate to this commonsense notion that values and beliefs matter. The main approaches focus on either political culture or political ideology.

A **political culture** is a set of widely held attitudes, values, beliefs, and symbols about politics. It provides people with ways to understand the political arena, justifications for a particular set of political institutions and practices, and definitions of appropriate political behaviors. Political cultures emerge from various historical processes

political culture

A set of widely held attitudes, values, beliefs, and symbols about politics

political socialization

The process through which people, especially young people, learn about politics and are taught a society's common political values and beliefs

modernists

Theorists of political culture who believe that clear sets of attitudes, values, and beliefs can be identified in each country that change very rarely and explain much about politics there

typology

A classification of some set of phenomena into distinct types for purposes of analysis

civic culture

A political culture in which citizens hold values and beliefs that support democracy, including active participation in politics but also enough deference to the leadership to let it govern effectively

subcultures

Groups that hold partially different beliefs and values from the main political culture of a country

and can change over time, although they usually change rather slowly as they are often deeply embedded in a society. They tend to endure, in part, because of **political socialization**, the process through which people, especially young people, learn about politics and are taught a society's common political values and beliefs. Theories of political culture argue that the attitudes, values, beliefs, and symbols that constitute a given country's political culture are crucial explanations for political behavior in that country. Widely accepted cultural values, they argue, can influence all three dimensions of power: getting people to do something, excluding them from the political arena, and influencing their political demands.

Two broad schools of thought within political culture theory exist: modernist and postmodernist. **Modernists** believe that clear attitudes, values, and beliefs can be identified within any particular political culture. The best-known example of this approach was presented by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba in their 1963 book, *The Civic Culture*. Based on a broad survey of citizens of five countries in North America and Europe, the authors developed a **typology**, or list of different types, of political cultures. They saw each country as dominated primarily by one particular type of political culture and argued that more stable and democratic countries, such as the United States and Great Britain, had a **civic culture**. This meant that their citizens held democratic values and beliefs that supported their democracies; these attitudes led citizens to participate actively in politics but also to defer enough to the leadership to let it govern effectively. On the other hand, the authors described Mexico as an authoritarian culture in which citizens viewed themselves primarily as subjects with no right to control their government, suggesting that these attitudes helped to produce the semi-authoritarian regime that ruled the country until 2000.

Critics of the modernist approach question the assumption that any country has a clearly defined political culture that is relatively fixed and unchanging, and they contest the argument that cultural values cause political outcomes rather than the other way around. They note that **subcultures** (distinct political cultures of particular groups) exist in all societies. Racial or religious minorities, for instance, may not fully share the political attitudes and values of the majority. The assumption that we can identify a single, unified political culture that is key to understanding a particular country can mask some of the most important political conflicts within the country. Furthermore, political attitudes themselves may be symptoms rather than causes of political activity or a governmental system. For example, Mexican citizens in the 1960s may not have viewed themselves as active participants in government for a very rational reason: they had lived for forty years under one party that had effectively suppressed all meaningful opposition and participation. They really did not have any effective voice in government or any chance for effective participation. According to this view, the political institutions in Mexico created the political attitudes of Mexicans, rather than vice versa.

Some political scientists also accuse modernists of ethnocentrism, in that many modernist approaches argue that Anglo-American values are superior to others for



Police confront protesters in Mexico City in 1968. Political culture theory argues that countries like Mexico were not democratic because they did not have a democratic political culture. Critics contend that culture can change quickly, so it isn't a very good explanation of regime type. Mexico transitioned to an electoral democracy in 2000.

establishing stable democracies. Still other critics suggest that political culture is more malleable than *The Civic Culture* assumed. The attitudes that surveys identified in the 1960s were just that—attitudes of the 1960s. Over time, as societies change and new political ideas arise, attitudes and values change accordingly, sometimes with breathtaking speed (Almond and Verba 1989). Many cultural theorists, for instance, have argued that both Arab and Islamic cultures tend to have nondemocratic values that support authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. The revolts in 2011 that toppled regimes in Tunisia and Libya suggest that those theorists either misunderstood the cultures or the cultures changed rapidly.

Some modernist approaches examine change in political culture. Ronald Inglehart (1971) coined the term **postmaterialist** in the 1970s to describe what he saw as a new predominant element in political culture in wealthy democracies. He argued that as a result of the post–World War II economic expansion, by the 1960s and 1970s most citizens in wealthy societies were less concerned about economic (materialist) issues and more concerned about “quality of life” issues. They had become “postmaterialist.” Economic growth had allowed most citizens to attain a level of material comfort that led to a change in attitudes and values. Individuals had become more concerned with ideas like human rights, civil rights, women’s rights, environmentalism, and moral values.

This postmaterialist shift in political culture led to a sea change in the issues that politicians came to care about and the outcomes of elections. It explained, for instance, why many self-identified Catholic voters in the United States shifted from

postmaterialist

A set of values in a society in which most citizens are economically secure enough to move beyond immediate economic (materialist) concerns to “quality of life” issues like human rights, civil rights, women’s rights, environmentalism, and moral values

voting Democratic in the middle of the twentieth century to voting Republican by the end of the century. In the 1950s they voted their mostly working-class economic interests, supporting the party that created what they saw as “pro-worker” policies. Later, as they achieved greater economic security as part of an expanding middle class, they came to care more about postmaterial moral values, such as their religious opposition to abortion, and they shifted their party allegiance accordingly. As the bulk of American voters went through this shift in political culture, political battles focused less on economic issues and more on debates over the moral and cultural values that many analysts see dividing the country more recently. Changes like the shift to post-materialist values in a political culture, though, are still long-term processes. If cultural values are deeply embedded and nearly universal in a society, they can only change slowly. For instance, some might wonder whether the economic crisis that began in 2008 might not shift Western voters away from postmaterialist values and back to more material concerns, but a major shift in this direction will only be apparent over a rather long time period.

postmodernist

An approach that sees cultures not as sets of fixed and clearly defined values but rather as sets of symbols subject to interpretation

political discourse

The ways in which people speak and write about politics; postmodern theorists argue that political discourse influences political attitudes, identity, and actions

Inglehart’s (1971) approach, and others like it, shows how political culture can change over time as a result of other changes in society. Nonetheless, Inglehart and others continued to argue that it was useful to think about societies as having identifiable political cultures that explain much political behavior. The **postmodernist** approach, on the other hand, pushes the criticism of modernism further, questioning the assumption that one clear set of values can be identified that has a clear meaning to all members of a society and defines the politics of that society. Postmodernists, influenced primarily by postmodern French philosophers such as Michel Foucault, see cultures not as sets of fixed and clearly defined values but rather as sets of symbols subject to interpretation. When examining political culture, postmodernists focus primarily on **political discourse**, meaning the ways in which a society speaks and writes about politics. They argue that a culture has a set of symbols that, through a particular historical process, has come to be highly valued but is always subject to varying interpretations. These symbols do not have fixed values upon which all members of a society agree; instead, political actors can use them by interpreting them through political discourse. Influencing discourse can be a means to gain power in its third dimension: influencing how people think about politics.

One example of a symbol that political actors use in political discourse is “family values.” No American politician would dare oppose family values. In the 1980s Republicans under President Ronald Reagan used this concept in their campaign discourse very effectively to paint themselves as supporters of the core concerns of middle-class families. As a result, Democrats and their policies came to be seen at times as threatening to the ideal of the nuclear family. In the 1990s under President Bill Clinton, Democrats were able to gain back some political advantage by reinterpreting family values to mean what they argued was support for “real” American families: single mothers trying to raise kids on their own, or two-income families in which the parents were worried about the quality of after-school programs and the cost of a

college education. Democrats created a new discourse about family values that allowed them to connect that powerful symbol to the kinds of government programs they supported. Family values, the postmodernists would argue, are not a fixed set of values that all agree on, but rather a symbol through which political leaders build support by developing a particular discourse at a particular time. Such symbols are always subject to reinterpretation in this way.

Critics of the postmodern approach argue that it really cannot explain anything. If everything is subject to interpretation, then how can one explain anything or form any prediction other than “things will change as new interpretations arise”? Postmodernists respond that the discourses themselves matter by setting symbolic boundaries within which political actors must engage to mobilize political support. The ability of political leaders to interpret these symbols to develop support for themselves and their policies is a central element to understanding political activity in any country.

Advocates of political culture, whether modernist or postmodernist, argue that explaining political behavior requires understanding the effects of political culture at the broadest level. A related but distinct way to examine the effect of values and beliefs is the study of **political ideology**, a systematic set of beliefs about how a political system ought to be structured. Political ideologies typically are quite powerful, overarching worldviews that incorporate both normative and empirical theories that explicitly state an understanding of how the political world does operate and how it ought to operate. Political ideology is distinct from political culture in that it is much more consciously elaborated. In chapter 3 we examine the predominant political ideologies of the last century: liberalism, communism, fascism, modernizing authoritarianism, and theocracy.

Advocates of a particular political ideology attempt to mobilize support for their position by proclaiming a vision of a just and good society as a goal toward which political actors should strive. The most articulate proponents of an ideology can expound on its points, define its key terms, and argue for why it is right. Communists, for instance, envision a communist society in which all people are equal and virtually all serious conflicts disappear, meaning government itself can disappear. They appeal to people’s sense of injustice by pointing out the inequality that is inherent in a capitalist society, and they encourage people to work with them through various means to achieve a better society in the future.

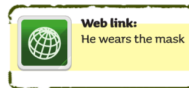
A political ideology may be related to a particular political culture, but political ideologies are conscious and well-developed sets of beliefs rather than the vague sets of values or attitudes. Some scholars take political ideology at face value, at least implicitly accepting the idea that political leaders, and perhaps their followers as well, should be taken at their word. These scholars believe that political actors have thought about politics and adopted a particular set of beliefs that they use as a basis for their own political actions and for judging the actions of others. Comparativists Evelyne Huber and John Stephens (2001), for instance, argue that the strength of social democratic ideology in several northern European governments partly explains why those states have exceptionally generous welfare policies.

political ideology
A systematic set of beliefs
about how a political system
ought to be structured



ideological hegemony

The ruling class's ability to spread a set of ideas justifying and perpetuating its political dominance



structuralism

Approach to explaining politics that argues that political behavior is at least influenced and limited, and perhaps even determined, by broader structures in a society such as class divisions or enduring institutions

Marxism

Structuralist argument that says that economic structures largely determine political behavior; the philosophical underpinning of communism

social classes

In Marxist theory, groups of people with the same relationship to the means of production; more generally, groups of people with similar occupations, wealth, or income

bourgeoisie

The class that owns capital; according to Marxism, the ruling elite in all capitalist societies

proletariat

A term in Marxist theory for the class of free-wage laborers who own no capital and must sell their labor to survive; communist parties claim to work on the proletariat's behalf

institutionalism

An approach to explaining politics that argues that political institutions are crucial to understanding political behavior

Critics of this approach point to what they see as the underlying motives of ideology as the real explanation for political behavior. The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1971) argued that the key element we need to understand is **ideological hegemony**, or the ruling class's ability to propagate a set of ideas that justifies and perpetuates its political dominance. For Gramsci, ideology is a means by which the ruling class convinces the population that its rule is natural, justified, or both (see the "Who Rules?" section in this chapter on page 24 for a discussion of the ruling class). Clearly, this ties directly to the "third dimension" of power. Advocates of rational choice models might argue that a particular leader or group adopts a particular ideology because it is in its own self-interest; for example, business owners support an ideology of "free markets" because it maximizes opportunities to make profits. Similarly, advocates of a political culture approach see cultural values as lying behind ideology. In the United States, for instance, vague but deep-seated American values of individualism and individual freedom may explain why Americans are far less willing to support socialist ideologies than are Europeans. The debate between proponents and critics of political ideology as an explanation for political behavior is about whether scholars should accept political actors' ideological statements at face value or should dig deeper to look for underlying causes of political behavior, including why particular actors adopt particular ideologies.

Underlying Structures The third broad approach to explaining political behavior is **structuralism**. Structuralists argue that broader structures in a society at the very least influence and limit, and perhaps even determine, political behavior. These structures can be socioeconomic or political. An early and particularly influential structuralist argument was **Marxism**, which argues that economic structures largely determine political behavior. Karl Marx contended that the production process of any society creates discrete **social classes**—groups of people with distinct relationships to the means of production. He argued that in modern capitalist society the key classes are the **bourgeoisie**, which owns and controls capital, and the **proletariat**, which owns no capital and must sell its labor to survive. According to Marx, this economic structure explains political behavior: the bourgeoisie uses its economic advantage to control the state in its interest, while the proletariat will eventually recognize and act on its own, opposing interests.

A more recent structuralist theory is **institutionalism**. Institutionalists argue that political institutions are crucial to understanding political behavior. A **political institution** is most commonly defined as a set of rules, norms, or standard operating procedures that is widely recognized and accepted and that structures and constrains individuals' political actions. Major political institutions often serve as the basis for key political organizations such as legislatures or political parties. In short, institutions are the "rules of the game" within which political actors must operate. These rules are often quite formal and widely recognized, such as in the U.S. Constitution.

Other institutions can be informal or even outside government but nonetheless be very important in influencing political behavior. In the United States, George Washington established a long-standing informal institution, the two-term limit on the presidency. After he stepped down at the end of his second term, no other president, no matter how popular, attempted to run for a third term until Franklin Roosevelt in 1940. Voters supported his decision and reelected him, but after his death the country quickly passed a constitutional amendment that created a formal rule limiting a president to two consecutive terms. Informal institutions can be enduring, as the two-term presidency tradition shows. It held for more than 150 years simply because the vast majority of political leaders and citizens believed it should; in that context, no president dared go against it.

Broadly speaking, two schools of thought exist among institutionalists. **Rational choice institutionalists** follow the assumptions of rational choice theory outlined above. They argue that institutions are the products of the interaction and bargaining of rational actors and, once created, constitute the rules of the game within which rational actors operate, at least until their interests diverge too far from those rules. Barry Weingast (1997), for instance, claimed that for democracies to succeed, major political forces must come to a rational compromise on key political institutions that give all important political players incentives to support the system. Institutions that create such incentives will be self-enforcing, thereby creating a stable democratic political system. Weingast applied this argument to several countries, including the United States. He argued that political stability in early U.S. history was due to the Constitution's provision of federalism, a particular separation of powers, and the equal representation of each of the states in the Senate. This gave both North and South effective veto power over major legislation, which enforced compromise and, therefore, stability. The Civil War broke out, in part, because by the 1850s the creation of nonslave states threatened the South's veto power. This changed context meant that Southern leaders no longer saw the Constitution as serving their interests, so they were willing to secede. Rational choice institutionalists argue that political actors will abide by a particular institution only as long as it continues to serve their joint interests. Therefore, a changed context requires institutions to change accordingly or face dissolution.

Historical institutionalists believe that institutions play an even bigger role in explaining political behavior. They argue that institutions not only limit self-interested political behavior but also influence who is involved in politics and shape individuals' political preferences, thus working in all three dimensions of power. By limiting who is allowed to participate, institutions can determine what a government is capable of accomplishing. Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman (1995), for example, argued that two key institutions—a strong executive and a coherent party system—shaped political participation in ways that allowed certain countries in Latin America and East Asia to respond positively to economic crises in the 1980s and 1990s, improving their economies and creating stable democracies. Beyond limiting who can participate

political institution

A set of rules, norms, or standard operating procedures that is widely recognized and accepted by the society, structures and constrains political actions, and often serves as the basis for key political organizations

rational choice institutionalists

Institutionalist theorists who follow the assumptions of rational choice theory and argue that institutions are the products of the interaction and bargaining of rational actors

historical institutionalists

Theorists who believe that institutions explain political behavior and shape individuals' political preferences and their perceptions of their self-interests, and that institutions evolve historically in particular countries and change relatively slowly

and what can be accomplished, institutions can create political preferences. Because societies value long-standing political institutions, their preservation is part of political socialization: citizens come to accept and value existing institutions and define their own interests partly in terms of preserving those institutions. Historical institutionalists thus argue that institutions themselves profoundly shape what policies are possible and what political outcomes are likely, independent of people's self-interests or cultural values.

Critics of institutionalism argue that institutions are rarely the actual explanation for political behavior. Skeptics who follow rational choice theory argue that institutions are simply based on rational actions and compromises among elites who will continue to be "constrained" by these only as long as doing so serves their interests. Scholars who focus on political culture or ideology, on the other hand, suggest that institutions are derived from a society's underlying values and beliefs or a more self-conscious ideology. In either case, the real explanation for political behavior and the shape of the institutions is the underlying values, beliefs, or ideology present in a society.

Political scientists look to three sources as explanations for political behavior: rational action, values and beliefs, and structures. Scholars can use each of these approaches to analyze the same political event. For instance, Chile made one of the most successful transitions to democracy in the 1990s. A rational choice institutionalist might argue that this resulted from the strategic interaction of the major political actors, regardless of what they personally believed about democracy. They came to a compromise with the former military regime and with one another around a set of constitutional rules that, given the political context, they thought was better for them than the available nondemocratic alternatives. Therefore, they agreed to act within the democratic "game." A political culture theorist would point to values in Chilean society that favored democracy, values that perhaps derived in part from the European origins of much of the population, as well as the country's past history with democracy. A historical institutionalist, on the other hand, would argue that Chile's prior stable democratic institutions were easy to resurrect because of their past success and that these institutions represented a legacy that many other Latin American countries did not have. So the question becomes, Which of these theories is most convincing and why, and what evidence can we find to support one or another explanation? This is the primary work of much of political science and the kind of question to which we will return frequently in this book. The theories we use are summarized in Table 1.1.

Who Rules?

The second great question in comparative politics is, Who rules? Which individual, group, or groups control power, and how much do they control? At first glance, the answer may seem obvious. In a democracy, legislators are elected for a set term

to make the laws. They rule, after the voters choose them, until the next election. Because of elections, it is the voters who really rule. In a dictatorship, on the other hand, one individual, one ruling party, or one small group (such as a military junta) rules. This ruler(s) has all the power and keeps it as long as he pleases, or at least as long as he is able.

Comparativists, however, question this superficial view. Even in democracies, many argue that the voters don't really hold the power and that a small group at the top controls things. Conversely, many argue that dictatorships may not be the monoliths they appear to be in that those officially in charge may have to unofficially share power with others in society in one way or another. Political scientists, in trying to dig beneath the surface of the question, have developed many theories that can be grouped into two broad categories: pluralist theories and elite theories.

Pluralist Theories: Each Group Has Its Voice Pluralist theories contend that society is divided into various political groups and that power is dispersed among them so that no group has complete or permanent power. This is most obvious in democracies in which different parties capture power via elections. When pluralists look at political groups, however, they look at far more than just parties. They argue that politically organized groups exist in all societies, sometimes formally and legally but at other times informally or illegally. These groups compete for access to and influence over power. Policy is almost always the result of a compromise among groups, and no single group is able to dominate continuously. Furthermore, over time and on different issues, the power and influence of groups vary. A group that is particularly successful at gaining power or influencing government on one particular issue will not be as successful on another. No group will ever win all battles. Pluralists clearly tend to think about power in its first dimension; they do not believe that any one group has the ability to exclude other groups from the political arena or to influence how another group thinks to the extent necessary to gain permanent power over them.

This pluralist process is less obvious in countries that do not have electoral democracies, but many pluralists argue that their ideas are valid in these cases as well. Even in the Soviet Union under Communist rule, some analysts saw elements of pluralism. They believed that for most of the Soviet period, at least after the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, the ruling Communist Party had numerous internal factions that were essentially informal political groups. These were based on positions in the party and government bureaucracy or on economic position, regional loyalty, or personal loyalty to a key leader. For instance, people in the secret police, the KGB, and the military were each a political group, quietly lobbying to expand the influence and power of their organizations. Leaders of particular industries, such as the oil industry, were a group seeking the ruling party's support for greater resources and prestige for their area of the economy. Leaders of a region or city could also act as a group, seeking greater government spending in their area. In all these cases, pluralist politics were hidden behind a

pluralist theory

Explanation of who has power that argues that society is divided into various political groups and that power is dispersed among these groups so that no group has complete or permanent power; contrast to elite theory