



COMPARATIVE POLITICS

An Institutional
and Cross-National
Approach

Second Edition

Gregory S. Mahler

Comparative Politics
An Institutional
and Cross-National
Approach

GREGORY S. MAHLER
University of Mississippi



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Preface

It is a real pleasure to be able to work on the second edition of a project such as this. It affords the author the opportunity to correct errors that inadvertently slipped into the first edition, as well as making possible the updating of the material included in the book.

As the first edition of this volume was going to press, Germany was evolving from two states to one. While this process still has a long way to go before the German state can be referred to as economically and culturally homogeneous, many significant changes have been made in German political institutions since the first edition appeared.

More dramatic, of course, was the devolution and the ultimate demise of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The chapter on the USSR that appeared in the first edition, while anticipating substantial changes—because Mikhail Gorbachev had already come to power, and significant changes were appearing in the Soviet Union on a regular basis—was not able to do justice to the extent of change that resulted from Gorbachev's reforms. I do not believe that *anyone* would have predicted at that time the degree of change that has taken place over the last couple of years. In fact, the chapter on Russia in this volume bears very little resemblance to the chapter on the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in the first edition.

I am very pleased to be able to add to this edition two new “area studies” chapters, one on Canada and one on Nigeria. Both of these additions represent a real improvement. Canada is the largest trading partner of the United States; Canada

and the United States share the largest open border in the world, which sees more transborder traffic and commerce than any other. Canada is, despite most Americans' benign ignorance of it, the most important country in the world to the United States, and it is important that American students become aware of that fact.

The addition of Nigeria represents an admission that the first edition of this work was inadequate in its treatment of the Third World. This edition now has an expanded and updated chapter on a Latin American nation (Mexico), and a new chapter on one of Africa's most important, if politically unstable, nations. A good deal of what has happened in Nigeria in the last two decades is characteristic of other African (and Asian, and Latin American) nations, so the Nigerian case study is of some value to us and to our students in our comparative undertaking.

This volume places an emphasis on political institutions—as indicated by the title—for the same reasons as were indicated in the first edition: their *ease of comparison*, their *facility of identification and classification*, and the extent to which they *lend themselves to analysis*. This emphasis on political institutions, combined with the cross-national perspective of this volume, gives students both the tools and the perspective to undertake a meaningful cross-national introduction to the political world in which they must operate.

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Once again I would like to acknowledge the assistance and encouragement of the outstanding professionals at Prentice Hall who have been associated with this undertaking. Jennie Katsaros began thinking about a second edition remarkably soon after the first edition appeared. Barbara Reilly oversaw the production process at Prentice Hall. Eleanor Walter was also extremely important in the editing and proof-reading process.

I also want to thank the scholars who were contacted by Prentice Hall to review the first edition of the book and make suggestions for the second edition. Margaret C. Gonzalez (Louisiana State University), Jeffrey L. Jackson (State University of New York at Buffalo), Peggy Ann James (University of Wisconsin, Parkside), and Mohsen M. Milani (University of South Florida, Tampa) each made a number of very helpful suggestions. Much of the book's improved comprehensiveness is because of these individuals' suggestions and advice, which were much appreciated.

I also want to acknowledge the assistance of several students who have helped me gather specific material for this new edition. Josh Brown, Jerry Cooper, and Laura Hebert provided invaluable assistance in the revision process.

Finally, I want to once again acknowledge the role of my own students in the production of this book. It was my students' comments that initially convinced me to try my hand at writing a better text, and their subsequent comments have helped me a great deal in deciding what should be included in this type of work and the best way of presenting the material.

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1

Comparative Political Analysis: An Introduction

WHY DO WE STUDY POLITICS?

Politics. The word conjures up visions of campaigns, elections, and speeches. For the student who is a bit more politically experienced, the word may suggest other images, images such as legislatures, executives, courts, political parties, and interest groups. The more advanced student may also associate concepts such as policy-making, power, influence, socialization, or recruitment with the concept of politics.

One point that is clear to all students is that the term “politics” is an extremely broad one. It means all of the things indicated above, and more. Political science as a discipline can be traced back to the time of Plato (c. 427–c. 347 B.C.) and Aristotle (384–322 B.C.). Aristotle is often referred to as the first “real” political scientist—and we could add “first comparativist” to his credits, as well—because of his study of the many political systems that he found in the political world of his time. His comparisons of constitutions and power structures contributed many words to today’s political vocabulary, words such as “politics,” “democracy,” “oligarchy,” and “aristocracy.”¹

The study of politics can be characterized as the study of patterns of systematic interactions between and among individuals and groups in a community or society. This study does not involve random interactions, but rather focuses upon those interactions that involve power or authority. Aristotle saw many different types of relationships involved in the “political” association, but central to the concept was

the idea of *rule* or *authority*. In fact, one of the central criteria by which Aristotle classified constitutions in his study involved *where* power or authority to rule was located in the *polis*, the political system.² Much more recently, David Easton referred to politics as dealing with the “authoritative allocation of values for a society”³—the process by which social goals and standards are set, these standards being binding upon members of society. Harold Lasswell put the question succinctly in the title of his classic work, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How?*⁴ Thus, the study of politics may involve the study of legislatures, the study of voting, the study of political parties, the study of the role of a minority group in a political system, the study of power, more generally the study of how public policy is made, or all of these, and more.

Why do we study politics at all? It could be argued that political scientists since the time of Aristotle have been studying the same things—constitutions, rulers, the ruled, and so on—and we have not yet managed to come up with anything that could be called a perfect society. Why do we continue to study politics, then? If we have not found what we are looking for by now, are we likely to? What *are* we looking for? These are all good questions, and they are hard questions to answer, too.

What are we looking for? The range of subjects of our inquiry is extraordinarily broad. Some political scientists are trying to learn about justice, what it is, and how to get it. Others are concerned with how social policy is made; they may study political structures that are involved in the policy-making process. Others seek to understand why a given election is won by one political party rather than another. Others may seek to understand why people vote for anyone in an election. Still others study politics simply because political relationships seem to be important to our daily lives.

In short, there are as many different reasons for studying political behavior as there are different aspects of political behavior to study. One thing, however, is clear: We cannot charge solely the discipline of political science with the duty of finding the “good life”; political science is only *one* of the social sciences concerned with helping us to understand the complex world around us. The others, including economics, sociology, and anthropology, also study the same general types of social phenomena that we study.

The same type of question can also be asked in relation to comparative politics. Why should we study that field? What can we hope to learn? Before we can answer these questions, we have to decide what “comparative politics” is, and how it can be said to differ from the more generic “politics.” Many American political scientists tend to label as comparative politics anything that does not fit into one of the subdisciplines of politics: international relations, methodology, political theory, or American politics. For them, the subdiscipline of comparative politics would include “politics in England,” “politics in France,” “politics in Russia,” “politics in Zimbabwe,” and so on. (The general formula is “politics in X,” where any nation other than the United States could be substituted for the “X.”)

It should be quickly added that American political scientists are not the only ones to have this perspective. In France, the study of American politics is found within the subdiscipline of comparative politics; there, any area studies other than French politics would fall in the comparative basket. The same could be said for anything

other than German politics in Germany, or anything other than Canadian politics in Canada, and so on.

But comparative politics should be more than that. Studying “politics in X” more properly can be referred to as “area studies.” Area studies, involving a detailed examination of politics within a specific geographical setting, certainly is a legitimate kind of inquiry, but not one that necessarily involves any explicit *comparison*. In fact, Macridis and Brown many years ago criticized comparative politics at the time for not being *truly* comparative, for being almost completely concerned with single cases (for example, “Politics in Egypt”) and area studies (for example, “Politics in the Middle East”).⁵ Comparative politics is—or should be—*more than area studies*.

When we speak of comparative politics in this book, we are talking about the actual method of *comparison*. We all know what comparison is: It involves terms of relativity, terms such as “bigger,” “stronger,” “freer,” “more stable,” “less democratic,” and so on. Comparative politics, then, involves no more and no less than *a comparative study of politics*—a search for similarities and differences between and among political phenomena, including political institutions (such as legislatures, political parties, or political interest groups), political behavior (such as voting, demonstrating, or reading political pamphlets), or political ideas (such as liberalism, conservatism, or Marxism). Everything that politics studies, comparative politics studies; the latter simply undertakes the study with an explicitly comparative methodology in mind.

We could make the argument, in fact, that *all* of political science is comparative. The study of international relations compares diplomatic relations and strategies over time and between nations. The study of political behavior compares and contrasts types of activity in different political contexts. The study of political philosophy compares different perspectives of what ought to be and what is. Even the study of American politics is implicitly comparative: We study the power of the president as compared to the power of the Supreme Court, or why one interest group is more powerful than another, or the change in the relationship between Congress and the president over time, and so on.

Returning to the question of why we should study comparative politics, then, an answer now may be suggested. Doggan and Pelassy have observed that

Nothing is more natural than to study people, ideas, or institutions in relation to other people, ideas, or institutions. We gain knowledge through reference. . . . We compare to evaluate more objectively our situation as individuals, a community, or a nation.⁶

The study of comparative politics is useful because it gives us a broader perspective of political phenomena and political behavior, and this broader perspective can contribute a great deal to both our understanding and our appreciation of the phenomena we are studying. We compare to escape from our ethnocentrism, our assumptions that everyone behaves the same way we do; we seek to broaden our field of perspective. We compare to discover broader rules of behavior than we might find in more narrow studies.

For example, the simplicity and brevity of the Constitution of the United

States is even more impressive when it is examined alongside the much longer constitutions of other nations.⁷ We can better understand the significance of presidential government when we know about alternatives to presidential government. We can learn something about those factors contributing to political stability by studying a country that is regarded as being politically stable. We can learn even more by including an *unstable* country in our study, and looking for similarities and differences between the two countries.

HOW DO WE STUDY POLITICS?

There are two broad lanes on the road of inquiry; one is called the *normative* approach, and the other is called the *empirical* approach. The normative approach focuses upon philosophies, norms, or “shoulds.” The empirical approach relies on measurement and observation rather than theory or norm. Normativists might investigate exactly the same questions as empiricists, but they go about their investigations differently. Normativists might study justice, equality, the “good society,” and so on, and so might empiricists. The difference between the two groups is simply in how these questions would be approached.

Let us take an example to highlight differences in approach. Let us suppose that we have two political scientists interested in studying the concept of “justice.” The normative approach might focus on the concept of justice itself: What is justice? What is a just society? How do we decide what is just and what is unjust? Does the concept of justice ever change or vary? *Should* it do so? *Should* all citizens in a society have equal resources? *Should* there be free education? Health care? What policy would principles of justice demand?

The empirical approach would not ask many of these questions. The job of the empiricist is not to ask what is better, or what *should* be, but simply to ask what *is*. The empirical approach might involve interviewing policymakers or justices and ascertaining what *they* feel justice is, and how they use that feeling in their work. It might involve studying capital punishment laws and their enforcement. It might involve examining economic distribution in a variety of settings in order to observe patterns of material distribution. *Do* all people in a society have roughly equivalent resources? *Do* all people in a society have equal access to education? To medical care? In brief, although both approaches would study the same general subject, the approaches would be different.

In fact, the empirical approach does not use only one method of gathering information. Arend Lijphart has suggested that there are *four* basic methods of discovering and establishing general empirical propositions. One of these methods is experimental; the three nonexperimental methods are the case study method, the statistical method, and the comparative method.⁸

The *case study method*⁹ involves “the intensive study of individual cases. Case studies run the gamut from the most microcosmic to the most macrocosmic levels of political phenomena.”¹⁰ Micro-level work might focus on individuals; macro-level

work might focus on political interest groups, regional groups, or institutional groups. An area study, as described above, *might* be a case study (such as voting behavior in Lesotho), but clearly not all case studies involve area studies. In this method, the investigator picks one case—whether that case be a single nation, a single voter, a single election, or a single political structure (such as a legislature, for example)—and studies it. Through the case study method one develops a certain amount of expertise in whatever one is studying, but the scope of one's study may be quite limited.

The *statistical method* involves more sophisticated forms of measurement and observation. Public opinion polls, survey research,¹¹ and various other forms of quantitative measurement are used to help make the measurement and observation that is characteristic of the empirical approach even more accurate.¹²

The *comparative method* may be likened to two or more case studies put together. We focus upon a particular political structure or behavior, and examine it in a comparative perspective. We look for similarities and differences in different settings. We may do our comparison in one setting, but compare across time—this is called *diachronic comparison*. For example, we may compare a given legislature in 1994 with the same legislature in 1934 and 1894 in order to observe differences in the relative power and structures of that legislature. Or we may compare institutions or behavior at one point in time—*synchronic comparison*—but compare across national borders: for example, examining the role of the legislature in Great Britain with the role of the legislature in Thailand or Jordan.¹³

These three *nonexperimental* methods are based exclusively upon observation and measurement. The *experimental* approach involves manipulation of variables. That is, whereas in the case study method one simply *observes* something, in the experimental method (as we observed above), one *manipulates* one variable in order to observe its effect upon another variable. This is difficult to do in most aspects of political research, because we are asking questions of extremely broad scope and cannot absolutely control the environment within which we are operating. We cannot, for example, set up two identical presidential elections—one with two candidates and one with three candidates—in order to see the relationship between the number of candidates and voting turnout. Society is too complex to enable us to manipulate and experiment with many political structures and institutions.

Each of the methods in the empirical approach has its own advantages and disadvantages for the researcher. The chief advantage of the comparative approach is the broad perspective that was mentioned earlier. For example, studying the British Parliament in 1994 may tell us a great deal about that institution. We will learn more about the *significance* of what we are observing, however, if we *compare* our observations—either compare the British Parliament of 1994 with those of 1794 and 1894, or compare the British Parliament of 1994 with the Indian Lok Sabha, the Japanese Diet, or the Israeli Knesset in the same year.

The study of comparative politics—or more properly, the comparative approach to the study of politics—is more and more common in the discipline of political science today. We find comparative studies of legislatures,¹⁴ political elites,¹⁵ ideologies,¹⁶ women in politics,¹⁷ constitutions,¹⁸ legal cultures,¹⁹ revolutionary move-

ments,²⁰ political executives,²¹ and political parties.²² We also find comparative studies of the role of the military in government,²³ of democracies,²⁴ of *new* democracies,²⁵ of political development,²⁶ of political culture,²⁷ and of political behavior.²⁸

THE NATURE OF COMPARATIVE POLITICAL ANALYSIS

How do we go about using the comparative method? If we start indiscriminately comparing every object on the political landscape, in a very short time we will find ourselves inundated with similarities and differences, most of which will turn out to be trivial distinctions either in scope or in significance. Suppose, for example, that we examine the political institution of the legislature. One of the first things that we will note once we start our measurement and observation is that legislatures are *not physically* the same. One legislature may have 100 seats, another may have 75 seats, and a third may have 500 seats. One building may be five stories high, another only two. One legislature may have its seats arranged in straight rows, while another may have its seats arranged in semicircles; indeed, one legislature may give its members individual desks, while another may only have long benches upon which many legislators must crowd.²⁹

So what? Before we get bogged down in inconsequential detail (and of course detail *need* not be inconsequential, but such may be the case if proper planning does not precede study), we need to plot a course of inquiry. We need to decide what questions we are interested in investigating, and why, and we need to understand the relationships between and among the objects of our scrutiny.

In this book we are interested in presenting an introduction to the comparative study of politics. What does this mean? It means that we want to show *how* comparative analysis is undertaken, and *why* it is undertaken, and we want to provide examples of the types of things that one might look at while engaging in this kind of study.

In one very useful analysis of the values of comparative inquiry, Adam Przeworski and Henry Teune discussed two general approaches to the comparative method that they called the “most similar systems” design and the “most different systems” design. They argued that most comparativists use the “most similar systems” design: Investigators take two systems that are, for the most part, similar, and subsequently study differences that exist between the two basically similar systems. They may, then, observe the impact of these differences on some other social or political phenomenon. These studies are based on the belief that “systems as similar as possible with respect to as many features as possible constitute the optimal samples for comparative inquiry.”³⁰ If some important differences are found between two essentially similar countries, “then the number of factors attributable to these differences will be sufficiently small to warrant explanation in terms of those differences alone.”³¹

An example may help to make this clear. Let us begin by taking two essentially similar nations, say Canada and Australia. These two nations have similar political histories, similar political structures, and essentially similar political cultures.