

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY
Department of Politics

V53.0500
COMPARATIVE POLITICS
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OBJECTIVES

We study politics in a comparative context, not as a form of intellectual tourism, but to broaden and deepen our understanding of important and general political processes. We do this by making systematic comparisons between political systems that are similar in many respects, but nonetheless differ in important ways. This allows us to analyze the effect of these differences in a careful and rigorous way, enriching our understanding of how politics works. The philosophy of this course is thus to concentrate on a group of developed countries that are similar in many important ways, seeking to analyze core features of representative democracy by making systematic comparisons between countries. (Other courses in comparative politics offered by the department focus more on developing countries.)

TEXT

The following text (hereafter RGME4) was written with this course specifically in mind. It provides thematic discussions of the main topics we will cover:

Gallagher, Michael, Michael Laver & Peter Mair. *Representative Government in Modern Europe: 4th edition*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006)

For students who develop a special interest in one or more of the topics covered by the course, additional readings can be found at the end of each chapter of RGME4.

LECTURES

Course lectures are designed to complement course readings and not simply to review material in the course text. Rather, the lectures will add light and shade to course materials, with discussions and elaborations of some of the key questions that arise from these. In short, the both the readings listed below and the lectures are important sources of information about the subject matter of the course. It goes without saying, furthermore, that a lively interest in current affairs and a voracious appetite for information about political events in a range of different countries are crucial assets for anyone seeking a better understanding of the political process.

GRADES

The final grade for this course will have three components:

- Each student will be a discussion leader for one of the recitation sessions. S/he should prepare a bulleted set of discussion points to structure the discussion, to be given to the TA at the end of the discussion. This, combined with general attendance and participation in recitations, will contribute 25% of the final grade.
- There will be a midterm exam on 11 March. This will contribute 25% of the final grade.
- There will be a final exam at the end of the course, as scheduled by the Registrar. This will contribute 50% of the final grade.

COURSE CONTENT AND ANNOTATED READING LIST

19 Jan: Overview and introduction

21 Jan: Is political science a science? The role of the comparative method.

Read RGME4 Chapter 1. (This chapter is not at all about the topic of the lecture, but is instead a general introduction to the set of countries that will be the main focus of our attention.)

A major justification for comparative political analysis has to do with the “scientific” status of “political science”. It is difficult, both ethically and practically, to design carefully controlled field experiments on real countries. One alternative is to conduct laboratory experiments. Another important option is “the comparative method”, whereby a set of cases for comparison is defined, with as many things as possible held constant between different cases in this set, to allow systematic investigation of factors that vary between cases.

26, 28 Jan: Separation or fusion of powers?

Read: RGME4 Chapter 2.

The distinction between constitutional regimes that involve “separation” or fusion of powers is crucial in a comparative context. Under a separation-of-powers regime, there is a constitutional firewall between: (1) the executive, typically with an elected president at its apex, which has the job of running the country under its constitution and laws, and; (2) the legislature, typically also elected by the people and having the job of making those laws. Under a “fusion-of-powers” regime that generates what is often known as “parliamentary government” the executive in general, and the chief executive in particular, are not elected directly by the people but are instead chosen “indirectly” by an elected parliament. The classic separation-of-power system can be found in the US; fusion-of-powers, leading to parliamentary government, is the norm in most European countries.

Those seeking to go beyond the core reading on this matter will find a comprehensive discussion in:

*Lijphart, Arend. 1992. *Parliamentary Versus Presidential Government*. New York: Oxford University Press.

For the constitutional choices made by the newly democratizing states of eastern Europe when they had the “once-in-a-lifetime” opportunity to choose a new system of government, see:

Stepan, Alfred and Cindy Skach. 1993. "Constitutional Frameworks and Democratic Consolidation: Parliamentarianism versus Presidentialism," *World Politics*, 46 (October): 1-22

2 Feb: Legislatures and parliaments: representation, legislation and oversight

4 Feb: Legislatures and parliaments: two houses or one?

Read RGME4 Chapter 3.

If we stick to a strict dictionary definition then legislatures legislate, they pass laws. Many legislatures do much more than legislate, however. As well as making and breaking governments in parliamentary democracies, legislators also act as representatives of their home districts in the national decision-making body, and often engage in various forms of oversight intended to keep national decision-makers accountable to the population at large.

A classic dilemma of constitutional design concerns whether a country should have one legislative chamber or two. One reason to have two arises in a federal system, where the upper house is the arena for reconciling the divergent interests of the constituent states. This explains why almost all federal systems have upper houses, but not why upper houses are also often found in unitary states. A second justification for an upper house is to act as a check on other parts of the political system, particularly important in systems where the government has tight control over both the drafting of legislation and the parliamentary agenda.

For those who develop a deeper interest in this latter topic, a comprehensive theoretical account of the interaction between two legislative houses can be found in:

*Tsebelis, George and Jeanette Money. 1997. *Bicameralism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

9 Feb: Constitutions

11 Feb: Judicial review, judges and politics

Read RGME4 Chapter 4.

Constitutions set out the “rules of the game” structuring interaction in any political system, whether this is a local club, a nation state, or a giant supranational institution like the United Nations. On top of this, there are “meta rules” that describe how the rules themselves can be changed. Many constitutions also contain statements about fundamental human rights that cannot be infringed by any law of the land. Since they are such fundamental documents, it is self-evidently important to understand how constitutions come into being, as well as how and why they change.

Judges routinely make key decisions that constrain what politicians do, interpret what politicians have decided, and affect the day-to-day lives of ordinary citizens. Despite lively academic interest in the political role of judges in the United States, there tends to be much less systematic research on this important matter in relation to other parts of the world. Although there are huge variations from this from country to country, and despite an official view that very often (naively) holds the judiciary to be essentially non-political, it is true everywhere that judicial and political systems interact in many important ways.

Those wishing to look more deeply into the role of judges in politics can consult:

*Stone Sweet, Alec. 2000. *Governing with Judges: Constitutional Politics in Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

16, 18, 23 Feb: Supranational politics: the European Union

Read *RGME4* Chapter 5.

A surprisingly large proportion of decisions that apply to the ordinary citizens of modern Europe are made, not by national governments, but by the European Union (EU). This has: an international executive (the Council), at least nominally deriving its authority from the national governments of 27 member states; an international parliament (the European Parliament), directly elected by the citizens of member states; an international bureaucracy (the Commission); and even a common currency (the Euro) that is used in many member states. The EU is in many ways a unique constitutional and political experiment and is certainly very widely studied. As well as being a very important political institution in its own right, trying to understand how such an institution does, and does not, work gives us considerable insight into politics more generally.

Those wanting a more comprehensive discussion of the politics of the EU should consult:

*Hix, Simon. 2005. *The Political System of the European Union* (2nd edition). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

25 Feb: Bureaucrats and civil servants

Read *RGME4* Chapter 6.

Despite the fact that national elections might seem to be where the action is when we look at the politics of any particular country, many real decisions affecting the lives of ordinary citizens are made well away from the limelight – by civil servants and other bureaucrats. We see a huge difference in civil service cultures as we move from country to country. Some are political while some, at least ostensibly, are apolitical. Some emphasize the need for technocratic specialists; others emphasize more broadly based general administrators. Wherever we go, however, senior civil servants have a huge impact on what is actually done – to the extent they are sometimes referred to as the “permanent government”. The political role of the civil service, therefore, while this sometimes does not look as exciting as other more gory aspects of politics in tooth and claw, is nonetheless critical.

2, 4 Mar: Voters, social cleavages and political competition

Read *RGME4* Chapter 9.

A striking feature of long-established democracies is the great persistence of the main lines of social and political “cleavage” – defined by social class, by the distinction between rural and urban dwellers, by religion, ethnicity, nationality, language, and by many other things besides. A widely cited and influential piece by Lipset and Rokkan argued in the mid-1960s that there had in effect been a “freezing” of European political systems following the last major era of mass enfranchisement in the early 1920s:

*Lipset, S. M, and Stein Rokkan. 1967. “Cleavage Structures, Party Systems and Voter Alignments: An Introduction,” pp. 1- 64 in S. M. Lipset and Stein Rokkan (eds.), *Party Systems and Voter Alignments*, The Free Press, New York.

A contrary view, arguing that the role of important social cleavages is changing in the modern world, is most commonly associated with the notion of “post-materialism” or “post-modernism”:

*Inglehart, Ronald. 1997. *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

9, 23 Mar: Political parties; party “families” and ideologies

Read *RGME4* Chapters 7 and 8.

The official story in most democratic societies is that the interests of citizens are represented by a process of electing representatives to national legislatures, as well to high offices such as the presidency. A crucial part of this process has to do with the alternatives that are presented for citizens to choose between. Almost invariably, these alternatives are packaged under the labels of different political parties. In this sense parties transform a wide diversity of different views among the public at large into a small number of packaged alternatives. The role of political parties in democratic politics is thus crucial – and a substantial part of democratic political competition manifests itself as party competition.

11 Mar: Midterm exam**25, 30 Mar: Electoral systems**

Read *RGME4* Chapter 11.

Turning to the elections in which parties compete, a crucial institutional feature of this process is the “electoral system” – the system that transforms votes cast by citizens into seats in the legislature won by political representatives. At the heart of any electoral system is a mechanical formula for deciding who gets elected, given the votes that have been cast. Such formulae include the “first-past-the-post” system familiar in places like the USA, Canada and Britain. They extend to “proportional representation” systems that set out in a very explicit way to ensure that the proportions of seats won by different political parties match the proportions of votes they receive in an election. The electoral system is much more than a simple mechanical formula, however, and includes the mechanisms for: drawing the boundaries of political districts; nominating party candidates; registering voters; and many other matters besides.

Electoral systems prove endlessly fascinating for many people who are interested in politics. Students who wish to expand their interest on this topic could start with:

*Lijphart, Arend. 1994. *Electoral Systems and Party Systems: A study of 27 Democracies 1945-1990*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

1, 6 April: Making governments**8, 13 April: Breaking governments**

Read *RGME4* Chapter 12.

Whenever there are more than two parties in serious electoral contention, which is almost always the case in a comparative context, crucial features of party competition may well only come into play after the election result has been declared. This is because it is rare in such settings for a majority of voters to support one single party, so that a coalition of several parties may be required in order to be able to form a government. Matters for negotiation between party leaders after the election result has been declared include: the choice of chief executive; the party composition of the government; the allocation of important government positions; and the content of the government’s policy program. All of this is crucial since it creates a situation in which what citizens vote for at election time may be somewhat different from what they get once the parties they voted for have done a deal and a government has been formed.

A major feature of parliamentary government systems, in which the executive depends upon the continued support of the legislature, is that governments can be defeated if they lose their

legislative support. Just as the legislature can make a government, so it can break it. In this context, a self-evidently important matter concerns circumstances in which such governments are more, and those in which they are less, stable.

For those who want to take this further, a review of the field can be found in:

*Laver, Michael and Norman Schofield. *Multiparty Government*. Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1998.

15, 20, 22 April: Does representative government make a difference?

Read RGME4 Chapter 13

The main reason to be interested in everything we have done up until now is the notion that representative government does, indeed, make a difference – that the choices citizens make at election time have some bearing on what actually happens in the real world. There are two basic ways to look at this. We can look at the dramatic social and economic changes that followed major political changes in particular countries. Some very notable examples can be found in the recent history of eastern Europe, an excellent source of material in this regard. And we can look more generally at large sets of countries to see whether, in a more systematic way, public policy seems to change in line with changes in the composition of governments.

27, 29 April: Review

Read widely and wildly

By way of a review, it is useful to combine many of the discussions set out above into a single big question of considerable normative significance for the analysis of politics. Given the institutional and cultural structuring of politics in different countries, and the processes of political competition that we have reviewed, to what extent do the outputs of politics represent the views of the people who make up the polity? When they do not, to which parts of the political process can we trace the disjuncture? If you are interested in pursuing such matters, you could read:

*Powell, G. Bingham. 2001. *Elections as Instruments of Democracy: Majoritarian and Proportional Visions*. New Haven: Yale University Press

Final exam: as scheduled by Registrar

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR RECITATIONS

1. Define “science” as you understand this. Give an example of how making systematic comparisons between some aspect of politics in different countries can (or cannot) help us draw conclusions about politics that are in some sense “scientific”.
2. Define “separation” and “fusion” of powers systems of government. In terms of everyday politics, what are the most striking similarities and differences between these two constitutional regimes?
3. What is the point of having an upper house (senate) in a non-federal political system? In what ways (if any) is politics different when there is no upper house?
4. Describe how procedures for changing constitutions differ from procedures for changing laws. What are the reasons for these differences?
5. Describe and evaluate ways in which those making decisions on behalf of the European Union (EU) are accountable to citizens of EU member states.
6. Discuss the arguments for and against a system in which senior civil servants change when the partisan composition of the executive changes.
7. There are many potential sources of social “cleavage” in any society. Why are some potential sources of social cleavage (for example religion, ethnicity) more important in some societies than in others?
8. What are the costs and benefits of describing political competition in terms of a single “left-right” dimension of ideology?
9. Briefly describe “plurality”, “list-PR”, and “mixed” electoral systems. What are the main political implications of these different types of system?
10. What are the main factors that affect the identity of the government that forms after an election in which no single party has won a majority?
11. What are the main factors that can bring down a government in a parliamentary government system?
12. How can we decide whether the partisan composition of the government does, or does not, make a difference to what “really” happens in any given country?