

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY
Department of Politics

V52.0510

COMPARATIVE POLITICS
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COURSE OBJECTIVES

The central reason for the comparative study of different political systems is to help us develop an understanding of more general political processes. Making systematic comparisons between political systems that are similar in many important respects, but nonetheless differ in crucial ways, allows us to analyze the political impact of these differences in a careful and rigorous way, deepening our understanding of how politics works. Thus the philosophy of this course is to concentrate on a group of countries that are indeed similar in many important respects – for the most part advanced industrial states – and to explore some of the central themes of politics by comparing these states.

Having looked in more detail at the reasons for studying politics in a comparative context, we move on to investigate important systematic variations in the institutional and cultural settings of politics in different countries, focusing on the processes of representative democracy.

Course lectures will in no sense be reviews of what is in the course textbook, but will add light and shade to the core readings with discussions and analyses of some of the key questions that arise from these.

COMPONENTS OF FINAL GRADE

The final grade for this course will have three components:

- Each student will be a discussion leader for one of the small group discussion sessions. S/he should prepare a bulleted set of discussion points to structure the discussion, which will be turned in to the TA at the end of the discussion. This, combined with general attendance and participation, will contribute 25% of the final grade.
- There will be a midterm exam on 9 March. This will contribute 25% of the final grade.
- There will be a final exam on 27 April. This will contribute 50% of the final grade.

COURSE TEXT

The following text (hereafter RGME4) was written with this type of course very specifically in mind. It provides thematic discussions of all 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 any of these topics, each chapter of RGME4, combined with its bibliography, can be used as an up-to-date annotated reading list.

COURSE CONTENT AND READING

17 Jan: Overview and introduction

19 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 very 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 real world experiments investigating many important aspects of politics. 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.

24, 26 Jan: Presidential or parliamentary government?

Read: RGME4 Chapter 2.

The distinction between the constitutional regimes of “presidential” and “parliamentary” government systems is crucial in a comparative context. Under presidential government, a powerful president is directly elected as both chief executive and head of state. There is a clear constitutional “separation of powers” between the executive, with the president at its apex and the job of running the country under its constitution and laws, and the legislature, also elected by the people and having the job of making those laws. Under 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 presidential government system can be found in the US; parliamentary government is the norm in most European countries.

For people wishing to go beyond the core reading on this matter, a comprehensive discussion can be found 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: Parliamentarism versus Presidentialism," *World Politics*, 46 (October): 1-22

31 Jan: Legislatures and parliaments: representation, legislation and oversight

2 Feb: No class

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

Read RGME4 Chapter 3.

If we stick to a strict dictionary definition, legislatures legislate, they pass laws. Many legislatures do much more than this, however. In addition to legislating, and 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 an upper house 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 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

14 Feb: Judicial review, judges and politics

Read RGME4 Chapter 4.

All constitutions set out "rules of the game" that structure competition in any political system, from a local club, through a nation state, to a supranational institution such as the European Union or the United Nations. On top of this, we find a set of "meta rules" that describe how constitutions 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 particular 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 a 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 (and typically naively) holds the judiciary to be essentially non-political, it is always true everywhere that the judicial and political systems can interact in very important ways.

Those wishing to look more deeply into this matter can consult:

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

16, 21 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 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.

23 Feb: Inside the nation state: the civil service

28 Feb: Inside the nation state: local governance

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 or members of local administrations of one form or another.

We can see a huge difference in civil service cultures as we move from country to country, from political to apolitical, from an emphasis on more technocratic specialists to an emphasis on more broadly based general administrators. Wherever we go, however, senior civil servants can 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 sometimes not looking quite as exciting as other more gory aspects of politics, is nonetheless critical.

The same is true for local government. The most fundamental form of local government is of course federalism, whereby constituent states retain high degrees of autonomy. Even in unitary” (i.e. non-federal) states, however, there is immense variation in the extent to which local political units can take decisions in a way that is autonomous from the national political authority. This is a very important matter, with a strong trend in recent years in favor of more decentralization of decision-making.

23, 28 Feb: 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, the distinction between rural and urban dwellers, religion, ethnicity, nationality, language and 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.

2 March: Party "families" and ideologies

Read RGME4 Chapters 7 and 8.

The interests of citizens in most democratic societies are seen as being represented by a process of electing representatives to national legislatures, as well as electing representatives 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. We will look both at competition between parties and competition within parties – the latter being crucial in determining what it is, precisely, that different parties offer to citizens as the alternatives they can choose between.

7 March: Referendums

Read RGME4 Chapter 11.

Once the different packages on offer have been decided, the time comes for citizens to choose between them. This typically happens at national general elections, but can also happen at referendums – a form of direct democracy whereby citizens choose particular policies rather than choosing people to choose those policies. Of course, *who* chooses *which* alternatives are presented to citizens in referendums remains a very important feature of democratic political competition.

9 March: Midterm exam

14, 16 March: Spring recess

21, 23 March Electoral systems

Read RGME4 Chapter 11.

Turning to elections that select representative bodies, 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.

28, 30 March: Making governments

4, 6 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.

11, 13 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 democratic politics 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 – which is 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.

18, 20 April: Politics outside parliament

Read RGME4 Chapters 14

We have so far been dealing with what we can think of as the “official” politics of representation. Many important political decisions, however, take place outside these formal structures. There are big differences between countries in how this happens, in terms of how key extra-parliamentary groups play a part in public decision-making. We now explore these in relation to the politics of economic policy making, as well as the politics of decision making in important but more obliquely economic spheres of activity, such as environmental policy and gender equality.

25, 27 April: Review

Read widely and eclectically

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

1. Define “science”. How can comparing political interactions in different countries help us to be more “scientific” in the ways we analyze politics?
2. Define “presidential” and “parliamentary” government. In terms of everyday politics, what is the most striking similarity, and the most striking difference, 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 without an upper house?
4. Describe the ways in which procedures for changing constitutions differ from procedures for changing laws. What are the reasons for these differences?
5. Describe and evaluate the ways in which those making decisions on behalf of the European Union (EU) are accountable to the citizens of EU member states.
6. Discuss the arguments both 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. What makes some potential sources of cleavage (for example religion, ethnicity) more important in some societies than in others?
8. What are the costs, and the 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 happens in any given country?