

New York University
Graduate School of Arts and Science
Department of Politics

G53.1550

Comparative Politics Core Course: Industrialized Democracies

Fall 2008

Classes: Tuesdays 2-4pm

Office Hours: Tuesdays 4-6pm or by appointment

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COURSE OBJECTIVES

We begin by looking at the fundamental rationale for studying politics in a comparative context. We move on to investigate the impact of important systematic variations in the institutional and cultural setting of politics in different countries. Since the potential subject matter is vast, we focus on a limited set of key features of the political landscape, concentrating on some that have in recent years been the subject of creative high-quality research. The course is *not* intended to transmit a large amount of information about politics in different countries, a task best pursued with a very specific research objective in mind. Rather, it is intended to stimulate thinking about why we study politics systematically in a comparative context, and how best to do this.

APPROACH TO READING

Course readings review recent work that has been influential in shaping how contemporary scholars think about key issues in comparative politics. My approach to reading is that *more reading is not better*. People should read a number of key works carefully, and think about these carefully. The ultimate purpose of all reading is to stimulate creative thought. It is also important for students to develop the reading habits of professional academic researchers, for whom particular personal reading lists evolve organically as they pursue their own specific research agendas. The important thing is to know where to start and how to move on from there. Google Scholar is of course an excellent tool, although many do not make optimum use of it. The best trick is to start with a key publication in some field and look at *who* is citing this, and *why*. This way you quickly get a better sense of recent work in the field. As a starting point in this process, the following undergraduate text, which I can make available in PDF form, provides general discussions and further reading on many of the themes we cover:

*Gallagher, Michael, Michael Laver and Peter Mair. 2006. *Representative Government in Modern Europe: 4th edition*. (New York: McGraw-Hill) (Hereafter RGME4)

TERM PAPER AND OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS TO FINAL GRADE

The most important part of the final grade will be a term paper, which should be seen as an early draft of a paper for presentation at a seminar, with potential for development into a conference paper and ultimately into a paper for publication in a professional journal. Set yourself high standards and find a topic on which you are prepared to make a substantial investment of time, effort and creative energy. Obviously, this should also be a topic that can be developed within the context of comparative political analysis, but there are few important questions in the field for which this is not true.

Selecting a precise, relevant, challenging, yet feasible, substantive question is one of the more difficult jobs faced by any member of the academy. You should start to think about this immediately, guided by your own substantive interests, intuitions and background knowledge as well as the particular talents you yourself can bring to bear upon the work, all of which you should exploit to the full. Most questions crystallize as you read the work of others with a critical eye, forever on the lookout for theoretical and empirical weakness, and alert to ways that arguments could be better constructed, empirical evidence better collected, marshaled and analyzed. All term papers should have the following structure:

1. State the question to be addressed; justify its substantive importance.
2. Outline and evaluate the core applicable theory(ies).
3. In light of such theories, develop empirical propositions dealing with the question.
4. Review available empirical evidence. (If none is available, outline a feasible research project that would gather the required evidence.)
5. Conclude with an evaluation of how the theories and evidence discussed illuminate the question posed.

A title and 750 word outline of the paper is due 30 September 2008, the date of our fourth meeting. This will contribute 25% to the final grade. The final paper, which will contribute 75% of the final grade, is due 5 December 2008. It is important to hit this deadline and there will be a grade penalty for later papers. So please factor these dates into your work schedule.

COURSE CONTENT AND READING

Weeks 1-2: Theories, cases and comparisons

The main rationale for comparative political analysis concerns the scientific status of political “science”. We are sometimes lucky enough to be presented with “natural experiments” that we can exploit with careful analysis, but we cannot rely on this. Thus the “comparative method” is an important weapon in the intellectual armory of the discipline. This is typically taken to involve the definition of a set of cases for comparison, with a crucial feature of the research design being to identify, given the particular theoretical claims under investigation, key factors that should ideally be held constant between cases in this set. The quintessential problem is that the number of cases is typically small, relative to the number of key factors that can vary between cases. Strictly speaking this problem is insoluble, but such a conclusion gets us nowhere of interest. Practically speaking, we do the best we can, on the ground that even if well

designed comparative research is nowhere near perfect, it gives us much more insight into politics than badly designed comparative research, or research conducted in one country only.

A closely related issue concerns the types of models and theories we construct. We cannot understand any important political process without a model or theory of the process involved. Without this, we cannot explore counterfactuals in a systematic way. Without the systematic ability to explore counterfactuals, we cannot claim to understand the process under investigation. Even authors who appear to have no model, but who nonetheless claim to offer an explanation, in effect use an implicit or hidden model, however informal. Obviously an explicit model, carefully analyzed, is far better than an implicit model, which is typically impossible to analyze systematically. However, things never look quite so simple when we actually roll up our sleeves and get to work on a real substantive question.

Much recent high-quality formal modeling within political science has operated on the principle that the precise institutional structure of the setting under investigation can fundamentally structure the logical inferences that can be drawn. As models have become more rigorous, they have become more precise – but as a consequence they have often (though not inevitably) become less general. Thus we have seen an evolution within the discipline away from “middle level” *theories* that were once all the rage, not especially precise or rigorous but nonetheless holding out the possibility of insights that generalize across sets of countries that are in some sense similar – where the meaning of “similar” derives from the theory at issue. The preferences of scholars in the field have evolved towards *models*, typically much more precise and tightly constrained, where the primary criterion is “rigor” – a rigor very often achieved at the cost of a radically reduced generalizability of results to a variety of real political settings. This presents a difficult but very interesting intellectual dilemma, especially for those interested in comparative politics. We will spend the first sessions of this class tormenting ourselves about how best to resolve it.

There are not too many helpful general readings on the matters discussed above, though two quite different positions can be found in:

Diermeier, Daniel and Keith Krehbiel. 2003. Institutionalism as a methodology. *Journal of Theoretical Politics*. 15:2 123-144

Gerring, John. 2004. What is a case study and what is it good for?” *American Political Science Review* 98:2, 341-54.

Week 3. The institutional structuring of politics 1: veto players

An important feature of comparative political analysis is the systematic exploration of ways in which institutions make a difference. Of course political institutions are themselves the products of politics – we would be foolish indeed to imagine that the core institutions of the US political system, for example, will be the same in 1000 or even 100 years’ time. One of the most fascinating aspects of recent transitions to democracy in central and eastern Europe has been the institutional choices made by key political players. At the same time, at least in the short term, politics must be conducted according to a set of “rules of the game”, enshrined in more or less stable institutions.

Tensions and ambiguities arising from taking political institutions seriously are evident in a book that rapidly became a fashionable citation for those engaged in comparative political analysis:

*Tsebelis, George. 2002. *Veto Players: How Political Institutions Work*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press)

Citations of this book by people, some of whom have read it, working within a wide range of subfields of comparative politics have reached epidemic proportions in recent times. Punch “veto player” into Google Scholar and marvel at the avalanche of citations. Those who have not already read the book should do so now; those who have already read it should reread it critically. The core problem for us to think about concerns the extent to which we can systematically identify *ex ante* the veto players in any political interaction, from an arm’s length analysis of its institutional structure. If we can only identify veto players *ex post*, on the basis of who appears to us to be powerful in a particular political interaction, then the concept is of dubious explanatory value.

In addition to reading the book itself, people should search (using Google Scholar or any other convenient search strategy) for a range of applications of the concept of veto player within comparative politics. Within the limited time available to us, it will be helpful to build as large a portfolio as possible of applications of this concept. When we critically review the intellectual value-added to this portfolio by the idea of “veto player”, we will develop a deeper sense of what is involved in the role of institutional analysis in comparative politics.

Week 4: The socio-cultural structuring of politics 1: social capital/civic culture

In addition to being structured by institutions, politics is structured by the shared sets of beliefs and values that condition how people interact with each other. The evolution of comparative politics has been punctuated with attempts to be systematic about this, some of them very influential. One of the most recent and influential of these is the concept of “social capital”:

*Putnam, Robert D. 2001, *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Putnam, Robert D. 1995, “Bowling alone: America’s declining social capital” *Journal of Democracy*, 6(1) 65 – 78.

Punch “social capital” into Google Scholar to find out how this concept has been applied by a large number of scholars in a wide range of different contexts. This apparently universal applicability suggests the concept may be too loosely defined, an argument set out in:

Sobel, Joel. 2002. “Can we trust social capital?” *Journal of Economic Literature*. XL: 139–154

Once more, people should use Google Scholar to search for applications of the concept of social capital within comparative politics. Having built a portfolio of applications, our task will be to see whether we can define and operationalize the concept in a rigorous enough way to deploy it validly, reliably and systematically in comparative research on different political systems.

More than two decades before the first “bowling alone” article, Almond and Verba’s book *The Civic Culture* was very influential, again as a way of capturing social and cultural effects that vary from setting to setting and make a big difference in a comparative context to how politics unfolds. Indeed the arguments in *Bowling Alone* and *The Civic Culture* bear systematic comparison, and it would also make an interesting project to trace the rise and fall of applications of the concept of “civic culture” since the book’s original publication.

Week 5: Institutional structuring 2: presidential and parliamentary systems

The constitutional distinction between “presidential” and “parliamentary” systems is crucial in a comparative context. Under presidential or separation of powers systems, a powerful president is directly elected as both chief executive and head of state. Under parliamentary government the executive in general, and chief executive in particular, are not elected directly by the people but chosen “indirectly” by an elected parliament. While the classic separation of powers system can be found in the US, parliamentary systems are the norm in modern Europe. We explore this important institutional distinction in several contexts and find it generates two very different environments for elections, party competition, legislative behavior, and the making and breaking of governments. An introduction to the institutional structure and politics of parliamentary systems can be found in chapter 2 of RGME4. The distinction between the two types of system is explored in greater depth in:

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

A widely cited discussion of presidential systems can be found in:

*Shugart, Matthew Soberg., and John M. Carey. 1992. *Presidents and Assemblies: Constitutional Design and Electoral Dynamics*, Cambridge University Press, New York.

Samuels, David J., and Matthew Soberg Shugart. 2003. Presidentialism, Elections and Representation. *Journal of Theoretical Politics*. 15:1 33-60

A key defining institutional feature of parliamentary government is the parliamentary vote of confidence in the government. A widely cited and highly regarded analysis of this procedure (in the context of French politics) can be found in:

*Huber, John. 1996. *Rationalizing Parliament: Legislative Institutions and Party Politics in France*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Week 6: Institutional structuring 3: bicameral vs unicameral systems

“If a second chamber dissents from the first, it is mischievous; if it agrees, it is superfluous.” (Abbé Sieyès)

“We pour legislation into the senatorial saucer to cool it.” (George Washington)

One classic dilemma of constitutional design concerns whether a country should have one legislative chamber or two. The most straightforward justification for a bicameral legislature arises in a federal system, where an important formal role for the upper house is as a political arena for reconciling the interests of the constituent states. This explains why almost all federal systems are bicameral, but not why bicameral legislatures are often found in unitary states. The second main justification for an upper house was articulated by George Washington (above). It can be particularly important in parliamentary government systems where the government has tight control over both the drafting of legislation and the parliamentary agenda. Obviously, for an upper house to make a difference, it must have at least some limited power to dissent from decisions taken by the lower house, in which case the problem articulated by Abbé Sieyès above comes into play. The substantive content of legislative decisions arises from political interaction between the two houses, given the precise powers and political compositions of each.

The recent trend in constitutional reform has been towards unicameral legislatures, and many of the newly democratizing states of eastern Europe opted to do without a senate – of the eight eastern European EU accession states, for example, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Hungary all opted for unicameralism. A general overview of the issues involved can be found in the latter part of Chapter 3 of RGME4. A widely read and cited theoretical account of the interactions between two legislative houses can be found in:

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

Week 7: Institutional structuring 4: the court system

Courts routinely make key decisions that constrain what politicians do, interpret what politicians have decided, and which 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 (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. A well-regarded more general treatment can be found in:

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

Week 8: Socio-cultural structuring 2: social cleavages and politics

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. Indeed a very 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.

We are now 80 years beyond the early 1920s, double the 40 years that had passed when Lipset and Rokkan were writing, and many have argued that there has been significant change in the structure of social cleavages since then, a debate rehearsed in Chapter 9 of RGME4. The view that the role of important social cleavages is changing in the modern world, is most commonly associated with the notion of “postmaterialism” or “postmodernism”:

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

Week 9: Socio-cultural structuring 3: dimensions of ideology and policy

One of the most common systematic ways to describe the structure of political competition in a comparative context is to use “dimensions” of policy or ideology – such as left-right, liberal-conservative; secular-clerical, and so on. Such dimensions are metaphors used to give substantive meaning to descriptions of how “close” or “far apart” pairs of political actors might be in general policy/ideological terms. These metaphors are very widely used in both real political discourse and analytical political science; somewhat surprisingly, however, they not tend to be the subject of extensive discussion in their own right. Thus the list references at the end of Chapter 8 of RGME4 contains a series of discussions of “radical right parties”, “social democratic”, “liberal” and “conservative” parties, “green” parties and so on. But it is rather rare to find discussions of the substantive meaning of left and right, for example, in contemporary political interaction.

There is much more discussion of how to estimate the positions of political actors. A range of techniques for doing this are available, including: the analysis of both mass and elite survey data; content analysis of political texts; analysis of roll-call voting behavior in legislatures; systematic surveys of country specialists. A comprehensive review of many aspects of this discussion can be found in the opening chapters to:

Benoit, Kenneth and Michael Laver. 2006. *Party Policy in Modern Democracies*. London, Routledge. (pdf files will be available for this)

The use of roll-call voting to estimate positions on policy dimensions is discussed in:

*Poole, Keith T. and Howard Rosenthal. 1997. *Congress: a Political-Economic History of Roll Call Voting*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Note, however, that the analysis of legislative roll call voting has very different interpretations in presidential systems and parliamentary government systems.

Week 10: The institutional structuring of politics 5: electoral systems

Electoral systems provide some of the key institutional tools with which people try to engage in institutional engineering. Political scientists have done a huge amount of work in this area and, in contrast to some other subfields in the discipline, a substantial body of collective wisdom has developed. This is summarized in Chapter 11 of RGME4, the bibliography of which provides an extensive list of further reading. Three widely-cited and influential works in this field are:

*Taagepera, Rein, and Matthew Shugart. 1989. *Seats and Votes: The Effects and Determinants of Electoral Systems*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London.

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

*Cox, Gary W. 1997. *Making Votes Count: Strategic Coordination in the World's Electoral Systems*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997.

We have already seen that political institutions, at least over the medium term, may be as much outputs of the political process, as they are exogenously determined features of the process itself. This argument is especially clear in the context of electoral systems, and political scientists have become increasingly interested in arguments about the ways in which political parties choose electoral systems just as much as voters, via electoral systems, choose political parties. Clearly, the need to make political choices about electoral systems was very explicit in post-communist eastern Europe. A comprehensive range of information about this can be found in:

*Colomer, Josep (ed). 2004. *Handbook of Electoral System Choice*. London: Palgrave-Macmillan

Weeks 11 - 12: Comparative political behavior 1: voting and party competition

The analysis of voting and party competition (VPC) is a vast area within political science and we will do no more than scratch the surface of it, looking at some key themes within the literature that have particular significance in a comparative context. This important since so much of the high quality formal work on VPC has been carried out by US political scientists analyzing US politics, thus in a setting with: a constitutional separation of powers between legislature and executive; only two political parties, with low levels of internal discipline, distinguished on a single dimension of ideology; a first-past-the post

electoral system with single member districts. Rigorous analyses of VPC are much rarer in settings with PR electoral systems, with many highly disciplined parties distinguished on multiple policy dimensions, and where the legislature makes and breaks the government. Issues that attract our attention in such setting include:

- a. *Voter rationality in PR elections to multi-party legislatures sustaining coalition governments.* Conventional theoretical accounts of voting distinguish between what we might think of as naive “proximity” voting, instrumental “strategic” voting, and non-instrumental “expressive” voting. The empirical frequency with which we encounter these different types of behavior in real voters seems very likely to vary between a “simpler” US-style one-dimensional system with two parties and a more complex system with many parties, many dimensions, and the consequent need for fully strategic voters to anticipate potential outcomes of future coalition bargaining.

*Downs, Anthony. *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York: Harper and Row, 1957.

*Hinich, Melvin and Michael Munger; *Analytical Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Chapters 7 and 8

*Brennan, Geoffrey and Loren Lomasky. *Democracy and Decision: The Pure Theory of Electoral Preference*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press, 1993

Rabinowitz, G. and S. E. Macdonald. 1989. "A directional theory of issue voting." *American Political Science Review* 83(1): 93-121.

*Miller, Warren E., Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse and Donald E. Stokes. 1966. *The American Voter*. New York: Wiley.

*Schuessler, Alexander A. *A Logic of Expressive Choice*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.

- b. *Party competition in multi-party, multidimensional systems.* Standard extensions of the spatial model, such as Hinich and Munger, deal with policy-based multi-party, multidimensional competition. A recent and quite technical version of this model can be found in Schofield and Sened (2006). This deals with probabilistic voting, and also with party “valence”, a notion that captures the different levels of attraction to voters of different politicians ***with the same policy position***.

*Schofield, Norman, and Itai Sened. 2006. *Multiparty democracy: elections and legislative politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Week 13 - 14: Comparative political behavior 2: making and breaking governments

When more than two parties are in contention for power, crucial features of party competition come into play after election result has been declared, including: choice of Prime Minister; party composition of the government; allocation of government portfolios; content of the government policy program. Reviews can be found in:

Laver, Michael. 1998. Models of government formation. *Annual Review of Political Science*. 1: 1-25

Laver, Michael. 2003. Government termination. *Annual Review of Political Science* 6: 23-40

A set of country studies, structured by a common framework, can be found in:

*Muller, Wolfgang and Kaare Strom. 2000. *Coalition Governments in Western Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

A comparative empirical evaluation of various models of government formation can be found in the following:

Martin, Lanny and Randolph Stevenson. 2001. "Government formation in parliamentary democracies." *American Journal of Political Science* 45:1, 33-50.

Influential accounts of government termination can be found in:

Diermeier Daniel and Randolph Stevenson. 1999. Cabinet survival and competing risks. *American Journal of Political Science*. 43:1051-1098.

Diermeier Daniel and Randolph Stevenson. 2000. Cabinet terminations and critical events. *American Political Science Review*. 94: 627-640.

Warwick, P. V. and J. N. Druckman. 2006. The portfolio allocation paradox: an investigation into the nature of a very strong but puzzling relationship. *European Journal of Political Research* 45: 635-665.

The second week of the discussion will consider what is involved in extending models of government formation to take account of the possibility that politicians are also motivated by preferences for particular public policy outcomes. Introductory reading on this matter can be found in:

Laver, Michael, and Kenneth A. Shepsle. 1996. *Making and breaking governments: cabinets and legislatures in parliamentary democracies*. New York: Cambridge University Press.