

**NEW YORK UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCE**

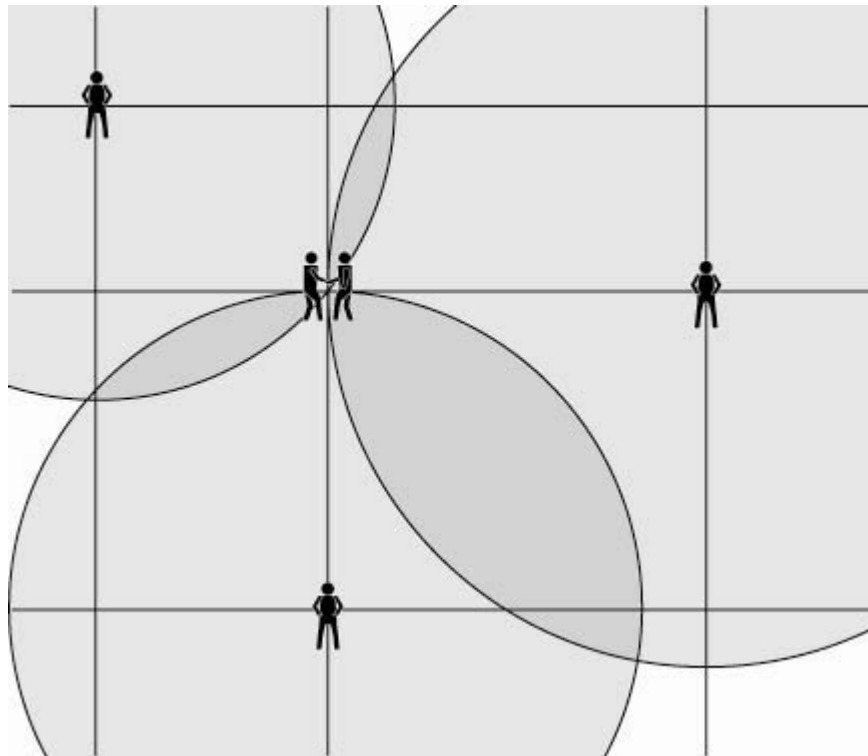
Department of Politics

G53.1500
COMPARATIVE POLITICS
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Michael Laver

Tel: 212-998-8534
Email: ml127@nyu.edu

Classes: Tuesdays 4-6pm
Office Hours: Tuesdays 10am-12noon



COURSE OBJECTIVES

This course is an introduction to the comparative study of politics in different institutional and cultural settings. We begin by looking at the fundamental rationale for studying politics in a comparative context. We move on to investigate the impact of some important systematic variations in the institutional and cultural setting of politics in different countries. Since the potential subject matter is vast, we will focus on a limited set of key features of the political landscape, concentrating on some of those that have in recent years been the subject of creative high-quality research.

This course is definitely not intended to transmit a large amount of information about politics in different countries, best pursued with a very specific research objective in mind. Rather, the course is intended to develop a deeper understanding of why we should study politics in a systematically comparative context, and how best to do this.

APPROACH TO READING

Course readings take us through some significant 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 reading, rather that people should read a number of key works carefully, and think about these deeply; the purpose of all reading ultimately is as a stimulus to 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. In this context Google Scholar is an excellent tool. Follow through key citations and quickly build up a sense of *what* is widely cited in a particular field, *who* is citing it and *why*. As a start towards pointing people in the right direction, the following text provides thematic discussions and further reading on many of the themes we will cover:

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

While this course is certainly not only about modern Europe, east and west, RGME4 has a series of chapters on core themes in the analysis of representative politics and incorporates discussion of the eight central and eastern European states that joined the European Union on 1 May 2004. The urgent constitutional choices made by these states during their rapid transitions from communist rule bear very directly upon many of the themes we will be discussing. For students who do feel the need for more extensive lists of further reading, these chapters and their bibliographies can be taken as annotated reading lists on many of the topics under consideration.

TERM PAPER AND OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS TO FINAL GRADE

The most important component of the final grade will be a term paper. This paper should be constructed 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 in which you are prepared to make 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.

Selecting a precise and relevant, yet feasible, substantive question to work on is one of the more challenging jobs faced by the professional political scientist. You should begin thinking

about this from the very start of the course, guided by your own substantive interests, background knowledge and the particular talents you can bring to bear upon the work, all of which you should exploit to the full. The way most questions crystallize is through reading the work of others with a critical eye, forever being on the lookout for theoretical and empirical weakness, and ways that things could be done better. 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 should be submitted at our fifth meeting. This will contribute 25% to the final grade. The final paper, which will contribute 75% of the final grade, is due at our final meeting.

COURSE CONTENT AND READING

1. Overview: is political science a science? The comparative method.

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”, under which 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.

2. 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 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”, many of which are enshrined in more or less stable institutions. And we certainly know from comparative analysis that such institutions do make a difference. To give a simple example to which we will return, we know very well that electoral systems make a big difference to the shape of party competition in a particular country.

So is it more fruitful intellectually to treat political institutions as the *causes* or as the *effects* of particular political interactions? There is no correct answer to this question, except that we can’t have it all ways. A provocative review of the issues at stake, which everyone should read carefully, can be found in:

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

Tensions and ambiguities arising from taking political institutions seriously are evident in a recent 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 work by people working within a wide range of subfields of comparative politics, some of whom have read it, 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 this 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, I would like people to 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.

3. 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. The 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 trawl through the literature and come up with 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 sufficiently rigorous way that we can 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* had been 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. Enter Civic Culture into Google Scholar and the resources to do this will blossom before your eyes

At the end of the day, it is self-evident that strong cultural effects structure political interactions. The challenge for the profession has been to find ways to describe these effects in a way that is both broad in its application yet rigorous in its definition.

4. The institutional structuring of politics 2: presidential and parliamentary government

The constitutional distinction between “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. 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. While the classic presidential government system can be found in the US, parliamentary government is the norm in modern Europe. We will explore this important institutional distinction in several contexts and find that 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 government can be found in chapter 2 of RGME4. The distinction between the two forms of government is explored in greater depth in:

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

A widely cited discussion of presidential government 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.

It is striking that, when the democratizing states of eastern Europe had the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to choose a new system of government as they moved away from their old constitutions, almost all of them opted for parliamentary rather than presidential government. See:

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

As with any distinction, that between presidential and parliamentary systems is never as clear cut in reality as it is in theoretical models and we find countries, such as France, in which substantial powers accrue to both a directly elected president and a prime minister responsible to parliament.

When the two offices are under the control of different political parties, this leads to a form of what in the US is known as divided government and in parliamentary systems as *cohabitation*. A comprehensive review of this phenomenon can be found in:

*Elgie, Robert. 2001. *Divided Government in Comparative Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

5. The institutional structuring of politics 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)

A classic dilemma of constitutional design concerns whether a country should have one legislative chamber or two. The most straightforward justification for having 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.

6. The institutional structuring of politics 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 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. The front end of the following article provides a review of some of the main arguments:

Tridimas, George. 2005. "Judges and taxes: judicial review, judicial independence and the size of government." *Constitutional Political Economy* 16: 5-30.

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.

7. The socio-cultural structuring of politics 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.

8. The socio-cultural structuring of politics 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 forthcoming book)

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.

9. The institutional structuring of politics 5: electoral systems

If elections are “instruments of democracy” – a theme to which we return in the final session – then differences between electoral systems provide some of the key institutional tools with which these instruments are calibrated. 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

10. Comparative political behavior 1: voting

There are essentially four different approaches within political science to analyzing voting in mass electorates. These differ, not so much in the assumptions they make about the *preferences* of voters, but more in the assumptions they make about the *instrumentality* of voter decision-making. (1) Essentially *expressive* voters are assumed to derive value from the *act of casting their vote in some particular way* (Brennan and Lomasky; Schuessler); we can include in this category voters socialized to have some form of *party identification* (Miller et al.). (2) Many spatial models of party competition assume voters are policy-motivated and *vote instrumentally* for the party

with the position closest to their ideal point – not deriving utility from the act of voting in itself. In each case we may observe “*proximity*” voting – voting for the closest party (Downs; Hinch and Munger) (3) When there are more than two candidates, incentives for *strategic* voting can arise. One level of strategic voting is to vote so as to maximize the expected utility of *candidates elected* to the legislature. Another level is to look beyond the election result and maximize the expected utility of the *policies that will be enacted* after the election is long gone (Hinch and Munger). (4) The final approach is the *directional* voting model (Rabinowitz et al.) under which the voter is assumed to care about how candidates are expected to *change the status quo*.

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

*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

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

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

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

11. Comparative political behavior 2: party competition

Whether or not we decide that *voters* are instrumental, it seems intuitively reasonable to assume that *politicians*, acting together in *political parties*, are instrumentally motivated to increase their chances of electoral success. However, despite the theoretical elegance of the spatial model account of party competition, there has been rather little success at putting together a convincing body of comparative empirical research to support this approach. The basic instrumental model can be found in Downs, updated in Hinich and Munger, both cited above. An influential critique of this approach, grounded to a large extent in the failure to generate systematic supporting evidence on the basis of comparative empirical research, can be found in:

*Green, Donald and Ian Shapiro. *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory: A Critique of Applications in Political Science*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.

Responses to these criticisms can be found in:

*Friedman, Jeffrey. (ed) *The Rational Choice Controversy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.

12. Comparative political behavior 3: making and breaking governments

Whenever more than two parties are in serious contention, crucial features of party competition come into play only after the election result has been declared. These include: choice of Prime

Minister; party composition of the government; allocation of important government portfolios; and the setting of the government policy programme. This is an area where theory and comparative empirical research have come quite close together, and where it is therefore easier to assess how effective political scientists' models have been in explaining real world comparative politics. A review of the field can be found in:

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

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 comprehensive 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 recent 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.

13. Putting it all together: do government policies reflect popular preferences?

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? On such matters, read:

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