NEW YORK UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCE

Department of Politics

G53.1500
COMPARATIVE POLITICS
Spring 2007

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Classes: Tuesdays 4-6pm
Office Hours: Tuesdays 2-4pm or by appointment
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 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.

This course is certainly 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, the course is intended to develop a deeper understanding of why we study politics in a systematically 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 reading; people should read a number of key works carefully, then think about these deeply. 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. Follow through by looking at who is citing key publications and why, and you will quickly build a deeper insight into recent work. As a starting point in this process, the following undergraduate text provides general discussions and further reading on many of the themes we will cover:


While this course is certainly not just 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 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. There is no need to buy this book – I will circulate PDF files of key chapters in advance of the classes concerned.

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 13 February 2007, the date of our fifth meeting. This will contribute 25% to the final grade. The final paper, which will contribute 75% of the final grade, is due 24 April 2007, the date of our final meeting. Please factor these dates into your work schedule, so that you are not left with too little time to give these assignments the attention they deserve. The best papers have typically been through many drafts.

COURSE CONTENT AND READING

Weeks 1-2: Theories and methods in comparative politics
A major justification for comparative political analysis has to do with the scientific status of political “science”. There are practical and ethical difficulties involved in the widespread use of carefully controlled political experiments on real countries. 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 well designed comparative research is nowhere near perfect, but gives 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 an explanation or even understanding of the process under investigation. Even those 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 of the 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.

I know of few particularly helpful general readings on the matters discussed above, though a trenchant and controversial statement of one position can be found in:


The most useful way to move forward with this is to look at some recent published work in a particular context. We will be returning to look at the substantive problem of government formation at the end of the course. Meanwhile we will discuss the following set of three papers on government formation, which everyone should read carefully and be prepared to talk about in class, from the perspective of how we can build rigorous models that apply across a range of different empirical real contexts.


The Ansolabehere et al. paper presents a game theoretic model of bargaining over government formation, and an empirical test of this in a comparative context. The Diermeier-Merlo paper presents important empirical information in relation to this model and test. The Warwick-Druckman paper presents different empirical tests that in effect reject the Ansolabehere et al. results. There are two essential questions for discussion. Does the Ansolabehere et al. model offer an explanation that applies in a range of different countries? Can this model be tested using data from a range of different countries, in the manner described by Ansolabehere et al. and by Warwick and Druckman?

**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 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.

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:


Citations of this book by people, some of whom have read it, who work 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, 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.

**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”:


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:


Once more, people should frolic though Google Scholar searching 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 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* 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. 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.

**Week 5: Institutional structuring 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 section 2 of RGME4. The distinction between the two forms of government is explored in greater depth in:


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


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:


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:


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:


**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)

A classic dilemma of constitutional design concerns whether a country should have should 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:


**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 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. A well-regarded more general treatment can be found in:

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:


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”:


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:


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


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:


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:


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.

b. Party competition in multi-party, multidimensional systems. Standard extensions of the classical 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.


Week 13 - 14: Comparative political behavior 2: making and breaking governments
When more than two parties are in serious contention for power, crucial features of party competition come into play only after election result has been declared, including: choice of Prime Minister; party composition of the government; allocation of government portfolios; the content of the government policy program. A review of the field can be found in:


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


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

Influential accounts of government termination can be found in:


The first week of our discussions on this matter will consider politicians motivated above all by the desire to consume the fruits of office. We will thus return to the opening discussions of the course, this time discussing the following three papers, not from the perspective of their methodology, but from the perspective of their substance.


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: