NEW YORK UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCE

Department of Politics

G53.1500
COMPARATIVE POLITICS
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Classes: Tuesdays 4-6pm
Office Hours: Tuesdays 2-4pm
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, as 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 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 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. In this context 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 you will 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 undergraduate text provides thematic discussions and further reading on many of the themes we will cover:


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. 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 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 on 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 on 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.

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 designed controlled political experiments, particularly at the macro level. We are
sometimes lucky enough to be presented with “natural experiments” that we can exploit with
careful analysis; but we cannot rely on this happening. 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 as many things as possible held constant
between different cases in this set, to allow systematic investigation of factors that vary between
cases. The quintessential problem is that the number of cases is typically small, relative to the
number of things that can vary between cases. Strictly speaking this problem is insoluble, but that
conclusion doesn’t get us anywhere. Practically speaking, we do the best we can, on the ground
that carefully designed comparative research is never perfect, but can give a lot more insight into
general political processes than research conducted in one country only.

A closely related issue concerns the types of models and theories we construct. It is
certainly true that we cannot understand any important political process without some 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 people who appear to have no
model, but who nonetheless claim to offer an explanation, are in effect using an implicit or hidden
model, however informal. We will certainly operate on the principle that an explicit model,
carefully analyzed, is better than an implicit model, which is typically impossible to analyze
systematically. However, things are not so cut and dried when we actually roll up our sleeves and get to work.

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 be a crucial determinant of the logical inferences that are 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 not especially precise or rigorous, but which did hold out the prospect of offering insight into political processes that generalized across sets of countries that are in some sense “similar” – similar in the sense that the theory at issue is held to apply to them as a set of cases. Evolution has been towards models, typically much more precise and tightly constrained, where the primary criterion has been rigor – a rigor very often achieved at the cost of a radically reduced generalizability of results to different political settings. This presents an difficult intellectual dilemma – especially for those interested in comparative politics – and 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, which everyone should read carefully and be prepared to talk about in class.


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 of something 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, 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 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.

**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. The apparently universal applicability suggests the concept may be too loosely defined, an argument set out in:


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.

**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 chapter 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**

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:


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:


**Week 11: 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.


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


Week 12: 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:


Responses to these criticisms can be found in:


Week 13: 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:


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:


**Week 14: 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: