



Civics Mosaic:

Comparing Political Systems

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Comparing political systems around the world

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Aim at an exact Knowledge of the Nature, End, and Means of Government.
Compare the different forms of it with each other and each of them with their
Effects on the public and private Happiness.

—John Adams, 1759

Lesson 1: Why Compare Political Systems?

Purpose of Lesson

This lesson introduces you to the comparative study of political systems. It acquaints you with the origins of the comparative approach that go back at least to the time of Plato, Aristotle, and the ancient Greeks. It also examines the thinking of present-day comparativists, scholars who specialize in comparative studies.

This lesson will prepare you for working with this textbook, which follows a comparative approach to the study of politics. Learning how to compare your own political system with other systems acquaints you with alternative ways in which other peoples have met similar needs and addressed comparable public issues.

After completing this lesson, you will be able to:

- Describe the scope, strategies, and methods of research used by comparativists.
- Discuss the advantages of the comparative study of political systems.

Along the way, you will gain a better understanding of your own political system, of other political systems in world history and around the world today, and of the core political ideas and issues they have encountered. Before you begin this introductory lesson, take a few moments to review John Adams' quotation that appeared on the opening pages of this textbook:

Aim at an exact Knowledge of the Nature, End, and Means of Government. Compare the different forms of it with each other and each of them with their Effects on the public and private Happiness.

Terms to Know

aggregate data analysis	participant-observation
case study	perspective
comparative politics	political system
comparativist	statistical methods
demographics	subdiscipline
discipline	survey research
generalization	transnational
narrative	typology

What Is Comparative Politics?

The term “comparative politics” refers to a subject matter, a method of political inquiry, and an enlarged, more encompassing perspective on the world.

As a subject, comparative politics is a special field within the discipline of political science. Today, the discipline of political science is divided into “fields” or areas of specialization. Those fields include Political Theory, American Politics, Comparative Politics, and International Relations. Within Comparative Politics, people study particular regions (e.g., The Politics of the Middle East), political institutions (e.g., Comparative Legislative Behavior), political ideas (e.g., Democracy in the World Today), and particular issues (e.g., Comparative Environmental Policy).

As a method, comparative politics is the effort to compare political units across time and cultures. Comparativists try to identify and analyze the similarities and differences among political systems. Some try to produce reliable generalizations about politics and government by deriving or inducing a general principle from the examination of particulars. Others prefer to work deductively from the general to the specific by testing general propositions in the real world.

As a perspective, comparative politics certainly broadens your view of the world. Instead of studying something in isolation, you see it in relation to other things of a similar nature.

What Do Comparativists Compare and How?

Comparativists sometimes explain their work by saying that their scope includes “the four I’s”: ideas, institutions, interests, and issues. Ideas are abstract thoughts, generalized concepts, or ideals. Comparativists explore ideas such as democracy, equality, and justice. They compare institutions such as the executive or legislative bodies of government. Some comparativists are interested in nongovernmental institutions such as political parties. Comparativists also compare interests and how groups whose members share common interests or objectives try to influence government officials and policies. Finally, comparativists compare how groups and other entities differ in

the stances they take on how best to resolve policy issues in domestic and foreign arenas.

Typically, the scope of comparative studies focuses on either ideas or institutions or interests, but not in isolation from one another. For example, a study comparing political party systems of different countries might want to know how democratic those systems are and how well they represent different interests in society.

Comparativists use a multi-step research process to achieve their goals. The first step is to formulate research questions or hypotheses and then decide how best to organize that research to answer the questions or test the hypotheses posed. Three organizational strategies are listed below.

A. ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES

1. Case study. A case study is an in-depth analysis of an idea, institution, or issue in a single or multiple political units such as a particular country or countries. One of the most famous and influential case studies was Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (volume I published in 1835 and volume II published in 1840). A native of France, Tocqueville came to the United States in the early 1800s because he saw the rise of democracy in the United States as the major political development of his time. He sought to analyze not only the idea of democracy but to describe its manifestations in a single country, with occasional comparisons to France.

2. Typology. A typology is a classification based on types or categories. Comparativists use typologies as simplifying devices to establish similarities and differences.

One of the first to make systematic use of a typology of government was Aristotle, a Greek philosopher born in Athens about 384 B.C. He thought that governments could be categorized on the basis of "Who rules?" and "Who benefits from rule?" Government can be in the hands of a single individual, a small group, or all citizens (the one, the few, or the many). In each case, government can be conducted either in the selfish interests of the rulers or for the benefit of the entire community.

Aristotle then identified six forms of government that he divided into good and corrupt versions of each. According to Aristotle, tyranny (rule of one), oligarchy (rule of the few), and democracy (rule by the masses) are all perverted forms of rule, because they promote their own

interests rather than the benefit of the whole. By contrast, he contended, monarchy, aristocracy, and polity are preferred because the single individual or a small group or the many will govern in the interests of the common good.

Tyranny, Aristotle declared, is clearly the worst of all possible forms of government since it reduces citizens to the status of slaves. Polity, which he defined as rule by the many in the interests of all, was the most desirable form of government (see Figure 1). These terms are Aristotle's. Today, we use the term "democracy" to refer to a healthy system ruled by the many and polity to refer to the state. We also use terms like "mobocracy" or "anarchy" or "majority tyranny" to describe what happens when rule by the many becomes corrupted.

Figure 1. Aristotle's Typology of Government

	Rule by One	Rule by the Few	Rule by the Many
Healthy Forms	Monarchy	Aristocracy	Polity
Corrupt Forms	Tyranny	Oligarchy	Democracy

Aristotle and his students researched many case studies of existing political systems. Only one of these, the study of Athens, survived.

Others have developed typologies of government since Aristotle's time. However, most of those typologies are based on Aristotle's. Niccolo Machiavelli, a political advisor to the rulers of Florence in the 15th century, divided government into republican (or non-monarchies) and princely governments. Then, in the 17th and 18th centuries, English and American thinkers drew on Aristotle's typology in the development of their theories of republican government.

During the Cold War, some political scientists used a typology of first, second, and third world countries. Those in the first world were rich, industrialized Western countries. Those in the second world were communist. Those in the third world were the chronically poor, non-industrialized countries most often found in the southern hemisphere. Some now regard that typology as having outlived its usefulness. Today, some political scientists use a typology of post-industrial, post-communist, and newly industrializing worlds. In light of the dramatic increase in nominally democratic countries since

the mid-1970s, other observers classify countries as democratic or non-democratic.

3. Aggregate data analysis. When comparativists want to test a theory or validate a hypothesis across a wide range of countries, they employ the relatively new method of aggregate data analysis. One of the most famous pioneering efforts was the study *The Civic Culture* (1963), a five-nation comparative inquiry into what factors might account for the stability of democratic government. Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba conducted this study in the aftermath of World War II. They not only wanted to find out why some nations remained democratic while others became authoritarian; they sought answers to other questions as well:

- Whether there were distinctive “nation marks” or national character traits.
- Whether and in what respects nations and cultures were divided into distinctive subcultures.
- How institutions such as the family, the school, and the workplace shaped people’s political attitudes and beliefs.

This ambitious study involved five countries in which answers to multiple questions were sought. The answers generated a lot of data. To be useful, those data had to be “aggregated” or collected and then sorted in meaningful ways so that generalizations could be made. Those generalizations then could be tested in follow-up studies.

Since Almond and Verba’s pioneering study, modern technology has made even more far-reaching research possible. For example, an effort to find out what 14 year-olds think about politics and what skills of analysis they have mastered has just been completed. That study involved nearly 90,000 youth in 28 countries.¹ After deciding how the research should be organized, researchers must then select the research methods to be used. Some choices are listed below.

B. RESEARCH METHODS

1. Survey research. Survey research is the scientific study of mass political behavior. It began in the 1930s with the discovery that a properly designed survey of a small number of

people could produce more accurate indications of attitudes and predictions of future behavior than improperly designed surveys of many people.

Today survey research underpins much of the good work on large populations in political science. Research is now conducted routinely of such topics as voting behavior, turnout at elections, tolerance, and confidence in institutions. One such survey instrument is the *Eurobarometer* that measures attitudes of people on the European continent. The Gallup Poll, which began in the United States, now operates worldwide to measure people’s attitudes toward politics and government.

2. Statistical methods. Statistics is a branch of mathematics dealing with the collection, analysis, interpretation, and presentation of masses of numerical data. The growing use of computers and the increased availability of statistical services have made possible comparative study of political facts and figures on an unprecedented scale. Comparativists have taken advantage of this advancement to expand the number of cases they analyze. As a result, they have been able to tackle issues such as the political determinants of mass violence, industrial conflict, and growth of state expenditures.

One example of the fruits of statistical methods is the annual Human Development Reports (HDRs) issued by the United Nations Development Programme since 1990. An example of those HDRs is the Arab Human Development Report 2002.² It contains statistical information from 22 Arab countries. It compares data on subjects ranging from literacy, the policy and management of health care, and trends in per capita income to patterns of causes of unemployment and the quality of institutions in Arab countries. Findings from statistical research often are presented in tables, charts, or graphs to clarify and compare data.

3. Narrative. A narrative is an account, a description, or a chronicle. When comparativists use the narrative method, they may look at the relationship between text and context. Their analysis of text involves the examination of primary sources such as constitutions, key legislation, and major speeches. They also review the textual analysis of others by consulting

¹ Judith Torney-Purta, Rainer Lehmann, Hans Oswald and Wolfram Schulz, *Citizenship and Education in Twenty-Eight Countries: Civic Knowledge and Engagement at Age Fourteen* (Amsterdam, NTH: The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, 2001).

² *Arab Human Development Report 2002* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2002), p. 29.

secondary sources such as newspapers, books, and journal articles. Comparativists also look to the context and interrelated circumstances surrounding the texts they study.³ Those circumstances might include the history, customs, values, ideas, and social and economic factors operating at the time.

Comparativists often prefer the narrative to statistical analysis when the kinds of questions posed concern the dynamic inter-play of a variety of forces operating at a complex moment in time. Some examples of questions currently being investigated in narrative fashion are these:

- What pushes some countries at certain historical times into democracy?
- How do fledgling democracies persevere when they face crises?
- What causes a government (such as the Roman Empire, Manchu Dynasty, Weimar Republic, or Soviet Union) to collapse?

4. Participant observation. Comparativists have always supplemented other sources of information with data gathering on their own. Through travel, personal experience, interviews, and access to original documents or primary sources, they have increased their knowledge and insights through first-hand experience on the scene. Participants, for example, may reflect on their observations and write a memoir. Conversely, observers may become more involved in the subject of their study and become a participant in it. We call both examples “participant observation.” Along the way comparativists also have become students of history, philosophy, and economics, because those three disciplines contribute to comparative politics.

Why Is Comparative Study Beneficial?

Comparing the past and present of other countries with that of your own country helps you see familiar institutions and accepted practices in a new light. Such comparisons help you to reexamine your basic assumptions. This may reinforce assumptions, or it may lead to ideas for improving your own political system.

No one was more aware of the benefits of comparative study than Alexis de Tocqueville.

Writing to a friend about his book *Democracy in America*, he confided, “Although I rarely spoke of France in my book, I did not write one page of it without having her, so to speak, before my eyes.”⁴ In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville had more to say about potential benefits of comparative study. He wrote:

*It is not, then, merely to satisfy a legitimate curiosity that I have examined America; my wish has been to find there instruction by which we [the French] may ourselves profit.... I confess that in America, I saw more than America: I sought there the image of democracy itself, with its institutions, its characters, its prejudices, and its passions in order to learn what we have to fear or to hope from its progress.*⁵

Just as Tocqueville’s horizons were broadened by his study, comparative study will broaden your horizons. Comparing and contrasting your own political system with other systems acquaints you with alternative ways in which other people have met similar needs or addressed comparable public issues.

An additional benefit of comparative study is that it better prepares you for life in today’s increasingly interconnected and interdependent world. People throughout the world need a better informed and richer understanding of the politics and government of other countries and of the transnational organizations which link them, if we are to live together in more peaceful and productive ways.

To put yourself in another’s position and to see the world as he or she sees it is to enlarge your understanding and broaden your perspective. That is particularly true when it comes to deepening your insights into politics and government. To do so, however, requires more than knowledge of current affairs or feelings of empathy evoked by images on television.

What Is the Scope of This Book?

⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville to Ernest de Charbrol, 7 October 1831, in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, ed. Roger Boesche (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 59 as quoted in Gabriel Almond et al. *Comparative Politics: A Theoretical Framework* (New York: Longman, 2001), p. 39.

⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Richard Heffner (New York: New American Library/Mentor, 1984) as reprinted in *Princeton Readings in Political Thought*, eds. Mitchell Cohen and Nicole Fermon (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 406.

³ See Ira Katznelson and Helen Milner, eds., *Political Science: The State of the Discipline* (New York: W.W. Norton and Washington, DC: American Political Science Association, 2002), pp. 637 and 645.

Genuine understanding can come only when we seek answers to questions that have engaged thoughtful men and women over time and across cultures. Those are the kinds of questions you will ponder as you proceed with this study of comparative political systems. In this lesson you began, as Aristotle did, by asking why it is important to compare political systems. Then you examined the methods used by present-day political scientists in their comparative work. You will continue your inquiry by considering the following questions:

- What are the historical and philosophical foundations for politics and government?
- How does political culture influence institutions and practices?
- What are the rights and responsibilities of individuals and groups in different political systems?
- How do representation and participation vary across time and culture?
- How are nations governed and how is policy made?
- How and why is governance changing in a globalizing world?

Throughout this study, emphasis is placed on key concepts and principles of civics in comparative perspective. For our examples and illustrations, we look to the various regions of the world: Europe, the Middle East, the Far East, Africa, and the Americas. Continuing attention is given to comparisons of the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, and China. In addition, and as appropriate, case studies and comparisons will be made with other countries including South Africa, Nigeria, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, France, Germany, India, Japan, Brazil, and Mexico.

Each of those countries has a “political system.” By that term, we mean a network of individuals and institutions—some governmental; others nongovernmental—devoted to the making of binding decisions affecting the country as a whole and its parts. In the next three lessons you will learn more about two essential building blocks of this system: politics and government.

Reviewing and Using the Lesson

1. Explain how comparative politics incorporates both subject matter and a method of inquiry or a way of approaching the study of politics.
2. Comparativists tend to focus on the “four I’s”: ideas, institutions, interests, and issues. Explain what the four terms—ideas, institutions, interests, and issues—mean to you. Then give an example of one term and explain how its study could be improved by looking at the other two terms.
3. What is the purpose of a case study? What are its potential benefits? Its limitations?
4. What is a typology and why do comparativists construct typologies?
5. Why has the use of survey research and statistical methods increased in recent years? What are the advantages of those methods of comparison?
6. Comparativists supplement other sources of information with data gathering on their own. They have acted as participant observers. You are a participant in your own community, and you can learn to be an astute observer. Imagine that you are about to conduct a case study of your community. Begin by:
 - Writing a brief description of your community touching on its geography, demographics (profile of its human population), economy, and how it is governed.
 - Prepare a list of people you would want to interview to gain insights into the politics and government of your community.
 - List some of the documents or primary sources you would need and explain why they would be important for your case study.
 - What personal experiences in the politics of your community have you or your friends and family had? What insights into politics can you glean from those first-hand experiences? What, if any, generalizations might you make from those experiences?