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Comparative Government

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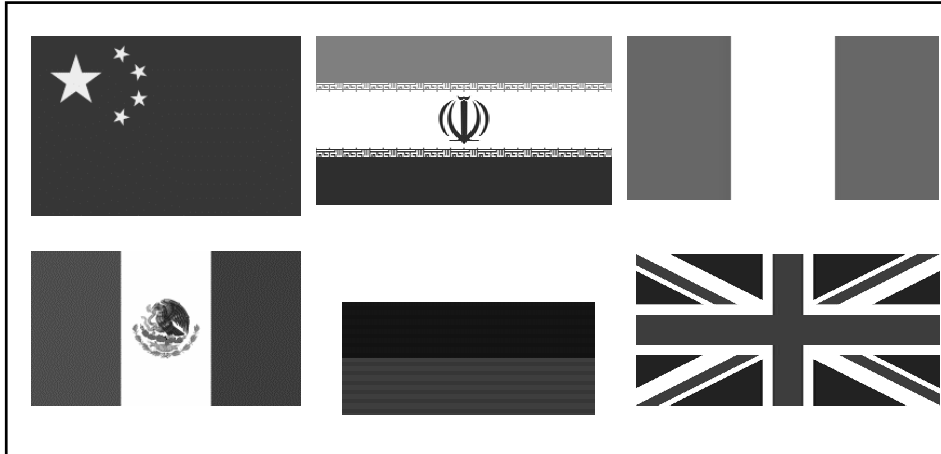
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Comparative Government



Reasons to Study Comparative Government

- Countries are actors in a continuously unfolding play
- Comparative Government and Politics helps “connect the dots”
- A set of basic understandings helps make sense of world events

Political Map of the World, July 2007



Countries are actors in a continuously unfolding play. There is no script, but actions on the world stage occur because of countries’ peoples, institutions, and the processes by which they make decisions. The discipline of Comparative Government and Politics examines and analyzes countries’ political structures, actions, and interactions with others, helping to “connect the dots” and make sense of world events.

To accomplish this, one must begin with some basic tools for grasping different countries’ histories of authority and power, the political structures and philosophies of different states, the ever-transforming environment in which they operate, and the internal and external forces that influence states’ actions.

Comparative Government and Politics can also provide insight into the American political system and the political systems of other governments, making it clearer why governments make certain decisions and take certain actions, and illuminating the potential consequences of these actions as well. Overall, Comparative Government provides a perspective of the world as a sort of laboratory for testing new programs and theories that shape world events and ultimately history.

Basic Terminology

- Nation
- State
- Nation-state
- Regime
- Government
- Power
- Authority
- Legitimacy
- Cleavage
- Command economy

To get started, let's look at some basic terms:

- A **nation** is a body of people sharing the same cultural, geographic, or linguistic ties.
- A **state** is a politically organized body of people able to make decisions through direct action or political participation.
- A **nation-state** is a territorial unit controlled by a single state and governed by a single government.
- A **regime** is a mode or system of government that rules through authority usually described by a constitution.
- A **government** is the part of a state (people and organizations) with legitimate public authority to operate the state.
- **Power** is the ability to take action or control a situation through coercion, persuasion, or leadership.
- **Authority** is the legal right to exercise power in the name of the state or the people.
- **Legitimacy** is the belief that a government has the authority to exercise power.
- **Cleavage** is the separation of groups within a society. Such separation may be cultural, historic, geographic, ethnic, economic, or racial. Cleavage causes tensions between these groups and can weaken their bonds as a people.
- A **command economy** is a economic system in which the government, rather than market forces, determines the levels of production.

The Comparative Approach

Comparing governments instills understanding and helps explain past and current events and predict future events

<u>Comparisons at multiple levels</u>
Sovereignty, authority, and power
Political institutions
Citizens, society, and the state
Political and economic change
Public policy

Comparing governments and their policies instills a greater understanding of the world and enables us to explain past or current actions and even predict future ones with a greater level of certainty. One can make comparisons at multiple levels by examining a government's legitimacy through its sources of sovereignty, authority, and power; its political institutions; the social context of politics via the interactions of citizens, society, and the state; the factors which influence political and economic change; and the development and implementation of public policy.

Sovereignty, Authority, and Power

- A government's legitimacy comes from its sovereignty, authority, and power
- Factors influencing legitimacy include:
 - The state's history of leadership
 - Supranational systems
 - Religious or other social movements
 - Economic considerations



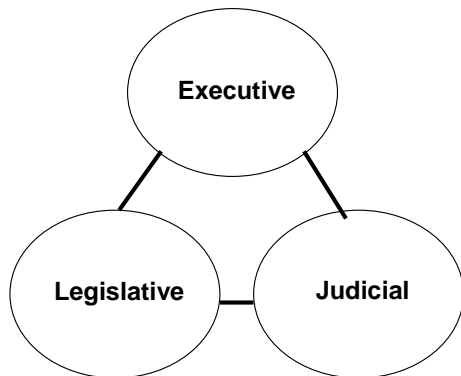
The scepter, a
monarchical
symbol of
sovereignty,
authority, and
power

Without sufficient sovereignty, authority, and power to lend legitimacy to its government, a state cannot function. A state's history of governance (authoritarian, democratic, etc.) influences perceptions of legitimacy. Political philosophies and practices carried down through generations establish in citizens' minds the relationship between society and the state. In addition, supranational systems (coalitions of other countries for a common purpose, such as United Nations, the European Union, or the World Bank) may affect states' sovereignty and thus their authority, power, and ultimately their legitimacy. For example, the United Nations Security Council may impose sanctions on "rogue states" for illegal, illegitimate, or potentially dangerous actions. Also, the financial assistance of organizations like the World Bank may hinge upon a state's reversal of spending policies contrary to the organization's aims.

Within the state itself, the various political systems can also affect state actions and thus affect its government's legitimacy. Religion may play a role in legitimizing a state's government, as in feudal Europe and in theocracies such as Iran. The country's military or a popular political movement may have a similar effect.

An immediate test of any state's legitimacy involves how it conducts its economic policies. Regardless of the level of authority held or power exercised over society, a government that does not effectively manage the country's economy will soon find its legitimacy in question; if conditions deteriorate severely, forces from inside and outside the state may challenge its ability to rule.

Political Institutions



- Formal and informal structures of authority and their interactions, such as between:
 - Branches of a single government
 - Governments of different countries
 - Countries and international organizations
- How those in power gain their legitimacy

Political institutions are the formal and informal structures of authority and policymaking systems within and outside a country. These can be examined by looking at the interactions between branches of one government, interactions between different governments, and relationships between governments and supranational organizations.

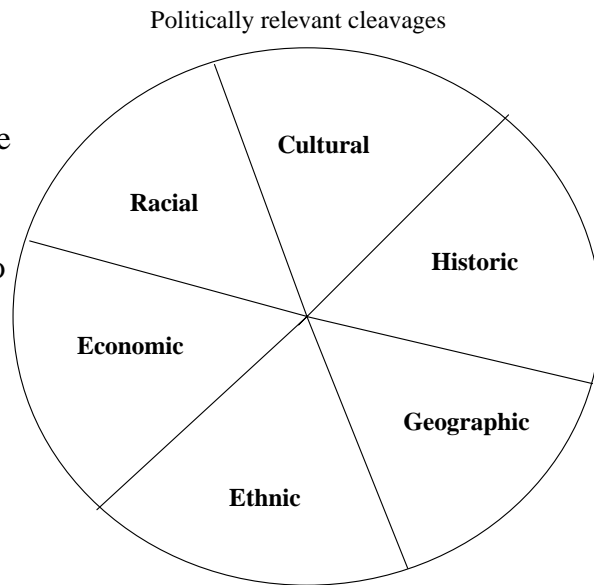
When studying a state, one should analyze the political institutions established by a country's constitution (or other claims to legitimacy) and its operations of authority and policymaking. For example, the U.S. Constitution grants authority to the executive, legislative, and judicial branches—all political institutions of the U.S. government. In China, the Communist Party legitimizes the government and its operations. Comparative government looks at the interactions between countries' political institutions in order to explain these countries' actions and policies.

One may also analyze the relationship between internal and external political institutions, such as one country's relationships with other countries or with international institutions. For example, when one country declares war on another, an international organization will likely react in ways it deems most effective in promoting its goals. How the belligerent country reacts to this response can reveal much about the political institutions of both parties.

Ways in which those in authority attain power can explain much about how the different political institutions operate within a government. Claims to power may come in the form of a constitutional mandate, traditional customs of ascension (as with tribal leaders), or social custom (as in a patronage system, in which people are awarded government positions in exchange for favors or votes).

Citizens, Society, and the State

- Consider politically relevant cleavages and their effect on the state
- The media and advocacy groups also influence state operations



When examining a country's government, it is often useful to look at how its citizens and society interact both with one another and with the state itself. Identifying politically relevant cleavages—which may be based on cultural, historic, geographic, ethnic, economic, or racial differences—and their effectiveness in spurring state action assists greatly in understanding a state's political systems. A country's media and various advocacy groups play important roles in maintaining and inspiring political change. Advocacy groups include political parties, social-service groups, and international organizations that assist various segments of the population.