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Introduction: What is Comparative Politics?

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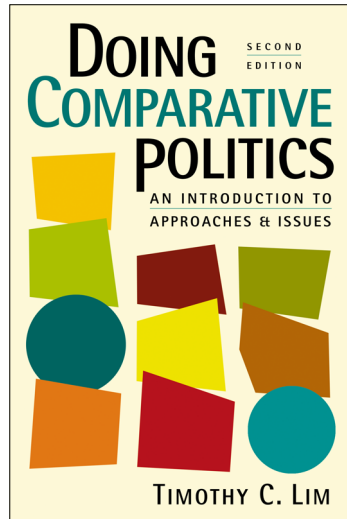
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An Introduction to
Approaches and Issues

SECOND EDITION

Timothy Lim

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Introduction

What Is Comparative Politics?

Let us begin this book with a few basic, but very big questions:

- Why are there so many gun-related homicides in the United States?
- Why do so many peoples and countries around the world remain mired in poverty and economic misery? Conversely, how have some peoples and countries been able to become “rich” and prosperous in only a generation or two?
- Is the expansion of “democracy” inevitable? Will it necessarily reach all countries over time?
- Why do people and groups resort to “terrorism” and other forms of political violence? Is anyone capable of becoming a terrorist, or are terrorists the product of a particular type of society and culture?
- How do social movements—such as the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and prodemocracy movements in the Ukraine, Burma (Myanmar), and Iran—emerge, and why do some succeed while others fail?

There are, of course, many answers to these questions. Some answers may sound very persuasive, whereas others may seem far less convincing, even absurd. On the first question, for example, the controversial director Michael Moore argued in his Oscar-winning 2002 film *Bowling for Columbine* that the high level of gun violence in the United States is largely due to a “culture of fear” that has been created and constantly reproduced through policies and practices that exacerbate insecurity throughout US society. This culture of fear, Moore suggested, pushes Americans to resolve problems and interpersonal conflict through violence, a reaction that, in turn, creates a self-confirming cycle: fear begets violence, which begets more fear, which begets even more violence, and so on. A culture of fear may not explain everything we need to know about gun violence in the United States, but according to Moore, it is almost certainly

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a major element—perhaps *the* major element—of any explanation that purports to tell us why Americans are so prone to shooting each other. Is Moore right? Or is his argument completely baseless? *How do we know?* More broadly, how do we know if *any* argument—especially one that deals with complex social, political, or economic phenomena—is valid or even plausible? This book is designed, in part, to help you answer this question. Learning how to evaluate specific arguments, however, is secondary to the overarching goal of this book, which is to enable you to better understand and explain social, political, or economic processes, events, and outcomes on your own.

So, what does all this have to do with **comparative politics**? The answer is fairly simple: comparative politics, as a field of study, provides us with a ready array of conceptual and analytical tools that we can use to address and answer a wide range of questions about the social world. I will talk about exactly what this means shortly; for now, though, let me just add that comparative politics provides a systematic, coherent, and *practical* way to understand and make better sense of the things that happen in the world around us. In a broader sense, moreover, comparative politics is relevant to almost anyone, even those not interested in “studying foreign countries.” A “comparative politics approach” can be applied to a huge variety of problems, from the mundane to the sublime, in a wide variety of areas. Explaining gun violence is just one example, but there are many others. Consider the following potpourri of questions and issues: Can a single-payer national health care system work in the United States? Are fundamentalist religious beliefs and democracy compatible? Is vast economic inequality a necessary by-product of a capitalist system? What encourages people to save and invest? If marijuana use is legalized, will such use necessarily lead to the abuse of “harder” drugs? What can be done to improve the performance of US students in science, reading, and math?

A comparative politics approach is well suited for addressing all these questions and many others. At this point, of course, the reasons may not be clear, but they will become much clearer as we proceed. It is also important to say, at this early juncture, that comparative politics is not the only, nor is it always the best, approach one can use. Nonetheless, virtually any student or concerned citizen (not to mention scholar or policymaker) will benefit tremendously from cultivating and developing a “comparative politics approach.” With all this in mind, the next important step we need to take is to clarify what the term “comparative politics” means and what it implies. As we will see, this is easier said than done.

What Is Comparative Politics?

Many textbooks on comparative politics provide a clear, seemingly simple answer to the question, what is comparative politics? Perhaps the simplest is this:

comparative politics is the study of politics *in foreign* countries (emphasis added; Zahariadis 1997, p. 2). Few texts, though, stop here. Most also emphasize that comparative politics, in slightly more formal terms, involves both a *method* of study and a *subject* of study. As a method of study, comparative politics is—not surprisingly—premised on comparison. As a subject of study, comparative politics focuses on understanding and explaining political phenomena that take place within a **state, society, country, or political system**.¹ (See Figure 1.1 for a discussion of these various terms.) This slightly more detailed definition of the field gives us a better sense of what comparative politics is and how it may differ from other fields of inquiry, although, as I will discuss below, it is a definition that raises far more questions than it answers. Still, defining comparative politics as a method of study based on comparison and a subject of study based on an examination of political phenomena in a country (or other “**macrosocial**” unit) highlights several important points. First, it immediately tells us that the field is primarily concerned with *internal* or domestic dynamics, which helps to distinguish comparative politics from **international relations** (IR)—a field of study largely, though not exclusively, concerned with the *external* relations or foreign policies of states. Second, it tells us that comparative politics is, appropriately enough, concerned with *political* phenomena. Third, and perhaps most important, it tells us that the field is not only characterized but *defined* by a comparative method of analysis. I might also point out that this second definition does not automatically exclude the United States (as the first does) from the field of comparative politics: the United States is a state or country in exactly the same sense that France, Japan, India, Mexico, South Korea, Zimbabwe, or Russia is.²

As I already suggested, though, this second definition raises a number of other questions and issues. Can comparative politics, for example, focus only on what happens *inside* countries? In other words, is it possible to understand the internal politics of a place without understanding and accounting for the impact of external or transnational/international forces? This is a very important question, but there are several others: What is meant by *political* phenomena—or by politics more generally? Are economic, social, and cultural phenomena also political, or do they fall into a completely different category? Regarding the question of method, we might also ask: What does it mean to compare? Is comparison in comparative politics different from, say, comparison in sociology or any other field of study? Even more basically, *why* do we compare? That is, what’s the point of making comparisons in the first place? And, last, *how* do we compare?

The Importance of Definitions

In asking so many questions, I realize that I also might have raised a question in *your* mind, namely, why can’t we be satisfied with the relatively short and

Figure 1.1 Some Key Concepts in Comparative Politics: State, Nation, Nation-State, Government, and Country

The terms “state,” “**nation**,” “**nation-state**,” “**government**,” and “country” are often used interchangeably, especially in the popular press and media. Although this practice is not entirely unwarranted, it is important to recognize that the terms are not synonymous. A state, for example, is a legal concept that is premised on a number of conditions: a permanent population, a defined territory, and a *national* government capable of maintaining effective control over its territory. In addition, many scholars (following **Max Weber**) argue that a state must have a monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force or violence within a given territory. Notice that the definition of state includes a reference to government, which can be defined as the agency or apparatus through which a body exercises authority and performs its functions. In this definition, governments need not be part of a state; moreover, multiple governments may exist within a single state. We can find governments in all sorts of places—in a university or school (that is, the student government) or in sovereign “nations” (for example, a Native American tribal council)—and at many levels. Cities, counties, provinces, and whole regions (for example, the **European Union**) can also have their own separate governments.

The example of Native Americans is a useful way to differentiate a nation from a state. A nation, in the simplest terms, can be defined as a group of people who recognize each other as sharing a common identity. This common identity can be based on language, religion, culture, or a number of other *self-defined* criteria. This makes the concept of the nation inherently subjective or **intersubjective**. Nations do not require states or governments to exist, nor must nations exist within a single defined territory. One can speak, for example, of nations that transcend borders, such as the Nation of Islam. Combining the definitions of state and nation creates the concept of the nation-state. Technically speaking, a nation-state would only exist if nearly all the members of a single nation were organized in a single state, without any other distinct communities being present (Willets 1997, p. 289). From this perspective, despite its prevalent usage, many scholars argue that there are no true nation-states and that the concept should be entirely abandoned. But there are what we might call *national states*—states in which a common identity is forged around the concept of nationalism itself (for more on this issue, see Eley and Suny 1996). For example, people living in the United States may be divided by a wide range of religious, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and other differences. Yet they all may share a common sense of “being American.” Practically speaking, the term “national state” is often used as a synonym for nation-state. The notion of a national state, moreover, comes close to the more concrete concept of country, which may be defined as a distinct political system of people sharing common values and occupying a relatively fixed geographic space (Eley and Suny 1996). “Country” is the most generic of the terms referred to here.

easy-to-understand definition first mentioned? One reason is clear: before we begin studying any field, we need to understand what the field is really about. To do this, we typically start at the most basic level—with how people define the field. Unfortunately, even seemingly simple and straightforward definitions (or questions, such as what is comparative politics?) are often filled with complexities and subtleties, many of which are not immediately apparent. As students generally—and as students of comparative politics specifically—I want you to keep this firmly in mind. Moreover, I want you to understand that few (social, political, or economic) issues can be adequately understood or explained without taking the time for careful and serious reflection. A second related reason is this: definitions are important. Very important. This is partly because they tell us what is included in the field of study and what is left out. Consider the definition offered at the beginning of this section: Comparative politics is the study of politics in foreign countries. This definition (unlike the other we discussed), quite clearly, leaves out the United States. But, it is not clear why the United States should receive such “special” consideration. Is it because the United States is different from all other countries—literally incomparable? Or, is there some other, less obvious, reason? We are left to wonder. Consider, too, the notion of *politics*: Does a study of politics mean that we do *not* study economic, social, or cultural forces? Does it mean we only examine those things that governments or states do? What, in short, is included in and excluded from the notion of politics? (I will return to these questions shortly.)

There are other closely related problems we need to address. One of the most important of these is the generally unintentional, but still quite serious problem of *bias*. Bias was a particularly serious problem in the early conceptualization of comparative politics as a field of study. To put it bluntly, scholars and others who helped shape the field did so in a way that suggested the world was divided into two basic categories: countries and peoples that mattered and those that did not. In this regard, it would be fair to say that the early development and conceptualization of the field were profoundly influenced by the **ethnocentric** biases, values, and political domination of US scholars and leaders who saw the United States as the guiding light for the rest of the world.

To see this (and to see the danger of this type of influence), consider the character of comparative politics prior to World War II, when the field was almost entirely defined in terms of western European affairs. During this period, the vast majority of research by scholars in the United States was devoted to a handful of countries: Britain, France, and Germany (a little later, the Soviet Union and Japan were included). These were the countries or states considered most important in US eyes—as I just noted, they were the only countries deemed to matter. Even the notion of studying *countries* or *states*, it is important to add, portrays an ethnocentric bias: prior to World War II, much of

the world was colonized by western powers. As such, those societies without a sovereign state were, almost automatically, considered unworthy of study. Their histories, their cultures, their peoples, their methods of governing, and so on were simply dismissed (by scholars in the United States and other western countries) for lack of political **sovereignty**.

Predictably, then, issues that are now considered especially important to researchers in comparative politics and to other comparative social scientists (“comparativists” for short), such as economic development and democratization, were also largely ignored by early students of comparative politics in the United States. These issues were not considered pressing or worthy of study, because the West had already “solved” them. In other words, non-democratic and economically “backward” countries were treated as aberrations or immature versions of the West and of the United States specifically, “rather than as political systems with distinct characteristics . . . worthy of examination on their own merits” (Zahariadis 1997, p. 7). The tendency for political scientists in the United States to ignore most of the rest of the world (even much of western Europe), moreover, rested on the immodest assumption that the United States simply had little or nothing to learn from anyone else. From this perspective, it is far easier to understand why comparative politics remained so narrowly defined for the first half of the twentieth century. “The reasons,” as Wiarda (1991) nicely put it,

go to the heart of the American experience, to the deeply held belief that the United States is different [from] and *superior* to European and all other nations, the widespread conviction at the popular level that the United States had little to learn from the rest of the world, the near-universal belief of Americans in the superiority of their institutions and their attitudes that the rest of the world must learn from the United States and never the other way around. Hence political science as it developed as a discipline in the United States was predominantly the study of American politics, for that is where the overwhelming emphasis and interest lay. . . . Those who studied and wrote about comparative politics were generally believed to have little to offer intellectually to other areas of the discipline. (emphasis added; p. 12)

The Changing Context of Comparative Politics

The relegation of comparative politics to the margins of political science changed dramatically following the end of World War II—although it would be more accurate to say that the deepest changes began during the war, when US policymakers recognized an urgent need for area specialists, that is, people with a strong understanding of specific cultures, languages, societies, and political systems, and not just in Western Europe. What sparked this newfound interest in the rest of the world? The answer is easy to discern. Specifically, World War II brought home the importance of knowing about other

peoples so that the military-strategic interests of the United States could be better protected. Certainly, in terms of funding and official support, there is little doubt this was true. As Bruce Cumings (1997), a prominent area specialist on Korea, pointed out, the first effort to create a systematic base of knowledge about “foreign” countries (from the perspective of the United States) was carried out by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). According to Cumings, in 1941, OSS director William “Wild Bill” Donovan established the rationale for employing the nation’s best expertise to collect and analyze all information and data that might bear upon national security. Once this rationale became policy, the future of comparative and **area studies** in the United States brightened considerably.³

The war not only broadened the perspective of the United States with regard to the list of countries that mattered but also with regard to the issues that mattered. In particular, the rise of **fascism** and militarism in Germany, Japan, and Italy and the rise of **communism** (and **Stalinism**) in Russia and, later, China, had a profound impact on the field of comparative politics and political science as a whole (Wiarda 1991). For good reason, scholars, policymakers, and others wanted to understand these political phenomena, which differed so much from the democratic and capitalist paths followed by the United States and most Western European countries. They especially wanted to understand not only how and why fascist or **totalitarian** rule emerged and developed but also how and why it seemed to thrive in certain places (especially to the extent that it represented a serious and real threat to the democracies of the West). The question was how to best accomplish this understanding. For an increasing number of scholars and policymakers, the answer was to be found in a more sophisticated approach to comparative study. One of the leading advocates of this view was Roy Macridis (1955), who, in the mid-1950s, strongly criticized traditional comparative politics as being overly parochial (with its near-exclusive focus on Western Europe), too descriptive (as opposed to analytical), exceedingly formalistic, atheoretical, and even noncomparative. Macridis’s critique helped lay the basis for a sea change in the field.

The Cold War and Comparative Politics

The impact of World War II on comparative politics, therefore, was immense; but it was the onset of the **Cold War** that ensured the longer-term prominence of the field. It was the conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States that compelled US policymakers to pay *sustained* and *systematic* attention to “lesser” countries and regions—especially to a huge number of former colonies, variously referred to as the “South,” the “developing world,” and the “Third World” (see Figure 1.2). The reason is clear enough: since these hitherto neglected countries were viewed, in strategic terms, as potentially important allies or enemies, it behooved US policymakers to know more about the peoples they

**Figure 1.2 Note on Terminology—What’s in a Name?
The “Third World” and Other Terms**

The terms “South,” “Third World,” the “developing world” (or developing countries), and “less developed countries” (LDCs) are often used interchangeably to refer to those parts of the world except for Western Europe, North America (Canada and the United States), Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the former communist “bloc.” During the Cold War era, so-called Third World countries were distinguished from “Second World” countries largely based on political ideology and military power; thus, the Second World comprised the communist or socialist regimes, including the Soviet Union and its satellite states (it is not clear, however, whether other communist states—such as China, Vietnam, North Korea, and others—were included). Today, of course, the former Soviet Union and its erstwhile “satellites” no longer exist. They have been replaced by Russia and a plethora of newly independent states, located primarily in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. For this reason, the concept of the Second World has essentially disappeared (although, even during the Cold War era, the term was rarely used).

So where have these countries gone? Into the Third World, or someplace else? This is not a trivial question, for there is considerable debate over the issue of what terminology to use. For many researchers, the concept of the Third World not only has become an anachronism but was suspect from the very beginning in that it implied inferiority—as did the term “less developed countries.” Instead, many preferred the more neutral term “South.” This term, too, is problematic, given that countries such as Australia and New Zealand are situated in the Southern Hemisphere, whereas most countries of Asia, many countries of Africa, and even some countries of South America are located in the Northern Hemisphere. More recently, others have proposed a whole new set of terms. Advocates of neoliberalism, for example, like the term “emerging markets”; not surprisingly, that term has not been embraced by everyone. One interesting alternative has been proposed by Titus Alexander (1996), who argued that the most appropriate term is “majority world.” This term, noted Alexander, is descriptively accurate but does not imply any degree of homogeneity among the huge number of countries that compose the majority world—an important point considering the “huge social, economic and political differences within and between all countries” (p. ix). Moreover, “majority” world does not contain any connotation of inferiority, backwardness, or subordination.

would now have to treat as relatively independent players in world affairs. Significantly, it was not just any countries and regions that were included: “Japan got favored placement as a success story of development, and China got obsessive attention as a pathological example of abortive development” (Cumings 1997). Latin and South American countries also became important foci of attention for scholars and policymakers (starting in the 1960s), as did South

Korea, Taiwan, and a few other countries that showed “promise.” Much of the research during this time, moreover, was driven by the desire to understand and confront the appeal of and potential challenge posed by communism. In this regard, it is no coincidence that one of the most influential academic books of the 1950s and 1960s was W. W. Rostow’s *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (1960). Although not strictly a work of comparative politics, Rostow’s anticommunist sentiments were shared by the foremost scholars of comparative political development of the time, including the likes of Gabriel Almond, James Coleman, and Lucien Pye (Wiarda 1991, p. 14).

This bit of history, it is important to understand, is still relevant. It tells us, quite clearly, that outwardly objective fields of study are not immune to a host of subjective, generally hidden—but sometimes quite open—social and political forces. (See Figure 1.3 for a contemporary example.) And what is true of the past is almost assuredly true of the present. This means that we al-

Figure 1.3 A Continuing Trend: A Note on the Post-9/11 Period and Comparative Politics

Since 9/11, we have witnessed a resurgence of “academic” interest in Islamic nations and, in particular, in the Islamic Middle East (in the United States, Middle Eastern studies was “invented” in the 1950s [Kramer 2001, p. 5]). This resurgence is manifested in large part through increased federal funding. Since the early 2000s, in particular, Arabic has been designated a “strategic language” by the US government (other strategic languages include Hindi, Mandarin, Persian, Russian, and Urdu), and funding for Arabic language training increased 33 percent between 2001 and 2004 to \$103.7 million. It is worth emphasizing, too, that strategic language grants (which can be as much as \$60,000) are restricted to US citizens: the clear implication is that US citizens are more likely to use their language skills to benefit the security interests of the United States. It is not hard to see, then, that military-strategic interests continue to influence the development of the field, although there has long been a strong tension between those who resist this influence and those who embrace it. Consider, on this point, an article by a prominent Middle East scholar, Martin Kramer. In his article, Kramer criticized other Middle East academics for doing “nothing to prepare America for the encounter with Muslim extremism” and for failing to “contribute anything to America’s defense.” In his view, there was no “justification for an additional penny of support for this [Middle East studies] empire of error” (Kramer 2001).

The key point here is not to say whether Kramer is right or wrong, or to argue that government funding is good or bad. Rather, the key point is that the development of an academic field of study, such as comparative politics, does not take place in a social (political, economic, and cultural) vacuum.

ways need to be careful, and even a little skeptical, of the knowledge that is produced in any context. This does not mean that all of today's scholarship, even more, the scholarship of the 1940s and 1950s, is irredeemably tainted and illegitimate. It is not (although *some* parts may certainly be). Instead, we should never assume it is entirely or even mostly "objective" or free of political, cultural, or social bias.

This said, since the 1960s, the field has continued to change. Definitions of the field, too, have changed. Today, in fact, the definition of comparative politics, except in a very broad or generic sense,⁴ is characterized as much by divergence as by consensus. (For a sampling of current definitions of comparative politics, see Figure 1.4.) This is one reason why the bulk of this chapter is devoted to the question, what is comparative politics? Unless you can

Figure 1.4 A Few Definitions of Comparative Politics

"Comparative politics involves the systematic study and comparison of the world's political systems. It seeks to explain differences between as well as similarities among countries. In contrast to journalistic reporting on a single country, comparative politics is particularly interested in exploring patterns, processes, and regularities among political systems" (Wiarda 2000, p. 7).

"Comparative politics involves both a subject of study—foreign countries—and a method of study—comparison" (Wilson 1996, p. 4).

"What is comparative politics? It is two things, first a world, second a discipline. As a 'world,' comparative politics encompasses political behavior and institutions in all parts of the earth. . . . The 'discipline' of comparative politics is a field of study that desperately tries to keep up with, to encompass, to understand, to explain, and perhaps to influence the fascinating and often riotous world of comparative politics" (Lane 1997, p. 2).

"Comparative politics . . . involves no more and no less than a comparative study of politics—a search for similarities and differences between and among political phenomena, including political institutions (such as legislatures, political parties, or political interest groups), political behavior (such as voting, demonstrating, or reading political pamphlets), or political ideas (such as liberalism, conservatism, or Marxism). Everything that politics studies, comparative politics studies; the latter just undertakes the study with an explicit comparative methodology in mind" (Mahler 2000, p. 3).

"Politics is . . . the struggle in any group for power that will give a person or people the ability to make decisions for the larger groups. . . . [C]omparative politics is a subfield that compares this struggle across countries" (O'Neil 2004, p. 3).

get an adequate grasp of this deceptively simple question, it will be exceedingly difficult to develop a grasp of the field as a whole. Given the lack of consensus, my intention is not to provide *the* definition of comparative politics in this chapter. Instead, my goal is, first, to help you understand the complexities and subtleties of defining the field and, second, to give you a basis for deciding how best to answer the question. One of the best ways to accomplish this is by asking the type of questions I posed above. Next, of course, we need to try to *answer* these questions, which is what we will endeavor to do in the remainder of this chapter.

Why Does Comparative Politics Focus on What Happens *Inside* Countries?

To answer the question upon which this section is based, it is extremely useful to recognize that comparative politics is not the only field in political science that focuses on countries or states as the primary **units of analysis**. Scholars in international relations, as I noted above, are also intimately concerned with countries or, more accurately, states. But, as I also noted, international relations is typically more interested in relations between and among states—that is, with their *interactions* in an international system. Even though this has not precluded IR scholars from looking at what happens inside states or countries, a good deal of research in the field has tended to treat states as undifferentiated wholes, which is to say that IR scholars (especially those associated with the dominant research school in IR, **realism** or **neorealism**) assume that states are *functionally alike* when interacting with other states. This is a critical assumption, largely because it suggests that it is possible to explain the behavior of states or countries *without* a careful examination of their “internal workings.” The reasoning behind this assumption stems from the belief that the international system is **anarchic**, so that each and every state is forced to behave in similar ways regardless of its internal makeup or its domestic politics. The logic here is both simple and compelling: in an anarchic (as opposed to **hierarchical**) system, states must compete with other states for security, power, and influence. They must do so precisely because there is no ultimate rule maker and rule enforcer for the system as a whole. Lacking an ultimate authority, individual states (or actors) are forced to take matters into their own hands, so to speak. Each state must, in other words, do those things that ensure its own long-term survival. This generally means, among other things, building a strong army, developing a network of mutually beneficial military-strategic alliances, maintaining a diplomatic corps, gathering intelligence, and engaging in military conflict when necessary.

In this view, the internal (political) makeup of a country is *relatively* unimportant in terms of explaining or predicting its external behavior. Thus, for ex-

ample, a liberal democracy with a strong **presidential system** (such as the United States) would behave—with regard to its foreign policy decisions—in the same way that a single-party, **communist**-led dictatorship would.⁵ In a similar vein, we would expect a state governed by an Islamic (or Christian) fundamentalist regime, say Iran, to act in essentially the same manner as any other state. A more salient consideration would be the size and military capacity of a country. That is, a large, militarily powerful country would behave differently from a small, militarily weak country. The foregoing discussion, I should stress, is highly simplified and stylized; in addition, it fails to account for wide and significant divergences within IR scholarship.⁶ Nonetheless, it is a useful way to grasp a basic distinction between IR and comparative politics. This is necessary if only because so many people, including some political scientists, are largely oblivious to the differences between the two fields. Yet, for the most part, the two fields have developed along very different lines both theoretically and methodologically (as I will discuss shortly) and have only occasionally intersected in a significant and meaningful manner. This is reason enough to spend a lot of time defining comparative politics, for if we cannot even distinguish it from related fields, how can we reasonably talk about a “comparative politics approach”?

Given the strong focus on external (or interstate) relations in IR, comparative politics has, by default, tended to focus on the internal dynamics of countries. In this respect, we might say that, whereas IR is generally based on an “outside-in” approach, comparative politics is generally based on an “inside-out” approach. The different emphases of the two fields, in turn, have produced (at least in the past) a very clear-cut “division of labor.” Thus, as Zahariadis (1997) pointed out:

Comparative research tends to be geographic in orientation; that is comparativists generally describe themselves either as country specialists or as Europeanists, Africanists, Asianists, and so on. [Ironically, this has led many “comparativists,” in practice, to eschew engaging in comparative research; instead, many have become narrowly, even exclusively, focused on their country of expertise.] In contrast, divisions in international relations are more thematic and involve issues such as international conflict or international political economy that transcend geographic boundaries. (p. 4)

Zahariadis is correct, but his observations do not go far enough. The division of labor between comparative politics and IR has resulted not only in different orientations and research interests but also in a belief that there is a real and fundamental difference between domestic and international politics.

Is It Possible to Understand the Internal Politics of a Place Without Understanding the Impact of External Forces?

All this brings us back to an integrally related issue, one raised earlier in the chapter, namely, is it possible to understand the internal politics of a place

without understanding the impact of external forces? My answer to this question is an unequivocal “no.” This, I think, has been true for a very long time (at least since the beginnings of colonialism in the fifteenth century) but is particularly true today. Processes such as **globalization** in all its various dimensions (a topic that I cover at length in Chapter 9), in particular, have made it nearly impossible to understand the internal dynamics of a country without looking at what happens on the “outside.” In practice, virtually all comparativists clearly recognize this, although there is still a great deal of disagreement over the relative importance of internal versus external factors. Some scholars argue that “external” and, particularly, system-level factors—such as the **structure** of the world economy or particular relationships of **dependence** between poor and rich countries—are extremely and sometimes overwhelmingly important. Others argue that, although such things matter, what matters most are the individual attributes of societies and their states. These individual attributes may derive from particular historical experiences, from culture, from language, from religion, and so on. The debate between these two sides is related to the main theoretical approaches in comparative politics, which we will cover in much more depth in subsequent chapters. For now, suffice it to say that although almost all comparativists recognize the peril of defining the field strictly in terms of what happens inside a country, state, or society, there is no consensus on exactly what this means.

Comparative Politics: The Interplay of Domestic and External Forces

Admitting that comparative politics cannot be limited to looking at what happens inside a country or other large social unit, I should stress, does not mean that we need to completely abandon any distinctions among fields of study, and especially between comparative politics and IR. We do need, however, to amend our definition of comparative politics. Thus, rather than defining comparative politics as a subject of study based on an examination of political phenomena *within* or *in* countries, we can say that comparative politics examines the interplay of domestic and external forces on the politics of a given country, state, or society. This amended definition, unfortunately, still does not tell us if it is legitimate to separate the study of politics from economics, society, culture, and so on. It is to this question that I will turn next.

What Is Politics?

Traditionally (that is, prior to World War II), comparative politics mainly involved *describing* the basic features of political systems. Most research in comparative politics, moreover, operated on the premise that **politics** referred exclusively to the formal political system, that is, to the concrete institutions

of government (such as the parliament, the congress, and the bureaucracy) and to the constitutional and judicial rules that helped governments function. Accordingly, early studies tended to be little more than factual and generally superficial accounts of how particular institutions of government operated and were organized or how certain laws were written and then passed. Such accounts may be useful and even necessary, but they can only tell a small part of what we need to know about politics. Even those political processes and actors closely associated with the formal political system—such as political parties, elections, and foreign and domestic decisionmaking—were left out of these early studies. Politics, in short, was conceived of in very narrow terms.

A Process-Oriented Definition of Politics

This narrowness began to change in the 1950s, when scholars laid a new foundation for the field of comparative politics and for political science more generally. There are several complex reasons for this, some of which I have already discussed (and some of which I will discuss later). For now, I would like to concentrate on how the traditional concern with the formal and legalistic definition of politics was challenged and ultimately cast aside in favor of a broader definition. An influential article by Roy Macridis (whom I mentioned above) and Richard Cox (1953) symbolized this change. The two authors argued that the preoccupation with formal political institutions and judicial rules was too close to the study of law and not close enough to the study of politics, “which [in contrast to the study of law] observed that relations between society and authority were governed by judicial but also by informal rules and sometimes by brute force” (cited in Zahariadis 1997, p. 7). Although Macridis and Cox (along with several other prominent scholars) succeeded in breaking the hold of **formalism/legalism** in comparative politics, they did so only to a limited extent. This was true for two basic reasons. First, although the move away from formalism/legalism opened the door to comparative study of a broader range of political institutions and processes, politics was still defined primarily if not solely in relation to activities that involved the state or the government. Second, the discipline of political science generally and comparative politics specifically remained tied to the idea that “politics”—as a subject of study—could be separated from economics, sociology, history, geography, anthropology, or any other field in the **social sciences** and **humanities**.

The limitations of this latter view become particularly clear, noted Adrian Leftwich (1983), “when one considers concrete problems in modern societies, such as unemployment in the industrial societies on the one hand, and rural poverty in the Third World on the other. The harder you think about these issues, the more difficult it is to identify them as strictly economic, social, or political in their causes or consequences” (p. 4). I agree, which is why in this book we will begin with a definition of politics that is broader than what is offered in many traditional textbooks. This alternative definition, what we might

call a *process-oriented* or *processual* definition (Stoker and Marsh 2002), sees politics as part and parcel of a larger *social process*. In this view, politics “is about the uneven distribution of power in society [or *between* societies], how the struggle over power is conducted, and its impact on the creation and distribution of resources, life chances and well-being” (emphasis added; p. 9). This process-oriented definition makes it difficult if not impossible to maintain firm boundaries between disciplines. To see this, consider, for example, how uneven distributions of power in societies come about in the first place. Are these uneven power distributions the product of history? Or do contemporary economic forces play the determinative role? What about the effects of culture, religion, custom, or even geography? Is it possible to say that one type of factor always predominates, or is there an inextricable interaction among these different forces—be they economic, social, political, cultural, geographic, and so on? The answer to all these questions is, I believe, fairly clear, and boils down to the conclusion that “politics” is integrally and necessarily tied to history, culture, economics, geography, and a variety of other forces. In practice, I think, most comparativists agree with this view of politics, which is why comparative political analysis today tends to be wide-ranging and inclusive.

In addition to transcending disciplinary boundaries, a process-oriented definition of politics has at least two other implications. First, it clearly takes politics out of the governmental arena and puts it into almost all domains of life. These other domains include virtually all social and civil institutions and actors, such as churches, factories, corporations, trade unions, political parties, think tanks, ethnic groups and organizations, women’s groups, organized crime, and so on. Second, a process-oriented definition of politics reinforces our amended definition of comparative politics above (namely, as a field that looks at “the interplay of domestic and external forces on the politics of a given country, state, or society”). For it is clear that politics—as a struggle for power over the creation and distribution of resources, life chances, and well-being—is not something that can be easily compartmentalized into the domestic and international. This is because the activities that determine the distribution and use of resources (at least for the past few hundred years) are rarely confined to a single, clearly defined political territory; thus, as all politics is local (according to one popular saying), all politics is also potentially international and global.

Losing Focus?

There are many political scientists who would disagree with this broad conception of politics. We are already familiar with the basic argument. To repeat: overly broad definitions force us to lose focus; that is, because there are no neat boundaries telling us what is and what is not included in the scope of the definition, we are studying both everything and nothing. Zahariadis (1997), for

example, would like us to differentiate politics from “corporate decisions”; the latter, he asserted, “affect only a specific corporation” (p. 2). Certainly, there are myriad decisions made within a corporation (or within a family, factory, church, or other social institution) with a very limited public or societal impact; yet, it is also true that a vast number of “private” decisions have a clear and sometimes profound public dimension. By their very nature, in fact, many corporate decisions have a deep influence on how resources are obtained, used, produced, and distributed. Moreover, in an era of “mega-corporations”—where the largest firms are bigger, and often immensely bigger, than many countries in terms of command over economic resources—the suggestion that corporate decisions do not have a far-reaching public impact is difficult to maintain. Consider, in this regard, Wal-Mart. In the 2008 fiscal year, Wal-Mart’s total sales (domestic plus international) amounted to \$374.5 billion (*Wal-Mart 2008 Annual Report*), which was more than three times bigger than New Zealand’s **gross domestic product** (GDP) of \$115.7 billion (2008 estimate), in terms of **purchasing power parity** (PPP), and vastly more than the GDP of most of the world’s smaller countries. Haiti’s GDP, to cite just one example, was a paltry \$11.5 billion in 2008, or about 3.1 percent of Wal-Mart’s total sales. (See Figure 1.5 for additional details.) It is not hard to assert that Wal-Mart’s decisions, in general, have a much greater political impact than decisions made in Haiti. Where, then, do we draw the line between public and private decisions? Is it even possible to do so? I would argue that the line, in some respects, has simply become too blurred to be of major significance today.

At the same time, it would be a mistake for politics to be defined as “everything-including-the-kitchen-sink.” Indeed, as I discuss in subsequent chapters (and as I suggested earlier), it is often necessary to provide clear-cut, precise definitions. This is especially true when trying to develop an argument or when trying to support a specific hypothesis or claim. After all, if you cannot precisely or adequately define what it is you are studying—say “democracy” or “terrorism”—how can you possibly claim to say anything meaningful about that subject? In defining an entire field of study, precision is less important, but not irrelevant. The trick, then, is to develop a definition that is neither too narrow nor too unfocused. One solution, albeit a pragmatic one, is to acknowledge that the politics about which comparativists (and other political scientists) are most concerned, according to Stoker and Marsh (2002), (1) is primarily *collective* as opposed to interpersonal and (2) involves interaction *within* the public arena—that is, in the government or state—or *between* the public arena and social actors or institutions (p. 10). No doubt, this qualification will still be unsatisfactory to many political scientists, but it is also one upon which a large number of comparativists have chosen to base their research and analysis.

With all this in mind, let us now turn to the other major aspect of comparative politics, namely, comparing. To begin this discussion, let me pose a simple question: what does it mean to compare?

Figure 1.5 Wal-Mart vs. the World (2008 estimates)

The table below provides some simple (maybe simplistic) comparisons of Wal-Mart (one of the world’s largest companies in terms of sales) and a few selected countries. Traditional definitions of politics suggest that countries, no matter how small, have greater relevance to “politics” than corporate actors. These figures, although hardly definitive, suggest otherwise.

	Wal-Mart	Saudi Arabia	New Zealand	Haiti
Employees/ population	1.4 million	28.7 million	4.2 million	9.0 million
Sales/GDP-PPP (in billions US\$)	\$374.5 ^a	\$593.4	\$115.7	\$11.5
Per capita sales/ GDP (in US\$)	\$267,500	\$23,834	\$27,060	\$1,316
Growth rate (3-year average, 2006–2008)	10.03%	3.6%	1.75%	2.6%
International sales/ exports (in billions US\$)	\$90.6 ^b	\$311.1	\$29.5	\$0.49
Imports (in billions US\$)	N/A	\$92.4	\$31.1	\$2.1

Sources: Figures for Wal-Mart are all based on the 2008 fiscal year (“Wal-Mart 2008 Annual Report,” <http://walmartstores.com/sites/AnnualReport/2008/>). GDP-PPP figures for Saudi Arabia, New Zealand, and Haiti are from the International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Database* (April 2009), www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2009/01/weodata/index.aspx. All other data are from the *CIA World Factbook*, www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook.

Notes: GDP = gross domestic product; PPP = purchasing power parity; N/A = figures not available.

a. Includes sales from Sam’s Club and Wal-Mart International. Sales for Wal-Mart only were \$239.5 billion.

b. Figure is included in total sales.

What Does It Mean to Compare? What Is a Comparativist?

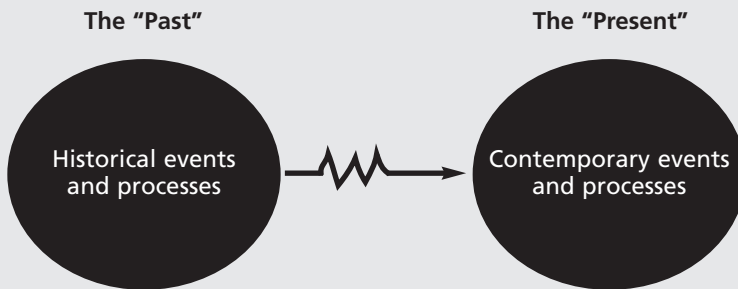
In thinking about what it means to compare, let’s first consider what one researcher has to say: “Thinking without comparison is unthinkable. And, in the absence of comparison, so is all scientific thought and scientific research” (Swanson 1971, p. 141; cited in Ragin 1987, p. 1). This scholar is telling us that in *all* social sciences, researchers, scholars, and students are invariably engaged in making some sort of comparison. If this is so (and it is fair to say that it is), then there is very little that sets comparative politics apart—on the surface, at least—from other fields of study. This is to say that the comparative

strategies used by “comparativists” are not, *in principle*, different from the comparative strategies used by other political scientists or by sociologists, economists, and so on. But it does not mean that no differences exist: arguably, one practice that sets comparative politics apart from other fields is the explicit and direct focus on the comparative method—as opposed to simply “comparing.”⁷

The comparative method, as I will discuss in detail in the following chapter, is a distinctive mode of comparative analysis. According to Ragin (1987), it entails two main predispositions. First, it involves a bias toward (although certainly not an exclusive focus on) **qualitative analysis**, which means that comparativists tend to look at *cases as wholes* and to compare whole cases with each other. Thus the tendency for comparativists is to talk of comparing Germany to Japan or the United States to Canada. This may not seem to be an important point, but it has significant implications, one of which is that comparativists tend to eschew—or at least, put less priority on—**quantitative analysis**, also known as **statistical** or **variable-centered analysis** (Ragin 1987, pp. 2–3). In the social sciences, especially over the past few years, this orientation away from quantitative and toward qualitative analysis definitely sets comparativists apart from other social scientists. Even within comparative politics, however, this is beginning to change. The second predisposition among comparativists is to value *interpretation* and *context* (pp. 2–3). This means, in part, that comparativists (of all theoretical orientations, I might add) begin with the assumption that “history matters.” Saying that history matters, I should caution, is much more than pointing out a few significant historical events or figures in an analysis; instead, it involves showing exactly how historical processes and practices, as well as long-established institutional arrangements, impact and shape the *contemporary* environment in which decisions are made, events unfold, and struggles for power occur. It means, in other words, demonstrating a meaningful continuity between the past and the present. This is not easy to do, but for a comparativist using “history,” it is often an essential task. (See Figure 1.6.)

Although understanding the predisposition of comparativists is important, this still doesn’t tell us what it means to compare—a question that may seem easy to answer, but in fact is not. Just pointing out or describing differences and similarities between any two countries, for example, is not by any account the be-all and end-all of comparative analysis. Indeed, if you stay strictly at the level of superficial description—for example, China has a **Confucian** heritage, whereas the United States does not; both France and Russia experienced **social revolutions**—you will never genuinely engage in comparative *analysis*, no matter how accurate your observations may be. And you’re even less likely to tell your audience anything meaningful or insightful about political phenomena. Comparing, then, involves much more than making observations about two or more entities. Just what else is involved in comparative analysis is the topic of our next chapter, so I will reserve the re-

Figure 1.6 The Importance of History



Good historical analysis must show how past events and processes connect with and shape contemporary events and processes. Just “talking about” history is never enough.

remainder of my discussion on this topic until then. In the meantime, we need to address another basic and essential question: why compare?

Why Compare?

To be good comparativists, we need to know *why* we compare. In other words, what is the purpose of comparing? On this question, Giovanni Sartori (1994) offered us a very simple answer, namely, we compare to **control**. By control, Sartori means to say—albeit in a very loose way—that we use comparisons as a way to check (verify or falsify) whether our claims or assertions about certain phenomena are valid by controlling for, or holding constant, certain variables. Take the statements “poverty causes corruption” or, conversely, “corruption causes poverty”; “authoritarianism is more conducive to high levels of economic growth than democracy”; and “social revolutions are caused by relative deprivation.” How do we know, Sartori asked, whether any of these statements is true, false, or something else? “We know,” Sartori answered, “by looking around, that is, by *comparative checking*” (emphasis added; p. 16). It is important to understand that, in most comparative analyses, actual **control variables** are not used. This issue may not be very clear right now and, for our purposes, is not critical. The main point is this: different types of comparisons allow a researcher to treat a wide variety of similarities or differences as if they are control variables. In so doing, the researcher can safely eliminate a whole range of potentially significant factors and, instead, concentrate on those variables he deems most important.

Unfortunately, comparative checking usually cannot (indeed, can almost never) provide definitive answers. This is true, in part, because comparative checking is an imperfect mode of analysis, at least when comparing real-world cases. It is also true, in more substantive terms, because comparison—although one method of control—is not the best. There are much better methods of control, such as the **experimental method** and statistical control. “But,” as Sartori also noted, “the experimental method has limited applicability in the social sciences, and the statistical one requires many cases” (1994, p. 16), something that research in comparative politics generally lacks (this is referred to as the **small-N** problem). Like it or not, therefore, comparison often represents only a “second-best” method of control in the social sciences and comparative politics.

Despite its second-best status, comparing to control is an undeniably important purpose of comparative analysis. Yet many comparativists, especially those with a strong predisposition toward qualitative and historical analysis, are not always, or even mostly, involved in “testing” hypotheses through their comparisons (Ragin 1987, p. 11). Instead, as Ragin noted, “[many comparativists] . . . *apply* theory to cases in order to interpret them” (emphasis in original; p. 11). We will see examples of this in subsequent chapters, but what Ragin meant, in part, is that comparativists recognize that countries or other types of macrosocial units all, in important ways, have a unique story to tell. Ragin suggested, therefore, that some researchers are often most interested in using comparative analysis to get a better grasp of these individual “stories,” rather than primarily using them as a way to verify or falsify specific arguments. In other words, for these researchers, in-depth **understanding** is the goal of comparative analysis. Comparing to understand, to put it in slightly different terms, means that researchers use comparison to see what other cases can tell them about the specific case or country in which they have the most interest.

In a similar vein, some comparativists assume that the sheer complexity of real-world cases makes control a worthwhile but difficult, if not impossible, goal to achieve. Instead, they advocate a more pragmatic approach that attempts to build theoretical generalization—or **explanation**—through an accumulation of case-based knowledge (this is sometimes referred to as **analytical induction**). In this view, it is understood that no case, by itself, or no comparison of a small number of cases is sufficient to test a theory or general claim. This is largely because the overwhelming complexity of any given case makes any test problematic and highly contingent. Instead, each case or each small-N comparison provides comparativists another piece (albeit often a very complicated piece in and of itself) to work into a much larger puzzle. I will come back to this issue—and specifically the issue of **complex causality**—below.

Even though the foregoing discussion may be a little confusing, the key point is simply that, although researchers use comparisons for different rea-

sons, doing comparative politics requires that you be aware of *your* reason and rationale for making a comparison. Figure 1.7 provides a summary of the three general purposes of comparing.

Figure 1.7 Three Purposes of Comparing: A Summary

	General Purpose		
	Comparing to <i>Control</i>	Comparing to <i>Understand</i>	Comparing to <i>Explain</i>
Basic strategy or purpose	Comparative checking	Interpretation	Analytical induction
Logic or approach to comparative analysis	Researcher uses a range of cases as a way to “test” (verify or falsify) a specific claim, hypothesis, or theory.	Researcher is primarily interested in a single case and uses different cases or general theories as a way to learn more about the case he/she is studying.	Researcher uses cases as a way to build a stronger theoretical explanation. Cases are used in a “step-by-step” manner, with each case contributing to the development of a general theory.
Basic example	(1) Begin with a claim: “A high level of gun ownership will lead to a high level of gun-related homicide.” (2) “Test” the claim: Researcher examines a range of countries in order to “control for” gun ownership; if countries with the highest rates of gun ownership have low rates of gun-related homicides (and vice versa), the claim is falsified and must be rejected.	(1) Begin with a case (and issue): The high level of homicides in South Africa. (2) Use existing theories and/or other cases to better understand case: Researcher uses a range of theories on gun violence to better understand why South Africa is the most violent country in the world. Researcher also uses other cases to see what those cases can tell her about South Africa.	(1) Begin with a general theory: “Structural theory of democratization.” (2) Use various cases to strengthen the theory: Researcher begins by looking at the democratization process in Mexico. This examination may lead researcher to “tweak” or revise elements of theory; he then looks at Taiwan, Poland, and Ukraine. Each case is used as a stepping-stone in developing or strengthening original theory.

What Is Comparable?

Another important question about comparing involves the issue of exactly what one can compare. What, to put it simply, is *comparable*? Again, the answer may seem obvious at first blush (especially in the context of comparative politics). For instance, it certainly seems reasonable to assert that countries, governments, societies, or similar entities are comparable. Yet, why should this be the case? What makes “countries” (or other units of analysis) comparable? One easy answer to this question is simply that all countries share at least some common attributes—for example, they all occupy a territory defined by political boundaries, they all represent the interests of a political community, they are all recognized (albeit not always “officially” as in the case of Taiwan) by other countries or states, and so on. At the same time, they each differ in some meaningful way. Indeed, differences are crucially important in any type of comparative analysis. After all, if all countries were exactly alike, there would be no reason to compare, because what we say about one case would necessarily be the same in any other case. In this respect, we might say that comparing apples to oranges generally makes more sense than comparing oranges to oranges or apples to apples.

Thus, to determine what we can compare, we can begin by saying that we can compare “entities whose attributes are in part shared (similar) and in part non-shared (and thus, we say, incomparable)” (Sartori 1994, p. 17). Saying this, however, still doesn’t tell us all we need to know. Is it appropriate, for instance, to compare the United States, Côte d’Ivoire, Japan, Indonesia, Guinea-Bissau, and New Zealand? Well, the answer is, *it depends*. That is, it depends on what the researcher is hoping to accomplish, and it depends on the particular research design the researcher plans to use. This is an obvious point; still, it is one worth making because when phrased as a question—“on what does our comparison depend?”—it forces us to think more carefully about the design of our analyses. It forces us, as well, to *justify* the comparisons we ultimately end up making.

Comparing Cases

What we can compare, I should stress, is definitely not limited to countries (more on this in Chapter 2). Nor is it necessarily limited to comparable data from *two or more* countries. Such a restriction, for example, would automatically exclude comparatively oriented but single-country (or single-unit) **case studies**, including such classic comparative studies as Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* ([1835] 1998) and Emile Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* ([1915] 1961) (both cited in Ragin [1987, p. 4]). As Ragin explained it, “Many area specialists [i.e., researchers who concen-

trate on a single country] are thoroughly comparative because they implicitly compare their chosen case to their own country or to an imaginary or theoretically decisive ideal-typic case” (p. 4). Others, including Sartori, would disagree, or at least would be quite skeptical of the claim that single-country case studies can be genuinely comparative. Sartori wrote, for example, “It is often held that comparisons can be ‘implicit.’ . . . I certainly grant that a scholar *can be* implicitly comparative without comparing, that is, provided that his one-country or one-unit study *is* embedded in a comparative context and that his concepts, his analytic tools, are *comparable*. But how often is this really the case?” (emphasis in original; 1994, p. 15).⁸ Sartori made a good point, but so too did Ragin. My own view is that single-case studies can be genuinely comparative if the researcher is clear about the “comparative context.” But, this is far less difficult than Sartori implies. (I will return to a discussion of this point in the following chapter.)

The Importance of Logic

We are not going to resolve the debate here. Suffice it to say, then, that doing comparative analysis requires far more than just looking at a “foreign country” or just randomly or arbitrarily picking two or more countries to study in the context of a single paper or study. It is, instead, based on a general “logic” and on particular strategies that guide (but do not necessarily) determine the comparative choices we make. Understanding the logic of comparative analysis, in fact, is essential to doing comparative politics. Needless to say, this will be an important topic of discussion in Chapter 2. To conclude our general discussion of comparing for now, however, it would be useful to consider some of the advantages of the comparative method (a number of disadvantages are discussed in Chapter 2).

What Are the Advantages of the Comparative Method?

Earlier I noted that comparativists tend to look at *cases as wholes* and to compare whole cases with each other. There are important advantages to this practice, the first and most important of which, perhaps, is that it enables researchers to deal with **complex causality** (or **causal complexity**). At one level, complex causality is an easy-to-grasp concept. After all, there is little doubt that much of what happens in the “real world” is an amalgam of economic, cultural, institutional, political, social, and even psychological processes and forces. Not only do all these processes and forces exist independently (at least to some extent), but they *interact* in complicated, difficult-

to-discern, and sometimes unpredictable (or contingent) ways. Thus, in studying a particular phenomenon—say, political violence—it is likely that several or even dozens of factors are at play. Some factors may be primarily “economic,” such as poverty, unemployment, and unequal income distribution. Other factors may be “cultural” (for example, specific religious values and practices, community norms, etc.), “political” (for example, lack of democracy or a skewed distribution of political power, which itself could be based on religious or ethnic differences), “socioeconomic” (for example, strong class-based divisions), and so on. An adequate understanding of political violence may have to take all these factors into account and will likely have to specify their interrelationship and interaction within certain contexts. Ragin (1987) provided a very useful, three-point summary of complex causality:

First, rarely does an outcome of interest to social scientists have a single cause. The conditions conducive for strikes, for example, are many; there is no single condition that is universally capable of causing a strike. Second, causes rarely operate in isolation. Usually, it is *the combined effect* of various conditions, their intersection in time and space, that produces a certain outcome. Thus, social causation is often both multiple and conjectural, involving different combinations of causal conditions. Third, a specific cause may have opposite effects *depending on context*. For example, changes in living conditions may increase or decrease the probability of strikes, depending on other social and political conditions. . . . The fact that some conditions have contradictory effects depending on context further complicates the identification of empirical regularities because it may appear that a condition is irrelevant when in fact it is an essential part of several causal combinations in both its presence and absence state. (emphasis added; p. 27)

The point to remember is that other methods of inquiry (such as the experimental method and statistical analysis) cannot, in general, adequately deal with complex causality. Comparative (case-oriented) analysis, by contrast, is especially—perhaps uniquely—suited for dealing with the peculiar complexity of social phenomena (Rueschemeyer 1991). Why? Quite simply because comparative analysis, to repeat a point made above, can and often does deal with cases *as a whole*—meaning that a full range of factors can be considered at once within particular historical contexts (which themselves vary over time). This is especially apparent with regard to “deviant” or anomalous cases. Comparative analysis can help explain why, for example, some relatively poor countries—such as India, Mauritania, and Costa Rica—are democratic, when statistically based studies would predict just the opposite.⁹ To account for such anomalous cases (as many comparativists might argue), we need to look very closely at the particular configuration of social, cultural, and political forces in these individual countries and understand how, from a historical perspective, these configurations emerged and developed. We also

By Way of a Conclusion: Method and Theory in Comparative Politics

The metaphor of the black box is instructive, but we should be careful not to take it too far, for comparative analysis is more than just opening up the black box and analyzing its contents. It also involves—as might already be apparent from my discussion of the two types of comparative research strategies—a process of a priori conceptualization. At the most basic level, this simply means that the selection of cases to investigate should not be purely random or arbitrary but should be guided by certain criteria, some of which derive from the particular research design we choose. Yet before we even get to the research design, important choices have to be made regarding the factors (or variables) we consider significant in the first place. These choices are guided by **theory**. In Chapter 3, I talk much more about theory. For now, then, let me highlight one general point: theory has a bad reputation among students. Part of the blame, I think, falls on professors who do not help students understand why theory is not only important but is something none of us can do without (whether in an academic discipline or in everyday life). As I will make clear, we all theorize about the world, all the time. Yet just because we all theorize does not mean we all do it equally well—this is especially true for those of you who operate on the assumption that theories have nothing to do with the “real world,” or that one can explain or understand anything simply by appealing to the “facts.” One way to rectify this problem is to simply become more self-conscious and explicit about theory/theorizing; this has the added benefit, I might add, of helping you become a more disciplined, critical, and analytic thinker. Thinking theoretically about comparative politics, in this regard, has value well beyond the confines of this particular subfield. The same can be said about thinking comparatively, which is the topic of our next chapter.

To sum up, *doing comparative politics* requires, minimally, a clear-eyed understanding of what comparative politics is, of what it means to compare, and of the importance and necessity of theory. There is, of course, more to doing comparative politics than just these three requirements, but they constitute an essential foundation upon which everything else will stand.

Questions

1. How do we know if an argument—especially one that deals with complex social, political, or economic phenomena—is valid or even plausible? How does knowledge of comparative politics help us answer this question?
2. Consider the early development of comparative politics in the United States. How was the field defined or understood by scholars in the United

States? What were the problems that characterized the early development of comparative politics as a field of study?

3. Why did the scope and definition of comparative politics change after World War II? Did these changes lead to a “better” or more objective definition of comparative politics?

4. What are the differences between international relations and comparative politics as fields of study? Why is it important to be aware of and understand these differences?

5. What does it mean to say that international relations, in general, has adopted an “outside-in” approach, while comparative politics, in general, has adopted an “inside-out” approach? Is one approach better than the other?

6. What definition of comparative politics is recommended in the chapter? How does it differ from other definitions of the field?

7. What are the key implications of a process-oriented definition of politics in terms of (1) *whom* we see as significant actors; (2) *what* we consider to be a political issue; and (3) *where* we understand politics to occur?

8. Does the economic size of a corporation such as Wal-Mart make it a significant “political” actor? Do the decisions made and implemented by Wal-Mart have important political consequences and implications?

9. What are the three goals of comparing? How do these goals differ in terms of doing comparative analysis?

10. Are “apples and oranges” comparable? More generally, are units of analysis that appear quite different from one another—say, Haiti and Japan—comparable? Or, is it *only* permissible to compare units that are essentially similar to one another?

11. What are the key advantages of the comparative method?

12. What is the “black box of explanation” and how does it relate to comparative analysis?

Notes

1. Terms that appear in boldface type are defined in the Glossary (see p. 311).

2. This seems an obvious point about which most scholars would agree. Yet the distinction between American and comparative politics still exists in the United States. There are, of course, plenty of reasons for this, one of which is that it is “natural” for people to see their own country or society as separate and distinct from other places. Nonetheless, there is no solid justification for the distinction. As Sigelman and Gadbois (1983) nicely put it, “the traditional distinction between American and comparative politics is . . . intellectually indefensible. . . . Comparison presupposes multiple objects of analysis . . . one compares something to or with something else” (cited in Sartori 1994, p. 14).

3. For an interesting discussion of the relationship between US government support and the development of area studies (specifically in relation to Asia) in the United States, see Selden (1997).

4. Most researchers in the field, I should emphasize, can probably agree on a basic, but very general, definition of comparative politics (such as the ones listed in Figure 1.4). There is far less agreement, however, on how the field should be constituted in terms of a particular theoretical or even methodological approach. In a wide-ranging discussion on the role of theory in comparative politics, for example, some of the leading names in comparative politics and comparative analysis fail to achieve a consensus on what is or should be the theoretical core of the field (see Kohli et al. 1995).

5. I should note, however, that there has never been unanimous agreement on this point. Indeed, one of the main areas of controversy in international relations theory today revolves around the “democratic peace thesis” (Doyle 1995). The crux of this argument is that liberal (or democratic) states do not go to war with other liberal states. In essence, advocates of the democratic peace thesis argue that there is something unique about the *internal* constitution of liberal states that changes their behavior in relation to other liberal states.

6. For obvious reasons, I cannot provide a detailed and nuanced discussion of international relations theory here. Fortunately, there are a number of very good introductory texts that do just this. See, for example, *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations* (2008), edited by John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens. Chapters 5 through 10 in that book cover both mainstream and alternative theories in some depth and detail. Another useful textbook is Jill Steans and Lloyd Pettiford’s *International Relations: Perspectives and Themes* (2001).

7. Despite the fact that the field is defined in terms of a particular method—that is, comparison—there are many scholars in the field of comparative politics who, according to Giovanni Sartori, “have no interest, no notion, no training, in comparing” (1994, p. 15). The reason, I might note, may have more to do with the ethnocentric way the field has been defined than with the scholars themselves. To understand this point, consider the fact that comparative politics (in the United States) has been defined, most simplistically, as “studying other countries.” Thus, as Sartori put it, “a scholar who studies only American presidents is an Americanist, whereas a scholar who studies only French presidents is not” (Sartori 1994, p. 14). The US-based scholar who decides to study only France, in other words, is only classified as a comparativist by dint of his or her interest in a country other than the United States.

8. Later, Sartori (1994) stated his case more strongly. “I must insist,” he contended, “that as a ‘one-case’ investigation the case study cannot be subsumed under the comparative *method* (though it may have comparative merit)” (p. 23).

9. Costa Rican democracy, especially, has been an issue of special interest to comparativists, since it constitutes, according to Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens (1992), “the real exception to the pattern [of authoritarianism] prevailing in Central America” (p. 234).

10. Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens (1992) made a very strong argument on this point. They noted that, although cross-national statistical work has shown an undeniable and very strong link (correlation) between capitalist development and democracy, this correlation, by itself (and no matter how many times it is replicated), “does not carry its own explanation.” “It does not,” they continued, “identify the causal sequences accounting for the persistent relation, not to mention the reason why many cases are at odds with it. Nor can it account for how the same end can be reached by different historical routes. The repeated statistical finding has a peculiar ‘black box’ character that can be overcome only by theoretically well grounded empirical analysis” (p. 4).