

Comparative Politics Made Simple

by Jean-Germain Gros
University of Missouri-St. Louis

Making Comparisons Explicit

Most people are subliminal comparativists; others make comparisons their vocation. If you made a decision this morning concerning what to eat, what to wear, and how you should get to work or school, chances are you did so by considering alternatives and choosing the one, for whatever reason, that "made sense." (Milk and cereal or eggs and toast? Jeans and T-shirt or suit? Scenic country road or freeway?) You engage in this listing of and picking among alternatives every day, sometimes consciously but more often than not, I suspect, less so. Some decisions you make quickly; others you insist on taking your time, usually to think through the consequences of each option, before choosing the one that is "best" (that is, the one that is likely to meet your goal with the least possible averse consequences and costs).

Decision making is usually the end point of comparison making. In other words, to decide is to compare, and most of us decide (and therefore compare) all the time.

Comparative politics is about classifying, comparing, and sometimes even choosing, except that the "things" that are of interest to comparative politics specialists are the really big ones: states, societies, ideologies, political systems, countries, regions, time periods, worlds, and so on. At its most basic, then, comparative politics is a **method of study** (by comparison) and a **field of study** (of macrosocial and political phenomena). Comparativists are interested in these phenomena not their own sake (that's the job of area studies specialists, who tend to stress the uniqueness, and therefore noncomparability, of their subject matter) but rather for the purpose of drawing attention to similarities and differences -- especially the latter, of understanding why things are the way they are in one locale but not another -- and of comparing and evaluating realities (for example, public policies).

Looking at Specific Country Examples

To take but one example among many: A comparativist observes that the United States' health-care system is funded mainly by private sources, while the United Kingdom's system is funded by government (through an organization called the National Health Service, or NHS). She further notices that in the UK health care is guaranteed to all, while in the United States more than 40 million citizens do without. But she also notes that those Americans with health insurance have an easier time receiving certain medical procedures (kidney dialysis and transplants, triple-bypass heart surgeries) than their counterparts across the Atlantic. All of the aforementioned differences between the U.S. and UK health-care systems are, in and of themselves, interesting, but you probably want to know more, such as why the two countries' health-care systems are different, and which one is "better."

Our comparativist is like you. Her inquiring mind wants to know, so she investigates. In her probe, she is not likely to confine herself to health care in the United States and the UK (her dependent variable, if I may be technical); she will focus on other issues that she thinks might have "caused" health-care systems between the two countries to be so different. These factors (independent variables) would likely include U.S. and UK history, geography, demography, economy, political institutions, interest groups, and citizen attitude toward government and the private sector.

She spends hours reading about many possible factors: the insular history of the United States and the empire-making history of the UK (which favored the formation of a healthy army and civil servants who could be dispatched around the world); the virtual absence of socialist ideology in the mainstream of American politics and the existence of Fabian socialist ideology in the UK; the division of policy making between separate, if not to say competing, branches of government in the United States and the fusion of executive and parliamentary powers in the UK (which makes for less contention in policy making and implementation); and, above all, her own survey, which indicates that Britons "trust" government more than Americans. Our comparativist may now feel that she "knows" why Americans and Britons have different health-care systems. She may conclude that, although the health-care system differences that exist between the United States and the UK have many "causes," one seems to be stronger than all the others: Britons trust government more than Americans. (In some studies comparativists are able to measure, together and separately, the effects of each independent variable, or cause, on the dependent variable, the effect. Even when they cannot do this, they can make plausible arguments about causes and effects.)

What has our comparativist done thus far, and how? First, she observes a "problem" or "case." Second, she investigates its cause(s). In the process, she reads extensively about not only the health-care systems in the two countries but also their history, political systems, and so forth. The knowledge gained is supplied by **secondary sources** (for example, books, journal articles, newspapers, and the Internet). To find out about public attitude toward government and the private sector, the comparativist decides to do a survey. Information supplied by this survey may be said to have come from **primary sources**. The comparativist therefore uses two types of sources to gather facts, or, if I may, information. From these facts, which she has analyzed meticulously, the comparativist makes a case as to why health-care systems in the United States and the UK are different. But she may go even further than that, based on what she has learned from her study. She may conclude that, given the evidence, one country has a "better" health-care system than the other. Here, however, she would be expressing a preference; her research would thus have a **normative** (or value-based) dimension, not just a **positive** (value-neutral or empirical) one. Furthermore, she may develop a **theory**, which is a general statement intended to explain or account for a given phenomenon, about health-care systems that goes this way: Citizen trust in government is the reason why countries have government-funded health-care systems.

National and Global Contexts

The words above in bold are at the heart of comparative politics. The United States and the UK are countries, or, in comparative politics language, **nation-states**. A nation-state is a large group of people who share (a) the characteristics of history, language,

religion, ethnicity, race, political and economic values, and so forth, (b) occupy the same (usually contiguous) territory, and (c) have a government that they recognize as "theirs" and that makes laws and regulations and is expected to defend them in case of an attack by another government. Few countries neatly fit this definition. The United States, for example, has many ethnic groups and religions. Perhaps a better concept than nation-state is a national state, by which a large group of people living under one authority (or state) have come together to forge a common, or national, identity, regardless of other things that may separate them. Nation-states are usually the **units of analysis** in comparative research, but comparativists can focus on almost anything. A unit of analysis is the main object or actor in an argument, hypothesis, or theoretical framework. It is to be distinguished from the **levels of analysis**, which are the primary analytical focus of the researcher, which in our example would be American and British health-care systems or policies.

Nevertheless, comparativists almost never ignore certain macrosocial factors, even when they are not their primary focus of study. These would include **the economy**, which is whatever arrangement people make to produce and trade the goods and services that they think they need to survive, or otherwise make money; **the state**, which is the centralized authority that rules over a territory thanks to its monopolistic ownership of force (armies, police, militias, and so forth); **political institutions**, which are the means by which state power is organized; **ideology**, which is a worldview by which people make sense of reality and, at the same time, serves as a guide for them to do what is "right"; **culture**, which is the purported collective experience, characteristics, and orientation of a large group of people (if you think that ideology and culture are closely related, you're right, but they are not the same; ideology is a cognitive road map usually produced by elites [intellectuals no less], and culture is how people actually live); **civil society**, which refers to nonstate organizations that people voluntarily join, usually to defend their interests against the state or express themselves peacefully and nonpolitically (think of political parties, labor unions, your church, and Boy and Girl Scouts); and, finally, the **international environment**, which refers to actors external to the typical units of analysis (nation-states) of comparativists.

The international environment is composed of other nation-states or countries, **multinational, government-sanctioned institutions**, which are institutions created by many nation-states to address matters of common concern, for example, the United Nations; **multinational, privately owned corporations**, which are profit-seeking business organizations that operate in more than one country, for example, Wal-Mart; and **international nongovernmental organizations** (INGOs), which are non-profit-seeking organizations that operate on a charity basis and deliver services to the poor and needy across countries, for example, Doctors Without Borders. INGOS also serve as advocates, when they do not provide services (for example, Amnesty International).

You can pick almost any book on comparative politics and you will find at least a mention of the concepts defined above. Sometimes one is the focus of comparison in a two-country study, as when comparativists study political parties in the United States and Italy; sometimes they are bundled with others in a multicountry study, as when comparativists study democracy and economic development all over the world. The relative weight of specific concepts as explanatory variables in the analysis of comparativists largely determines the "school" to which they may be said to belong.

Schools of Analysis

Three of the most prominent schools in comparative politics in the past 50 years have been **political economy, modernization theory, and dependency theory**. They are chosen here only to give you an idea of the sharply different perspectives that exist in comparative politics. The political economy approach emphasizes, as its name suggests, the nexus between economy and politics. A classic case is Robert Bates' *States and Markets in Tropical Africa: The Political Basis of Agricultural Policy* (University of California Press, 1981), in which the author examines how state economic policy in Africa, especially in agriculture, undermines development, and why policy continues in light of failure. Political economy, in turn, is composed of subschools, among them rational choice theory, which attempts to use (neoclassical) economic reasoning to explain collective decisions.

Like political economy, modernization theory focuses on domestic forces, but its concern is more about how certain cultural aspects that retard development may be overcome. Modernization theory generally divides society between a "modern" sector and a "backward" sector. The challenge of development is how to overcome the latter. In addition, modernization theory tends to emphasize culture rather than the political economy, which it sees as a dependent variable to be acted upon. Still, the units of analysis in both schools are nation-states, and their levels of analysis, although different, are internal to the units.¹

The same cannot be said of dependency theory, for which the global system, not nation-states, is the focus of analysis. In dependency theory, poverty is due to neither so-called backward culture nor deleterious state actions in the political economy but rather the global system itself, in which a relatively small number of "core" countries specialize in high-value-added manufactured goods, while a large number of "peripheral" countries specialize in primary commodity production. Thus poverty in dependency theory stems from the position countries occupy in the international division of labor or system.

To conclude, comparative politics is about serious issues: war and peace, democracy and authoritarianism, market-based and state-based economies, prosperity and poverty, health-care coverage for all and health-care coverage for some, and so on. However, its *raison d'être* is quite simple: the world is diverse, not monolithic. Furthermore, the world is getting smaller, literally and figuratively. Given the tremendous diversity that exists on our planet, and the fact that no one country is "better" than all the others on every count, there is always room for learning. Furthermore, knowledge is a *sine qua non* (precondition) for success in an interdependent - that is, less isolated, more interconnected, and therefore "smaller" -- world. How can we relate to the Chinese if we know nothing about China, its institutions, culture, and history? The job of the comparativist researcher is to make comparisons less subliminal and random and more deliberate and systematic, especially in the things that are critical to human life.

Notes

1. I am simplifying somewhat here. Allowance should be made for international political economy, which emphasizes the role of external forces in the politics of countries. Also, modernization theory stresses the demonstration effect that "modern" countries have on their nonmodern cousins.