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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Data from the Quality of Government Data Bank, [www.qog.pol.gu.se](http://www.qog.pol.gu.se).

<sup>2</sup> The graded measure of democracy is a combination of the average scores of political rights and civil liberties, reported by Freedom House, and the combined autocracy and democracy scores, derived from the Polity IV data set. It has been constructed by Axel Hadenius and Jan Teorell and, as they show, this index goes from 0–10 and performs better, both in terms

of validity and reliability, than its constituents parts. Hadenius, A., and J. Teorell (2005) 'Cultural and economic prerequisites of democracy: Reassessing recent evidence', *Studies in Comparative International Development* 39(4): 87–106.

<sup>3</sup> Reuters World Edition, 19 December 2013 at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-worldbank-corruption-idUSBRE9B11P20131219>.

## CHAPTER 2

# Approaches in comparative politics

B. Guy Peters

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### Reader's guide

Theories and approaches are crucial in guiding research and the awareness of what specific perspectives imply is important to make sense of scientific results. The chapter discusses five main approaches in comparative politics that represent important contributions (the five 'I's): old and new institutional analysis, interests and actors' strategies to pursue them through political action, ideas (**political culture** and **social capital**), individuals, and the influence of the international environment. The role of 'interaction' is also stressed. The chapter concludes by discussing the importance of looking at political processes as well as of defining what the 'dependent variables' are.

## Introduction

The political world is complex, involving a range of institutions, actors, and ideas that interact continuously to provide **governance** for society. The complexity of politics and government is compounded when we attempt to understand several different political systems, and to compare how these systems function. As comparative politics has moved beyond simple descriptions of individual countries or a few institutions, scholars have required substantial guidance to sort through the huge amount of evidence available, and to focus on the most relevant information. Thus, we need alternative approaches to politics, and particularly to develop approaches that are useful across a range of political systems.

Political theories are the source of these approaches to comparison. At the broadest level, there is the difference between positivist and constructivist approaches to politics (see Box 2.1). At less general levels a number of different theories enable comparative political scientists to impose some analytical meanings on the political phenomena being observed, and to relate that evidence to more comprehensive understandings of politics. This chapter will first discuss some general questions about using theory in comparative political analysis, and then discuss alternative approaches to politics. Each approach discussed provides some important information about politics, but few (if any) are sufficient to capture the underlying complexity. Therefore the chapter will also discuss using multiple approaches and assess the ways in which the approaches mentioned interact for more complex explanations.



### BOX 2.1 FOR AND AGAINST Positivism and constructivism

Most of contemporary political science, and comparative politics, is founded on positivist assumptions. The most basic assumption of positivism is a fact value distinction, implying that there are real facts that are observable and verifiable in the same way by different individuals. Further, it is assumed that social phenomena can be studied in much the same way as phenomena in the natural sciences, through quantitative measurement, hypothesis testing, and theory formation. For example, the study of political attitudes across political cultures (beginning with work such as *The Civic Culture* (Almond and Verba 1963) and extending to contemporary work such as Shore 2013) has assumed that there are dimensions of individual political thought that can be measured and understood through surveys and rigorous statistical analysis.

Constructivism, on the other hand, does not assume such a wide gulf between facts and values, and considers facts to be socially embedded and socially *constructed* (see Finnemore and Sikkink 2001). Thus, the individual researcher cannot stand outside political phenomena as an objective observer, but rather to some extent imposes his/her own social and

### KEY POINTS

- Given the high complexity of political systems and the wide range of variation between them across the world, it is important to develop approaches that are useful across them all and not simply in single countries.
- Political theories are the main source of such approaches—the division between positivism and **constructivism** being the more general distinction.

## Uses of theory in comparison

Although there is an important interaction between theory and **empirical research** in all areas of the discipline, that interaction is especially important in comparative politics. Even with an increasing amount of statistical research in political science, a still significant amount of case research, and a limited amount of experimental research, comparison remains the fundamental laboratory for political science.<sup>1</sup> Without the capacity to compare across political systems, it is almost impossible to understand the scientific importance of findings made in a single country (see Lee 2007), even one as large as the US.<sup>2</sup>

Without empirical political theory, effective research might be impossible, or it certainly would be less interesting. Some questions that are almost purely empirical can and should be researched. It is interesting to know variations in cabinet sizes in European countries, for example, but if the scientific study of politics is to progress,

cultural understandings on the observed phenomena. While most positivist research assumes that the individual is the source of social action (methodological individualism), constructivism asserts the importance of collective understandings and values, so that phenomena may not be understood readily in the absence of context. Rather than relying on **variables** to define the objects of research, constructive approaches focus more on dimensions such as scripts or discourses to promote understanding.

Each of these approaches to comparative politics can make major contributions to understanding. The use of the variable-oriented research associated with positivism has added greatly to the comparative understanding of individual-level behaviour, as well as to the understanding of political parties and other mass-based organizations. On the other hand, much of the analysis of formal political institutions and processes of governing still relies on methods that, if not explicitly constructivist, do share many of the assumptions concerning collective understandings and the importance of ideas (see Bevir and Rhodes 2010).

research needs to be related to theory. The information on the size of cabinets can, for example, be related to the capacity of those cabinets to make decisions through understanding the number of 'veto players' in the system (Tsebelis 2002).

Therefore, comparative political theory is the source of questions and puzzles for researchers. For example, once we understand the concept of **consociationalism**, why is it that some societies have been able to implement this form of conflict resolution and others have not, even with relatively similar social divisions (see Lijphart 1996; Bogaards 2000)? And why have some countries in Africa been successful in implementing elite pacts after civil conflicts (a strategy like consociationalism, involving agreements among elites to govern even in the face of significant ethnic divisions) while other have not (LeVan 2011)? Likewise, political systems that appear relatively similar along a number of dimensions may have very different experiences maintaining effective coalition governments (Müller and Strøm 2000). Why? We may have theories that help explain how cabinets are formed in **parliamentary systems** and why they persist, but the anomalies in and exceptions to these theories are crucial for elaborating the models and enhancing our understanding of parliamentary democracy as an institution.

One crucial function of theory in comparative politics is to link micro- and macro-behaviour. Much of contemporary political theory functions at the micro-level, attempting to understand individual choice. The most obvious example is rational choice, which assumes utility maximization by individuals and uses that assumption about individuals to interpret and explain political phenomena.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, cognitive political psychology is central in contemporary political science (Winter 2013). However, in both cases the individual behaviours are channelled through institutions. Further, there is some reciprocal influence as institutions shape the behaviour of individuals and individuals shape institutions. For example, the institution of the presidency in the US was different after the personal indiscretions of Bill Clinton, and different again after the rather passive style of President Obama.

The link between the micro and the macro is crucial for comparative politics, given that one primary concern is explaining the behaviour of political systems and institutions rather than individuals. Variations in individual behaviour and the influence of cultural and social factors on that behaviour are important, but the logic of comparison is primarily about larger structures, and thinking about how individuals interact within parliaments, parties, or bureaucracies. Indeed, one could argue that if a researcher went too far down the individualist route, comparison would become irrelevant and all the researcher would care about would be the individual's behaviour. This problem is perhaps especially relevant for rational choice approaches that tend to posit relatively common motivations for individuals (but see Bates *et al.* 2002).

Theory is at once the best friend and the worst enemy of the comparative researcher. On the one hand, theory is necessary for interpreting findings, as well as providing questions that motivate new research. Without political theory, research would simply be a collection of useful information and, although the information would be interesting, it would not advance the analytical understanding of politics. Further, theory provides scholars with the puzzles to be solved, or at least addressed, through comparative research. Theory predicts certain behaviours, and if individuals or organizations do not behave in that manner we need to probe more deeply. We should never underestimate the role that simple empirical observation can play in setting puzzles, but theory is a powerful source for ideas that add to the comparative storehouse of knowledge.

As important as theory is for interpreting findings and structuring initial research questions, theory is also a set of blinders for the researcher. After choosing our theoretical approach and developing a **research design** based on that theory, most people find it all too easy to find support for that approach. This tendency to find support for a theory is not necessarily the result of dishonesty or poor scholarship, but generally reflects a sincere commitment by the researcher to the approach and a consequent difficulty in identifying any disconfirming evidence. Most research published in political science tends to find support for the theory or model being investigated, although in many ways negative findings would be more useful.<sup>4</sup>

The difficulties in disconfirming theories is in part a function of the probabilistic methods most commonly used in political science research. More deterministic methods, including case-based methods such as process-tracing (Beach and Pedersen 2015), tend to dismiss possible causes for variation in the presumed dependent variable, while probabilistic methods tend to demonstrate varying degrees of contribution to explanation. The use of Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA, see Rihoux and Ragin 2009) also can dismiss certain combinations of variables as viable explanations for the outcomes in which we are interested, thus enabling us to reduce the wide range of viable explanations.

Given the tendency to find support for theories, comparative research could be improved by greater use of **triangulation**.<sup>5</sup> If we explore the same data with several alternative theories, or go into the field with alternative approaches in mind, we become more open to findings that do not confirm one or another approach. Likewise, if we could collect several forms of data—substantiating the findings of **quantitative** research with those from **qualitative** methods—then we could have a better idea whether the findings were valid.<sup>6</sup> This type of research can be expensive, involves a range of skills that many researchers may not possess, and may result in findings that are inconclusive and perhaps confusing.



## BOX 2.2 DEFINITION Major approaches to comparative politics

### Structural functionalism

The purpose of this approach was to identify the necessary activities (functions) of all political systems and then to compare the manner in which these functions were performed. As it was elaborated, it had developmental assumptions about the manner in which governing could best be performed that were closely related to the Western democratic model.

### Systems theory

This approach considered the structures of the public sector as an open system that had extensive input (supports and demands) and output (policies) interaction with its environment.

### Marxism

Class conflict is an interest-based explanation of differences among political systems. While offering some empirical predictions about those differences, Marxist analysis also posits a developmental pattern that would lead through revolution to a 'dictatorship of the proletariat'.

### Corporatism

This approach stresses the central role of state and society interactions in governing, and especially the legitimate role of social interests in influencing policy. Even in societies such as Japan or the US which have not met the criteria of being

corporate states, the identification of the criteria provides a means of understanding politics.

### Institutionalism

Although there are several approaches to **institutionalism**, they all focus on the central role of structures in shaping politics and also in shaping individual behaviour. As well as formal institutional patterns, institutions may be defined in terms of their rules and their routines, and thus emphasize their normative structure.

### Governance

As an approach to comparative politics governance has some similarities to structural functional analysis. It argues that certain tasks must be performed in order to govern a society and then posits that these tasks can be accomplished in a number of ways. In particular, scholars of governance are interested in the variety of roles that social actors may play in the process of making and implementing decisions.

### Comparative political economy

Comparative political economy is the analysis of how political factors affect economic policy choices. The primary focus has been on how institutions of representation influence policy choices, but political executives and bureaucracies also exert some influences.

When we discuss comparative political theory, we have to differentiate between *grand theories* and *middle-range theories*, or even analytical perspectives. At one stage of the development of comparative politics the emphasis was on all-encompassing theories such as structural functionalism (Almond and Powell 1966) and systems theory (Easton 1965b) (see Box 2.2). These theories became popular as comparative politics had to confront newly independent countries in Africa and Asia, and find ways of including these countries in the same models as industrialized democracies. Those grand theories fulfilled their purpose of expanding the geographical concerns, as well as including less formal actors in the political process, but it became evident that by explaining everything they actually explained nothing. The functions of the political system and their internal dynamics discussed were so general that they could not produce meaningful predictions. Since that time there has been a tendency to rely more on mid-range theories and analysis, although contemporary governance theories have some of the generality of functional theories. The principal exception to that generalization is the development of governance as an approach to comparative politics (Peters and Pierre 2016), emphasizing the need to perform certain key functions to be able to govern any society.

Finally, as we attempt to develop theory using multiple approaches, we need to be cognizant of their linkages with methodologies, and the possibilities for both qualitative and quantitative evidence. Comparative politics is both an area of inquiry and a method that emphasizes case selection as much as statistical controls to attempt to test its theories. Each approach discussed below has been linked with particular ways of collecting data, and we must be careful about what evidence is used to support an approach, and what evidence is being excluded from the analysis.

### KEY POINTS

- Theory is necessary to guide empirical research in comparative politics. It is also necessary to interpret the findings. It provides the puzzles and the questions that motivate new research.
- Without theory, comparative politics would be a mere collection of information. There would be no analytical perspective attempting to answer important questions. However, theories and approaches should never become blinders for the researcher. Ideally, we should investigate the same question from different angles.

- An important distinction concerns grand theories and middle-range theories. With the **behavioural revolution** there was a great emphasis on all-encompassing theories. At present, there is a tendency to develop 'grounded theories' or middle-range theories that apply to more specific geographical, political, and historical contexts.

## Alternative perspectives: the five 'I's

### Institutions

The roots of comparative political analysis are in institutional analysis. As far back as Aristotle, scholars interested in understanding government performance, and seeking to improve that performance, concentrated on constitutional structures and the institutions created by those constitutions. Scholars documented differences in constitutions, laws, and formal structures of government, and assumed that if those structures were understood, the actual performance of governments could be predicted. Somewhat later, scholars in political sociology also began to examine political parties as organizations, or institutions, and to understand them in those terms (Michels 1915).

The behavioural revolution in political science, followed by the increasing interest in rational choice, shifted the **paradigm** in a more individualistic direction. The governing assumption, often referred to as *methodological individualism*, became that individual choices, rather than institutional constraints, produced observed differences in governments. It was difficult to avoid the obvious existence of institutions such as legislatures, but the rules of those organizations were less important, it was argued, than the nature of the individual legislators. Further, it was argued that decisions emerging from institutions were to a great extent the product of members' preferences, and those preferences were exogenous to the institutions.

While other areas of political science became almost totally absorbed with individual behaviour, comparative politics remained more true to its institutional roots. Even though some conceptualizations of behaviour within institutions were shaped by individualistic assumptions, understanding structures is still crucial for comparative politics. With the return to greater concern with institutions in political science, the central role of institutions in comparative politics has at once been strengthened and made more analytical.

The 'new institutionalism' in political science (Peters 2011) now provides an alternative paradigm for comparative politics. In fact, contemporary institutional

theory provides at least four alternative conceptions of institutions, all having relevance for comparative analysis. **Normative institutionalism**, associated with James March and Johan P. Olsen, conceptualizes institutions as composed of norms and rules that shape individual behaviour. Rational choice institutionalism, on the other hand, sees institutions as aggregations of incentives and disincentives that influence individual choice. Individuals would pursue their own self-interest utilizing the incentives provided by the institution. **Historical institutionalism** focuses on the role of ideas and the persistence of institutional choices over long periods of time, even in the face of potential dysfunctionality. Each approach to institutions provides a view of how individuals and structures interact in producing collective choices for society. And some *empirical institutionalism*, to some extent continuing older versions of institutionalism, asks the fundamental question of whether differences in institutions make any difference (Weaver and Rockman 1993; Przeworski 2004).

Thus, merely saying that institutional analysis is crucial for comparative politics is insufficient. We need to specify how institutions are conceptualized, and what sort of analytical role they play. At one level the concept of institutions appears formal, and not so different from some traditional thinking. That said, however, contemporary work on formal structures does examine their impact more empirically and conceptually than the traditional work did. Also, the range of institutions covered has expanded to include elements such as electoral laws and their effects on **party systems** and electoral outcomes (Taagapera and Shugart 1989).

Take, for example, studies of the difference between presidential and parliamentary institutions. This difference is as old as the formation of the first truly democratic political systems, but has taken on new life. First, the conceptualization of the terms has been strengthened for both parliamentary and presidential (Elgie 1999) systems, and the concept of **divided government** provides a general means of understanding how executives and legislatures interact in governing.<sup>7</sup> Further, scholars have become more interested in understanding the effects of constitutional choice on presidential or parliamentary institutions. Some scholars (Linz 1990a; Colomer and Negretto 2005) have been concerned with the effects of presidential institutions on political stability, especially in less-developed political systems. Others (Weaver and Rockman 1993) have been concerned with the effects of presidential and parliamentary institutions on policy choices and public sector performance.

The distinction between presidential and parliamentary regimes is one of the most important institutional variables in comparative politics, but other institutional variables are also useful for comparison, such as the distinction between federal and **unitary states** (and among types of federalism (Schain and Menon 2007)). Further,

we can conceptualize the mechanisms by which social actors such as interest groups interact with the public sector in institutional terms (Peters 2011: Chapter 5). The extensive literature on **corporatism** (see Molina 2007) has demonstrated the consequences of the structure of those interactions. Likewise, the more recent literature on networks in governance also demonstrates the structural interactions of public and private sector actors (Sørensen and Torfing 2007).

The preceding discussion concentrated on rather familiar institutional forms and their influence on government performance, but the development of institutional theory in political science has also focused greater attention on the centrality of institutions. Of the forms of institutional theory in political science, historical institutionalism has had perhaps the greatest influence in comparative politics. The basic argument of historical institutionalism is that initial choices shape policies and institutional attributes of structures in the public sector (Steinmo *et al.* 1992). For example, differences made in the initial choices about **welfare state** policies have persisted for decades and continue to resist change (Pierson 2001*b*). In addition to the observation about the persistence of programmes—usually referred to as **path dependence**—historical institutionalism has begun to develop theory about the political logic of that persistence (see Peters *et al.* 2005).

Institutional theory has been important for comparative politics, and for political science generally, but tends to be better at explaining persistence than explaining change (but see Mahoney and Thelen 2010). For some aspects of comparative politics we may be content with understanding static differences among systems, but dynamic elements are also important. As political systems change, especially democratizing and transitional regimes, political theory needs to provide an understanding of this as well as predicting change. While some efforts are being made to add more dynamic elements to institutional analysis—for example, the ‘actor-centered institutionalism’ of Fritz Scharpf (1997*c*)—institutional explanations remain somewhat constrained by the dominance of stability in the approach.

Historical institutionalism also can be related to important ideas about political change such as ‘critical junctures’ (Collier and Collier 1991; Capocchia and Keleman 2007), and the need to understand significant punctuations in the equilibrium that characterizes most institutionalist perspectives on governing (see also True *et al.* 2007). In this approach change occurs through significant interruptions of the existing order, rather than through more incremental transformations. Much the same has been true of most models of transformation in **democratization** and transition, albeit with a strong concern about consolidation of the transformations (Berg-Schlosser 2008). This view contrasts with the familiar idea of incremental change that has tended to dominate much of political science.

## Interests

A second approach to explaining politics in comparative perspective is to consider the interests that actors pursue through political action. Some years ago Harold Lasswell (1936) argued that politics is about ‘who gets what’, and that central concern with the capacity of politics to distribute and redistribute benefits remains. In political theory, interest-based explanations have become more prominent, with the domination of rational choice explanations in much of the discipline (Lustick 1997; for a critique see Green and Shapiro 1994). At its most basic, rational choice theory assumes that individuals are self-interested utility maximizers and engage in political action to receive benefits (usually material benefits) or to avoid costs (see Box 2.3). Thus, individual behaviour is assumed to be motivated by self-interest, and collective behaviour is the *aggregation of the individual behaviours* through bargaining, formal institutions, or conflict.

Rational choice theory provides a set of strong assumptions about behaviour, but less deterministic uses of the idea of interests can produce more useful comparative results. In particular, the ways in which societal interests are represented to the public sector and affect policy choices are crucial components of comparative analysis. The concept of corporatism was central to comparative analysis in the 1970s and 1980s (Schmitter 1974, 1989). The close linkage between social interests and the state that existed in many European and Latin American corporatist societies provided an important comparison for the pluralist systems of the Anglo-American countries, and produced a huge literature on the consequences of patterns of interest intermediation for policy choices and political legitimacy.

The argument of corporatism was that many political systems legitimated the role of interest groups and provided those groups with direct access to public decision-making. In particular, labour and management were given the right to participate in making economic policy, but in return had to be reliable partners, with their membership accepting the agreements (e.g. not striking). These institutionalized arrangements enabled many European and some Latin American countries to manage their economies with less conflict than in pluralist systems such as the United Kingdom.

The interest in corporatism also spawned a number of alternative means of conceptualizing both corporatism itself and the role of interests. For example, Stein Rokkan (1966) described the Scandinavian countries, especially Norway, as being ‘corporate pluralist’, with the tightly defined participation of most corporatist arrangements extended to a wide range of actors. Other scholars have discussed ‘meso-corporatism’ and ‘micro-corporatism’, and have attempted to apply the concept of corporatism to countries where it is perhaps inappropriate (Siaroff 1999).



### BOX 2.3 ZOOM-IN Rational choice and comparative politics

Rational choice models have made significant contributions to the study of politics and government. By employing a set of simplifying assumptions, such as utility maximization and full information, rational choice models have enabled scholars to construct explanatory and predictive models with greater precision than would be possible without those assumptions. For example, if we assume that individuals act rationally to enhance their own self-interest, then we can understand how they will act when they have the position of a ‘veto player’ in a political process (Tsebelis 2002). Likewise, if we assume that voters engage in utility maximization, then their choice of candidates becomes more predictable than in other models that depend more on a mixture of sociological and psychological factors (e.g. partisan identification).

By positing these common motivations for behaviour, however, rational choice adds less to comparative politics

than to other parts of the discipline of political science. Comparative politics tends to be more concerned with differences among political systems and their members than with similarities. Comparative politics, as a method of inquiry (Lijphart 1971) rather than a subject matter, relies on selecting cases based on their characteristics and then determining the impact of a small number of differences on observed behaviours. However, if everyone is behaving in the same way, important factors in comparative politics such as political culture, individual leadership, and ideologies become irrelevant. Differences in institutions remain important, or perhaps even more important, in comparison because their structures can be analysed through veto points or formal rules that create incentives and disincentives for behaviours.

The institutionalized pattern of linkage between social interests and the state implied in corporatism has been eroding and is being replaced by more loosely defined relationships such as networks (Sørensen and Torfing 2007). The shift in thinking about interest intermediation to some degree reflects a real shift in these patterns, and also represents changes in academic theorizing. As the limits of the corporatist model became apparent, the concept of networks has had significant appeal to scholars. This idea is that surrounding almost all policy areas there is a constellation of groups and actors seeking to influence that policy, who are increasingly connected formally to one another and to policy-making institutions. The tendency of this approach has been to modify the self-interested assumption somewhat in favour of a mixture of individual (group) and collective (network or society) interests.

Network theory has been developed with different levels of claims about the importance of the networks in contemporary governance. At one end, some scholars have argued that governments are no longer capable of effective governance and that self-organizing networks now provide governance (Rhodes 1997; for a less extreme view see Kooiman 2003). For other scholars, networks are forms of interest involvement in governing, with formal institutions retaining the capacity to make effective decisions about governance. Further, the extent of democratic claims about networks varies among authors, with some arguing that these are fundamental extensions of democratic opportunities, and others concerned that their openness is exaggerated and that networks may become simply another form of exclusion for the less well-organized elements in society.

Although we tend to think of interests almost entirely in material terms, there are other important interests as well. Increasingly, individuals and social groups define

their interests in terms of identity and ethnicity, and seek to have those interests accommodated within the political system along with their material demands.<sup>8</sup> This concern with the accommodation of socially defined interests can be seen in the literature on consociationalism (Lijphart 1968*a*). Consociationalism is a mode of governing in which political elites representing different communities coalesce around the need to govern, even in the face of intense social divisions. For example, this concept was devised originally to explain how religious groups in the Netherlands were able to coalesce and govern despite deep historical divisions.

Like corporatism, consociationalism has been extended to apply to a wide range of political systems, including Belgium, Canada, Malaysia, Colombia, and India, but has largely been rejected as a solution for the problems of Northern Ireland and Iraq. The concept is interesting for comparative political analysis, but, like corporatism, may reflect only one variation of a more common issue. Almost all societies have some forms of internal **cleavage** (Posner 2004) and find different means of coping with those cleavages. In addition to strictly consociational solutions, elite pacts (Higley and Gunther 1992; Collins 2006) have become another means of coping with difference and with the need to govern. The capacity to form these pacts has been crucial in resolving conflicts in some African countries, and presents hoped-for solutions for some conflicts in the Middle East (Hinnebusch 2006).

Comparative political economy represents another approach to comparative politics that relies largely on interest-based explanations. Governments are major economic actors and their policies influence the economic success of business, labour, and other groups in society. The dynamics of the political economy have gained

special importance after the economic crisis beginning in 2008 and the increases in economic inequality that have followed. Therefore, there are significant political pressures to choose policies that favour those various groups in the economy (Przeworski 2004; Hall 1997). Much of this literature focuses on the role of representation and representative institutions, but the public bureaucracy also plays a significant role in shaping those policies.

Approaches to comparative politics built on the basis of interest tend to assume that those interests are a basis for conflict, and that institutions must be devised to manage that conflict. Politics is inherently conflictual, as different interests vie for a larger share of the resources available to government, but conflict can go only so far if the political system is to remain viable. Thus, while interests may provide some of the driving force for change, institutions are required to focus that political energy in mechanisms for making and implementing policy. And, further, ideas can also be used to generate greater unity among populations that may be divided along ethnic or economic dimensions.

## Ideas

Although ideas are amorphous and seemingly not closely connected to the choices made by government, they can have some independent effect on outcomes. That said, the mechanisms through which ideas exert that influence must be specified and their independent effect on choices must be identified (Beland and Cox 2011). In particular, we need to understand the consequences of mass culture, political ideologies, and specific ideas about policy. All these versions of ideas are significant, but each functions differently within the political process.

At the most general possible level, political culture influences politics, but that influence is often extremely vague. Political culture can be the residual explanation in comparative politics—when everything else fails to explain observed behaviours, then it must be political culture (Elkins and Simeon 1979). Therefore the real issue in comparative analysis is to identify means of specifying those influences from culture, and other ideas, with greater accuracy. As comparative politics, along with political science in general, has moved away from behavioural explanations and interpretative understandings of politics, there has been less analytical emphasis on understanding political culture and this important element of political analysis has been devalued.<sup>9</sup>

How can we measure political culture and link this somewhat amorphous concept to other aspects of governing? The most common means of measuring the concept has been surveys asking the mass public how they think about politics. For example, in a classic of political science research, *The Civic Culture* (Almond and Verba 1963; Saretta 2013), the public in five countries were asked about their attitudes towards politics, and particularly their attitudes to political participation. More

recent examples of this approach to measurement include Ronald Inglehart's (1997) numerous studies using the World Values Survey, as well as studies that explore values in public and private organizations (Hofstede 2001).

Of course, before surveys for measuring political culture can be devised, scholars must have some ideas about the dimensions that should be measured. Therefore conceptual development must go along with, or precede, measurement. Lucien Pye (1968) provided one interesting attempt at defining the dimensions of comparative political culture. He discussed culture as the tension between opposite values such as *hierarchy and equality*, *liberty and coercion*, *loyalty and commitment*, and *trust and distrust*. Although these dimensions of culture are expressed as dichotomies, political systems tend to have complex mixtures of these attributes that need to be understood to grasp how politics is interpreted within that society.

The anthropologist Mary Douglas (1978) (see also Table 2.1) provided another set of dimensions for understanding political culture that continues to be used extensively (Hood 2000). She has discussed culture in terms of the concepts of *grid* and *group*, both of which describe how individuals are constrained by their society and its culture. Grid is analogous to the dimension of hierarchy in Pye's framework, while group reflects constraints derived from membership in social groups. As shown in Table 2.1, bringing together these two dimensions creates four cultural patterns that are argued to influence government performance and the lives of individuals. These patterns are perhaps rather vague, but they do provide means of approaching the complexities of political culture.

The trust and distrust dimension mentioned by Pye can be related to the explosion of the literature on social capital and the impact of trust on politics. The concept of social capital was initially developed in sociology (Coleman 1990), but gained greater prominence with Robert Putnam's research on Italy and the US (Putnam 1993, 2000). This concept was measured through surveys as well as through less obtrusive measures. What is perhaps most significant in the social capital literature is that the cultural elements are linked directly with political behaviour, of both individuals and systems (Hetherington and Husser 2014).

As well as the general ideas contained in political culture, political ideas also are important in the form of

**Table 2.1** Patterns of political culture

Grid	Group	
	High	Low
High	Fatalist	Hierarchical
Low	Egalitarian	Individualist

Source: Douglas (1978).

*ideologies*. In the twentieth century, politics in a number of countries was shaped by ideologies such as communism and fascism. Towards the end of the last century and into the current one, an ideology of **neoliberalism** came to dominate economic policy in the industrialized democracies and was diffused through less-developed systems by donor organizations such as the World Bank. Within the developing world, ideologies about development, such as Pancasila in Indonesia, reflect the important role of ideas in government, and a number of developing countries continue to use socialist ideologies to justify interventionist states.

Although ideologies have been important in comparative politics, there has been a continuing discussion of the decline, or end, of ideology in political life. First, with the acceptance of the mixed economy welfare state in most industrialized democracies, the argument was that the debate over the role of the state was over (Bell 1965). More recently, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a similar argument was made concerning the exhaustion of political ideas and the end of political conflicts based on ideas (Fukuyama 1992). However, this presumed end of the role of ideas could be contrasted with the increased importance of conservative ideologies and the increased significance of religion as a source of political conflicts.

A final way in which ideas influence outcomes in comparative politics is through specific policy ideas. For example, while at one time economic performance was considered largely uncontrollable, after the intellectual revolution in the 1930s governments had tools for that control (Hall 1989). Keynesian economic management dominated for almost half a century, but then was supplanted by monetarism and, to a lesser extent, by supply-side economics. Likewise, different versions of the welfare state, for example the Bismarckian model of continental Europe and the Beveridge model in the United Kingdom (see Esping-Andersen 1990), have been supported by a number of ideas about the appropriate ways in which to provide social support.

In summary, ideas do matter in politics, even though their effects may be subtle. This subtlety is especially evident for political culture, but tracing the impact of ideas is in general difficult. Even for policy ideas that appear closely related to policy choices, it may be difficult to trace how the ideas are adopted and implemented (Braun and Busch 1999). Further, policy-learning (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993) and the social construction of agendas and political frames can shape behaviour (see Baumgartner and Jones 2015).

## Individuals

I have already discussed the methodological individualism that has become central to political theory. Although I was arguing that an excessive concern with individual behaviour, especially when based on an assumption that

individual motivations are largely similar, may make understanding differences among political systems more difficult, it is still impossible to discount the importance of individuals when understanding how politics and government work. The importance of political biography and political diaries as sources of understanding is but one of many indications of how important individual-level explanations can be in understanding governing.

Many individual-level explanations are naturally focused on political elites and their role in the political process. One of the more interesting, and perhaps most suspect, ways of understanding elite behaviour is through personality. There have been a number of psychological studies, usually done from secondary sources, of major political figures (Freud and Bullitt 1967; Berman 2006). Most of these studies have focused on pathological elements of personality, and have tended to be less than flattering to the elites. Less psychological studies of leaders, e.g. James David Barber's typology of presidential styles (Barber 1992; see also Simonton 1993), have also helped to illuminate the role of individual leaders (see Table 2.2). Barber classifies political leaders in terms of their positive or negative orientations towards politics and their levels of activity, and uses the emerging types to understand how these individuals have behaved in office.

A more sociological approach to political leaders has stressed the importance of background and recruitment, with the assumption that the social roots of leaders will explain their behaviour. Putnam (1976) remarked several decades ago that this hypothesis was plausible, but unproven, and that assessment remains largely true. Despite the absence of strong links there is an extensive body of research using this approach. The largest is the research on 'representative bureaucracy' and the question of whether public bureaucracies are characteristic of the societies they administer, and whether this makes any difference (Meier and Bohte 2001; Peters *et al.* 2015). While the representativeness of the bureaucracy is usually discussed at the higher, 'decision-making' levels, it may actually be more crucial where 'street level bureaucrats' meet citizens.

The ordinary citizen should not be excluded when considering individuals in comparative politics. The

**Table 2.2** Styles of political leaders

Orientation to politics	Activity	
	Active	Passive
Positive	Bill Clinton	George H. W. Bush
	Tony Blair	Jim Callaghan
Negative	Richard Nixon	Calvin Coolidge
	Margaret Thatcher	John Major

Source: Based on Barber (1992). The role of political elites can also be seen in studies of political leadership (Helms 2013).

citizen as voter, participant in interest groups, or merely as the consumer of political media plays a significant role in democratic politics, and less obviously in non-democratic systems. The huge body of literature on cross-national voting behaviour has generated insights about comparative political behaviour. Further, the survey-based evidence on political culture already mentioned uses individual-level data to make some (tentative) statements about the system level.

In those portions of political science that deal with government activities the role of the individual has become more apparent. Citizens are consumers of public services, and the **New Public Management** has placed individual citizens at the centre of public sector activity (see Chapter 8). This central role is true for the style of management now being pursued in the public sector. It is also true for a range of instruments that have been developed to involve the public in the programmes that serve them, and also for a range of instruments designed to hold public programmes accountable.

## International environment

Much of the discussion of comparative politics is based on analysing individual countries, or components of countries. This approach remains valuable and important. That said, it is increasingly evident that individual countries are functioning in a globalized environment and it is difficult, if not impossible, to understand any one system in isolation. To some extent the shifts in national patterns are mimetic, with one system copying patterns in another that appear effective and efficient (see DiMaggio and Powell 1991; see also Chapter 24). In other cases the shifts may be coercive, as when the European Union has established political as well as economic criteria for membership.

International influences on individual countries, although ubiquitous, also vary across countries. Some, such as the US or Japan, have sufficient economic resources and lack direct attachments to strong **supra-national** political organizations, and hence maintain much of their exceptionalism. Poorer countries lack economic autonomy and their economic dependence may produce political dependence as well, so their political systems may be influenced by other nations and by international organizations such as the World Bank and the United Nations.

The countries of the European Union present a particularly interesting challenge for comparative politics. While most of these countries have long histories as independent states, and have distinct political systems and political styles, their membership of the Union has created substantial convergence and homogenization. The growing literature on Europeanization (Knill 2001; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005; see also Chapter 23) has attempted to understand these changing patterns of national politics in Europe and the increasingly

common patterns of governance. This is not to say that British parliamentary democracy and the presidentialism of Poland will merge entirely, but there is reciprocal influence and some difficulties in sorting out sources of change.

The case of the European Union also points out the extent to which interactions among all levels of government are important for shaping behaviours in any one level. The concept of 'multilevel governance' has been popular for analysing policy-making in the European Union (Hooghe and Marks 2001; Bache and Flinders 2004). For individuals coming from federal regimes this interaction is a rather familiar feature of governing, and in many cases the sub-national governments have been the principal policy and political innovators. For many European countries, however, multilevel governance is a more distinctive phenomenon that links both **internationalization** and the increasing political power of sub-national governments to the national government.

The interaction among countries, and across levels of government, raises an analytical question. When we observe a particular political pattern in a country, is that pattern a product of indigenous forces and national patterns, or is it a product of diffusion? The so-called 'Galton problem' has been present for as long as there have been comparative studies, but its importance has increased as interactions have increased, and as the power of international organizations has increased (Seeliger 1996). Unfortunately, we may never really be able to differentiate all the various influences on any set of observed patterns in the public sector, despite the numerous solutions that have been proposed to the problem (Braun and Gilardi 2006).

While diffusion among countries can be conceived as an analytical problem for social sciences, it can be a boon for governments and citizens. If we conceptualize the international environment as a laboratory of innovations in both political action and policy, then learning from innovations in other settings becomes a valuable source for improving governing. A number of governments have attempted to institutionalize these practices through evidence-based policy-making.

## Add a sixth 'I': interactions

Up to this point I have been dealing with five possible types of explanation independently. That strategy is useful as a beginning and for clarifying our thoughts about the issue in question, but it vastly understates the complexity of the real world of politics. In reality these five sources of explanation interact with one another, so that to understand decisions made in the political process we need to have a broader and more comprehensive understanding. Given that much of contemporary political science is phrased in terms of testing hypotheses derived from specific theories, this search for complexity may

not be welcomed by some scholars, but it does reflect political realities.

Let me provide some examples. Institutions are a powerful source of explanations and are generally our first choice for those explanations. However, institutions do not act—the individuals within them act, and so we need to understand how institutions and individuals interact in making decisions. Some individuals who may be very successful in some political settings would not be in others. Margaret Thatcher was a successful prime minister in the majoritarian British system, but her directive leadership style might have been totally unsuccessful in consensual Scandinavian countries, or even perhaps Westminster systems such as Canada that also have a consensual style of policy-making. And these interactions can also vary across time, with a bargainer such as Lyndon Johnson being likely to have been unsuccessful in the more partisan Congresses of the early twenty-first century.

These interactions between individual political leaders and their institutions raise a more theoretical concern for contemporary comparative politics. Although there is still a significant institutional emphasis in comparative politics, much of contemporary political theory is based on the behaviour of individuals. Therefore, a major challenge for building better theory for comparison is linking the micro-level behaviour of individuals with the macro-level behaviour of institutions. The tendency to attribute relatively common motivations for individuals to some extent simplifies this issue, but in so doing may oversimplify the complexity of the interactions (Anderson 2009).

Another example of interaction among possible explanations can occur between the international environment and institutions. Many of the states in Asia and Latin America have adopted a 'developmental state' model to cope with their relatively weak position in the international marketplace and to use the power of the state for fundamental economic change (Evans 1995; Minns 2006). On the other hand, the more affluent states of Europe and North America have opted for a more liberal approach to economic growth—a model that better fits their position in the international political economy.

The literature on **social movements** provides a clear case for the interaction of multiple streams of explanation (see Chapter 16). On the one hand, social movements can be conceptualized as institutions, albeit ones with relatively low levels of institutionalization. These organizations can also be understood as reflecting an ideological basis, and as public manifestations of ideas such as environmentalism and women's rights. Finally, some social movements reflect underlying social and economic interests, although again in somewhat different ways than would conventional interest groups. Again, by using all these approaches to triangulate these organizations, the researcher gains a more complete understanding of the phenomenon.

Multiple streams of explanation and their interaction help to emphasize the point made at the outset of this chapter. The quality of research in comparative politics can be enhanced by the use of multiple theories and multiple methodologies when examining the same 'dependent variable'. Any single analytical approach provides a partial picture of the phenomenon in question, but only through a more extensive array of theory and evidence can researchers gain an accurate picture of the complex phenomena with which comparative politics is concerned. This research strategy is expensive, and may yield contradictory results, but it may be one means of coping with complexity.

Much of contemporary political science does not, in fact, cope well with the increasing complexity of their surrounding economies and societies, or indeed of politics itself (see Jervis 1997). Increasing levels of participation and the increasing 'wickedness' of policy problems demands that we develop the means to understand a non-linear world better and have tools to assist in that understanding. Somewhat paradoxically, that may demand the use of (seemingly) relatively simplistic tools such as case studies to begin to understand the dynamics inherent in political processes and their relationships with their environments.

## KEY POINTS

- Comparative politics has institutional roots: more than other fields of political science, it stresses the role of institutions in shaping and constraining the behaviour of individuals. However, it is weak in explaining change.
- Rational choice analysis assumes that individuals are self-interested utility maximizers and engage in political action to receive benefits (and avoid costs). As an approach it is less relevant in comparative politics than in other fields.
- Although cultural explanations are often vague and 'residual', ideas matter and a great deal of research investigates the impact of cultural traits on political life (e.g. on democratic stability). Recent research stresses factors such as social capital and trust.
- As the last part of this volume stresses, single political systems are increasingly facing international influences because of integration and **globalization**.

## What more is needed?

The preceding discussion gives an idea of major approaches to comparative political analysis. These five broad approaches provide the means of understanding almost any political issue (whether within a single country or comparatively), yet they do not address the full

range of political issues as well as they might. Indeed, there are at least two comparative questions that have not been explored as completely as they might have been. We can gain some information about these issues utilizing the five 'I's already advanced, but it would be useful to explore the two questions more fully.

## Process

Perhaps the most glaring omission in comparative analysis is an understanding of the **political process**. If we look back over the five 'I's, much of their contribution to understanding is premised on rather static conceptions of politics and governing, and thus issues of process are ignored. This emphasis on static elements in politics is unfortunate, given that politics and governing are inherently dynamic and it would be very useful to understand better how the underlying processes function. For example, while we know a great deal about legislatures as institutions, as well as about individual legislators, comparative politics has tended to abandon concern about the legislative process.

Institutions provide the most useful avenue for approaching issues of process. If we adopt the common-sense idea about institutions, then each major formal institution in the political system has a particular set of processes that can be more or less readily comparable across systems. Further, various aspects of process may come together and might constitute a policy process that, at a relatively high analytical level, has common features. Even if we do have good understanding of the processes within each institution, as yet we do not have an adequate comparative understanding of the process taken more generally.

## Outcomes

Having all these explanations for political behaviour, we should also attempt to specify what these explanations actually explain—the dependent variable for comparative politics? For behavioural approaches to politics the dependent variables will be individual-level behaviour, such as voting or decisions made by legislators. For institutionalist perspectives the dependent variable is the behaviour of individuals within institutions, with the behaviour shaped by either institutional values or the rule and incentives provided by those institutions. Institutionalists tend to be more concerned about the impact of structures on public sector decisions, while behavioural models focus on the individual decision-maker and attributes that might affect his/her choices.

As implied earlier in this chapter, one of the most important things that scholars need to understand in comparative politics is what governments actually do. If, as Harold Lasswell argued, politics is about 'who gets what', then public policy is the essence of political action and we need to focus more on public policy. As Chapter 1 shows, this was indeed the case. However, policy outcomes are not just

the product of politics and government action, but rather reflect the impact of economic and social conditions. Therefore, understanding comparative policy requires linking political decisions with other social, economic, and cultural factors. Unfortunately, after having been a central feature of comparative politics for some time, comparative policy studies appear to be out of fashion. True, some of those concerns appear as comparative political economy, or perhaps as studies of the welfare state (Myles and Pierson 2001), but the more general concern with comparing policies and performance has disappeared in the contemporary literature in comparative politics.

If we look even more broadly at comparative politics, then the *ultimate dependent variable is governance*, or the capacity of governments to provide direction to their societies. Governance involves *establishing goals for society, finding the means for reaching those goals, and then learning from the successes or failures of their decisions* (Pierre and Peters 2000). All other activities in the public sector can be put together within this general concept of governance. The very generality of the concept of governance poses problems for comparison, as did the structural-functionalist and systems theories (Almond and Powell 1966) popular earlier in comparative politics. Still, by linking a range of government activities and demonstrating their cumulative effects, an interest in governance helps counteract attempts to overly compartmentalize comparative analysis. To some extent, it returns to examining whole systems and how the constituent parts fit together, rather than focusing on each individual institution or actor.

Governance comes as close to the grand functionalist theories of the 1960s and 1970s as almost anything else in recent developments in comparative political analysis (see Box 2.2). Like those earlier approaches to comparative politics, governance is essentially functionalist, positing that there are certain crucial functions that any system of governance must perform, and then attempting to determine which actors perform those tasks, regardless of the formal assignment of tasks by law. While some governance scholars have emphasized the role of social actors rather than government actors in delivering governance, this remains an empirical question that needs to be investigated rather than merely inferred from the theoretical presumptions of the author.

Governance also goes somewhat beyond the comparative study of public policy to examine not only the outputs of the system but also its capacity to adapt. One of the more important elements of studying contemporary governance is the role of accountability and feedback, and the role of monitoring previous actions of the public sector. This emphasis is similar to feedback in **systems theory** (see Figure I.1 in the Introduction to this volume), but does not have the equilibrium assumptions of the earlier approach. Rather, governance models tend to assume some continuing development of policy capacity as well as institutional development to meet the developing needs.

## KEY POINTS

- One weak point of comparative politics is its focus on the static elements of the political system and a neglect of dynamic political processes. The field of comparative politics with greater attention to processes is comparative public policy analysis.
- The dependent variable in comparative politics varies according to approaches; but, perhaps, the ultimate dependent variable is 'governance', i.e. establishing goals for society, finding means to reach those goals, and then learning from the successes or failures of their decisions.

## Conclusion

Understanding politics in a comparative perspective is far from easy, but having some form of theoretical or analytical guidance is crucial to that understanding. The

discussion in this chapter devotes little time to grand theory; rather, it has focused on analytical perspectives that provide researchers with a set of variables that can be used to approach comparative research questions. These five 'I's were phrased in rather ordinary language, but underneath each is a strong theoretical core. For example, if we take the role of individuals in politics, we can draw from political psychology, elite theory, and role theory for explanations.

Comparative politics should be at the centre of theory-building in political science, but that central position is threatened by the emphasis on individual-level behaviour. Further, the domination of American political scientists in the marketplace of ideas has tended to produce a somewhat unbalanced conception of the relevance of comparative research in contemporary political science. I would still argue that the world provides a natural laboratory for understanding political phenomena. We cannot, as experimenters, manipulate the elements in that environment, but we can use the evidence available from natural experiments to test and to build theory.



## Questions

### Knowledge based

1. What is the purpose of theory in comparative politics?
2. What is a functionalist theory?
3. What is meant by triangulation in social research?
4. What forms of institutional theory are used in comparative politics, and what contributions do they make?
5. Do institutions make a difference?

### Critical thinking

1. Both behavioural and rational choice approaches focus on the individual. Where do they differ?
2. Does political culture help to understand political behaviour in different countries?
3. Do people always act out of self-interest in politics?
4. Will globalization make comparative politics obsolete?
5. Are the policy choices made by political systems a better way of understanding them than factors such as formal institutions or voting behaviour?



## Further reading

### Basic discussions

- Bates, R., Greif, A., Levi, M., Rosenthal, J.-L., and Weingast, B. (2002) *Analytic Narratives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
- Braun, D., and M. Magetti (2015) *Comparative Politics: Theoretical and Methodological Challenges* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar).
- Geddes, B. (2002) *Paradigms and Sand Castles: Theory Building and Research Design in Comparative Politics* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press).
- Peters, B. G. (2013) *Strategies for Comparative Political Research* (Basingstoke: Palgrave).

### Institutional theories

- March, J. G., and Olsen, J. P. (1989) *Rediscovering Institutions* (New York: Free Press).
- Steinmo, S., Thelen, K. A., and Longstreth, F. (1992) *Structuring Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

### Interest-based theories

- Sørensen, E., and Torfing, J. (2007) *Theories of Democratic Network Governance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave).
- Tsebelis, G. (2002) *Veto Players* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

### The role of ideas

Hall, P. A. (1989) *The Political Power of Economic Ideas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

Putnam, R. D. (1993) *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

### Individual theories

Greenstein, F. I. (1987) *Personality and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

Helms, L. (2013) *Oxford Handbook of Political Leadership* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

### The role of the international environment

Cowles, M. G., and Caporaso, J. A. (2002) *Europeanization and Domestic Change* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).

Keohane, R. O., and Milner, H. (1997) *Internationalization and Domestic Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

### Governance

Peters, B. G., and J. Pierre (2016) *Governance and Comparative Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Pierre, J. (2003) *Debating Governance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).



### Web links

<http://www.community.apsanet.org/comparativepolitics/ComparativePolitics/Home/>

Website of the Comparative Politics Section, American Political Science Association.

<http://www.asu.edu/clas/polisci/cqrm>

Website of the Arizona State University Institute for Qualitative Methods.

<http://www.upslinks.net>

Ultimate Political Science Links Page.

<http://www.politicalresources.net>

Political Resources on the Net.



For additional material and resources, please visit the Online Resource Centre at:

[www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/caramani4e/](http://www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/caramani4e/)



### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This classification of research types comes from Arend Lijphart's seminal article (Lijphart 1971).

<sup>2</sup> A great deal of political science theory has been developed in reference to the US, given the size and importance of the political science profession there. However, a good deal of that theory does not appear relevant beyond the boundaries of the US (in some cases not within those boundaries either).

<sup>3</sup> This is something of an oversimplification of the assumptions of rational choice approaches, but the central point here is not the subtlety of some approaches but rather the reliance on individual-level explanations. For a more extensive critique of the assumptions see Box 13.5 in Chapter 13.

<sup>4</sup> That is, if we could reject more theories and models then we could focus on the more useful ones. As it is, we are overstocked with positive findings and theories that have credible support.

<sup>5</sup> The classic example of a study that uses triangulation explicitly is Allison (1971). However, this book uses multiple theories but it does not verify the results through multiple research methods.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Adcock and Collier (2001), who stress the need for common standards of validity for all varieties of measurement, as well as the interaction of those forms of measurement.

<sup>7</sup> Lijphart (1999) has provided a slightly different conceptualization by distinguishing between majoritarian and consensual political systems (see Chapter 5 on 'Democracies'). Some parliamentary systems, such as the Westminster system, are majoritarian, designed to produce strong majority governments that alternate in office. Others, such as in the Scandinavian countries, may have alternation in office, but the need to create coalitions and an underlying consensus on many policy issues results in less alternation in policy.

<sup>8</sup> These shifts are to some extent a function of changes in political culture, especially the movement towards 'post-industrial politics' (Inglehart 1990).

<sup>9</sup> This is more true for American than for European political science. Discourse theory and the use of rhetorical forms of analysis have been of much greater relevance in Europe than they have in North America, and qualitative methodologies remain more at the centre of European political analysis.

## CHAPTER 3

# Comparative research methods

Hans Keman and Paul Pennings

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### Reader's guide

In this chapter the 'art of comparing' is explored by demonstrating how to relate a theoretically guided research question to a properly founded research answer by developing an adequate **research design**. First, the role of **variables** in comparative research will be highlighted. Second, the meaning of 'cases' and their selection will be discussed. These are important steps in any comparative research design. Third, the focus will turn to the 'core' of the **comparative method**: the use of the logic of comparative inquiry to analyse the relationships between variables—representing theory—and the information contained in the cases—the data. Finally, some problems common to the use of comparative methods will be discussed.