

CHAPTER 1

The relevance of comparative politics

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Chapter contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction: What should comparative politics be relevant for? | 22 |
| Political institutions and human well-being | 23 |
| The many faces of democracy | 25 |
| Democracy and state capacity | 26 |
| Does democracy generate political legitimacy? | 29 |
| What should be explained? | 30 |
| Conclusion | 32 |

Reader's guide

The issue of the relevance of political science in general, and then of course also the sub-discipline of comparative politics, has recently received increased attention both in the public debate as well as within the discipline itself. This chapter considers what comparative politics could be relevant for, such as informing the public debate and giving policy advice. A central argument is that comparative politics has a huge but sometimes underdeveloped potential for being relevant for various aspects of human well-being. **Empirical research** shows that the manner in which a country's political institutions are designed and the quality of the operations of these institutions have a strong impact on measures of population health as well as subjective well-being (aka 'happiness') and general social trust. One result is that **democratization** without increased state capacity and control of corruption is not likely to deliver increased human well-being.

Introduction: What should comparative politics be relevant for?

The issue of the relevance of political science in general, and then of course also the sub-discipline of comparative politics, has recently received increased attention both in the public debate as well as within the discipline itself (Stoker *et al.* 2015). To answer a question like 'is comparative politics relevant?' certainly demands that a more basic issue is solved, namely for what, whom, or when should this knowledge be relevant? Many different answers could be given to this question.

First, comparative politics could be relevant for informing the elite: giving advice to parties on how to win election campaigns, how politicians should best act so as to get enough support for their policies in legislative assemblies, how they should interact with strong interest groups such as business organizations and labour unions and how to best handle factions within their party, to name a few. In this approach to the issue of relevance, comparative political scientists act as consultants, advisors, or even so-called 'grey eminences' to politicians. This is also where many of those with a degree in political science end up, for example as ministerial advisors or policy consultants, professions which have increased considerably in almost all OECD countries (OECD 2011). Plato already ventured into this area some 2,300 years ago with his three famous journeys to Sicily, where he was asked to educate the new King of Syracuse in the noble art of governing. The historical record shows that Plato came to deeply regret his role as teacher to the king. His advice fell on deaf ears and the king became a ruthless tyrant, ruining his country (Lilla 2001).

A well-known formulation in relation to public policy issues is that the researcher's task is to 'speak truth to power' (Wildavsky 1987). The problem is of course that 'power' may not be that interested, especially if what is spoken comes into conflict with deeply held ideological convictions or specific interests. The extent to which comparative politics is relevant in this respect also depends, of course, on how useful the knowledge is for the policy in question. One problem is that most **public policies** are connected to a specific ideological and/or political orientation, and many argue that science should be about finding out what is the truth and not about supporting any specific ideology or group interest.

A second idea for making comparative political science more relevant is based not on informing the political elite, but the general public. This is the comparative political scientist as the public intellectual writing op-ed articles, giving public lectures, and commenting upon current political affairs in the media. The number of political events that deserve comments are in principle

endless. Why does country X have higher economic growth? Why is gender equality better in some countries than others? Why does nation Z have such a huge **welfare state**? Here, the level of relevance would be determined by the question 'can political scientists offer something more, deeper, or qualitatively different than what we get from the astute political journalist or pundit and that is also intelligible for the general public?' One argument for this approach is that everything else being equal, it cannot be a disadvantage to the quality of debate about **public policies** in a democracy if people with more knowledge chose to participate. An often heard argument against the 'public intellectual' approach is that the opinions and comments may not always have a good foundation in verified research results.

Politics is a partisan game and that is likely to be one reason why many researchers in comparative politics choose to stay away both from 'speaking truth to power' and from acting as 'public intellectuals'. A fear of being seen as 'normative' seems to hinder many from being engaged in issues that many citizens care deeply about (see Box 1.1., Gerring 2015; Stoker *et al.* 2015). Another problem is, of course, what is known as 'paternalism'. Should the choice of policies in a democracy not be left to the citizens? What rights have the academic elite to tell ordinary people what is best for them? If the experts know which policies are 'best', we could do away with the democratic process. And should we not suspect that behind a shield of objective scientific jargon rests the special interests of the elite?

A way out of this paternalism problem has been suggested by the economist-philosopher and Nobel Laureate, Amartya Sen. His theory of justice, known as the 'capability theory of justice' or 'capability approach', rests on the idea that a just society provides people with



BOX 1.1. ZOOM-IN Normative theory and empirical research in comparative politics

Institutionally, political philosophy (aka 'political theory') is usually kept apart from empirical research in political science. From a policy and relevance perspective this is unfortunate, since without a foundation in normative theory, results from empirical research may be used in ways that stand in sharp conflict with respect for human rights. A strand of literature has pointed to the problem with 'illiberal democracy', implying that majorities may launch policies that are detrimental to civil liberties (Zakaria 2003; King 1999). It is also the case that political philosophers sometime suggest policies for increased social justice which empirical research have shown are impossible to implement (Rothstein 2017).

'effective opportunities to undertake actions and activities that they have reason to value, and be the person that they have reason to want to be' (Robeyns 2011, 2.2; Sen 2010). The terminology implies that the problem of justice is not to equalize economic resources or social status as such, but to ensure all individuals a set of *basic resources* that will equalize their chances to reach their full potential as humans. For this, economic measures like gross national income per capita will not work because (a) economic resources can be very unevenly divided, and (b) economic resources does not always translate into actual capabilities. For example, according to the most recent statistics from the UNDP, in economic terms South Africa is 60 per cent richer than the Philippines but has a life expectancy ten years lower.

Standards for what should be seen as basic resources that increase capabilities include access to high quality health care and education, basic food and shelter, equality in civil and political rights, equal protection under the law, basic social services and social insurance systems that support people who for various reasons cannot generate enough resources from their own work, support for persons with disabilities, etc. The set of such capabilities enhancing goods and services can of course vary, but it is important to realize that equality, as a politically viable concept, has to be about specified things. There is simply no way we, by political means, can equalize the ability to be a skilled musician, to be creative, to be loved, to be an outstanding researcher, a good parent, or a first rate ballet dancer. What it is possible to do by political means is to increase the possibility for those who happen to have ambitions in these (and many other) fields to realize their talents even if they have not entered this world with the necessary economic endowments to do this. This can be done by giving people access to a certain bundle of goods and services that are likely to enhance their capabilities of reaching their full potential as human beings. In practice, the capabilities approach to justice has been translated to various measures of human well-being, of which many (but not all) are measures of population health. Simply put, a person that dies as an infant due, for example, to lack of access to sanitation and safe water has no possibility of fulfilling whatever potential he or she had. The same goes for a person that dies prematurely due to lack of health care, or who never learned to read and write due to lack of education, or who as a child did not develop her cognitive capacities due to malnutrition. In addition to the 'hard' objective measures from population health, there is now an abundance of interesting, so-called subjective measures. These include perceptions of the level of corruption in one's country, perceptions of social trust, and if people report satisfaction with their lives (aka 'happiness'). Various research and policy institutions have also produced measures for ranking countries, concerning things like: respect for

human and civil rights, the rule of law, gender equality, innovativeness, and competitiveness, to name a few. One answer to the question 'for what is comparative politics relevant?' can thus be *its potential for increasing human well-being*.

KEY POINTS

- A discussion of the potential relevance of a discipline such as comparative politics has to start by asking the question 'relevant for what?'
- Comparative politics can be relevant for informing the public debate and also for giving advice to politicians and government agencies about public policies.
- Comparative politics also has a potential for serving more general goals like increased social justice and improved human well-being.

Political institutions and human well-being

It was long taken for granted that the well-being of the population in a country rested on non-political factors such as natural resources, technological and medical inventions, the structural situation of the social classes, or deeply held cultural norms, including religion. The political institutions were seen merely as a superficial reflection or as the 'superstructure' of underlying structural forces and thus had no or very little impact on the overall prosperity or well-being of a country. This changed in economics, sociology, and political science during the 1990s with what has been termed 'the institutional turn'. The economic historian (and Nobel Laureate) Douglass C. North (1990) was amongst the first to point at the importance of institutions, understood as 'the rules of the game' for explaining why some countries were much more prosperous than others. This became known as 'the new institutionalism' (March and Olsen 1989) and, in comparative politics, as 'historical institutionalism' (Steinmo *et al.* 1992). Comparing societies with almost identical structural conditions revealed that they could be dramatically different in their ability to produce human well-being and the scholars in the various institutional approaches could empirically show that what explained the differences was the variation in political, legal, and administrative institutions.

The institutional turn and comparative politics

The implication of this 'institutional turn' for the relevance of comparative politics can hardly be overstated. An example is the issue of access to safe water.

The magnitude of the problem can be illustrated by reports from the World Health Organisation (WHO), which in 2006 estimated that 1.2 billion people lacked access to enough clean water and that 2.6 billion people lacked adequate sanitation. Figures further reveal that 80 per cent of all diseases in developing countries are waterborne, and that contaminated water causes the death of 2.8 million children every year. A careful estimate by the WHO is that 12,000 people, two thirds of them children, die every day from water and sanitation related diseases (UNDP 2006; Transparency International 2008).

What makes this enormous problem relevant from a comparative politics perspective is that a growing number of experts in the area argue that the problem is not, as was previously assumed, an issue of lack of technical solutions. The acute lack of clean water that affects a large amount of people in developing countries is not due to a lack of technical solutions, such as pumps, reservoirs, or sewers; nor is the problem caused by limited access to natural clean water. Instead, the main problem seems to lie within the judicial and administrative institutions—in other words, in a dysfunctional state apparatus. Developing countries more often than not possess the technical devices needed to provide the population with clean water; the problem is that these technical installations rarely fulfil their functions due to lack of supervision, incompetence, and corruption in the public sector. In many cases, the corruption in the procurement process results in extremely low-quality infrastructure being put in place (Rothstein 2011, ch. 1).

The implication is that for comparative politics to be policy relevant, it is not necessary to side with a specific political ideology or special interest group. The capability approach to social justice is, of course, a normative theory, but based on the generally held idea that most people would prefer to live in a country where few newborns die, most children survive their fifth birthday, almost all ten year olds can read, people have access to safe water, people live a long and reasonably healthy life, child deprivation is low, few women die when giving birth, the percentage of people living in severe poverty is low, and many report reasonable satisfaction with their lives. More than anything else, an abundance of empirical research shows that the ability to become a 'successful society' in this sense is decided by the quality of the political institutions (including the administrative and legal institutions which are inherently political). Simply put, some societies are more successful than others in achieving broad-based human well-being for their populations (Hall and Lamont 2009), and empirically this turns out to, for the most part, be caused by what can be termed their quality of government (Rothstein 2011). The implication is that the question of whether comparative political science can be relevant becomes different

from the consultant/advisor and the public intellectual approaches mentioned above. Instead, it becomes a question of the extent to which the discipline can contribute to increased human well-being by (a) specifying which political institutions are most likely to increase human well-being and (b) how such institutions can come about.

Institutions rule—but which?

Not least in research into developing countries there is now almost a consensus about the importance of institutions and the quality of government in terms of impact on development and human well-being (Rodrik *et al.* 2004; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). However, there is little consensus on which particular political institutions matter, how they matter, how they can be created where they are now absent, or how they can be improved if dysfunctional (Andrews 2013; Fukuyama 2014). In addition, as North kept reminding us, the importance of the informal institutions in society should not be overlooked and the importance of formal institutions has often been exaggerated (North 2010). A case in point is Uganda, which, after numerous interventions by the World Bank and many bi-lateral donors, has established an institutional framework that according to one leading donor organization was 'largely satisfactory in terms of anti-corruption measures' (SIDA 2006). In fact, Uganda's formal institutions of anti-corruption regulation score 99 out of a 100 points in the think tank Global Integrity's index. Thus, while the formal institutions are almost perfect, the informal underbelly is a very different matter. After almost a decade of impressive legislation and a government that rhetorically assured non-tolerance towards corruption, the problem of corruption remains rampant. Uganda ranks as 142 out of 175 countries on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. One example of an important informal institution that has been shown to have a strong impact on human well-being is the degree of social trust. If people in a society perceive that 'most other people can be trusted', this has a positive impact on overall prosperity and most measures of human well-being (Uslaner 2002). If we knew how to increase the informal institution of social trust within a society, much would be gained. The issue of which institutions is not confined to the division between formal and informal. There is also a large discussion about whether the institutions that regulate the *access* to power are more important than the institutions that regulate the *exercise* of power. In a democracy, the former are, for example, party and electoral systems and the latter are the rule of law and the capacity of the public administration in general (Holmberg and Rothstein 2012; Fukuyama 2014). These issues will be addressed below.

KEY POINTS

- The 'institutional turn' in the social sciences implies a shift away from a focus on structural variables for explaining why some societies are more successful than others in providing human well-being.
- This 'institutional turn' implies an increased relevance for comparative politics since the creation, design, and operations of political institutions are among the central objects of study.
- Institutions, broadly understood as 'the rules of the game', can be both formal and informal. Moreover, they can be located at the 'input side' or at the 'output side' of the political system. This variation opens up an interesting analysis of which institutions are most important for increasing human well-being.

The many faces of democracy

Almost all scholars in comparative politics take for granted that in producing 'the good society', democratic political institutions are to be preferred. Research in **democratization** has been very high on the comparative politics agenda (Lindberg 2009; Teorell 2010). From a capability theory, one problem is that far from all democracies produce high levels of human well-being. This is not only the case if we compare the OECD countries with democracies in the developing world since there are also huge differences within these groups of countries for most measures of human well-being. One problem is that we tend to speak about democracy as a single political institution, when in fact it is a system that is built on multiple separate institutions. This problem can be illustrated with the following thought experiment: Every representative democracy has to solve a number of issues for which different institutions have been created (or have evolved). For example, the electoral system, the degree of decentralization, the formation of the organizations that are to implement laws and policies, the way expert knowledge is infused into the decision-making process, and so on. Democratic theory does not provide precise answers to how these institutions should be constructed. There is, to take an obvious example, not a clear answer in democratic theory that tells us if a proportional electoral system (giving rise to a **multi-party system**) is to be preferred or if a first-past-the-post system that usually produces a two-party system would be a better choice. As shown in Table 1.1, at least ten such institutional dimensions can be identified in every representative democracy.

According to the main works in democratic theory, none of the various choices that can be made for the

Table 1.1 Examples of basic institutional variation among representative democracies

| Type of institution | Institutional variations |
|--------------------------|---|
| Electoral system | Proportional vs majoritarian |
| Legislative assembly | Unicameral vs bicameral |
| Government structure | Unitarian vs federalist |
| Central executive | Parliamentarism vs presidentialism |
| Judicial review | Strong vs weak judicial review |
| Local governments | Weak vs strong local autonomy |
| Civil service | Spoils recruitment vs merit-recruitment |
| Protection of minorities | Strong vs weak protection |
| Referendums | Regularly used vs not used |
| Consultation of experts | Routine vs ad hoc |

ten institutional dimensions are mutually exclusive. In theory, everything can be combined (even though some combinations are less likely than others). Thus, the result from this thought experiment shows that there are at least 1,024 ways of constructing a representative democracy ($2^{10} = 1,024$). Since many of these dimensions are not dichotomous, but to varying extents gradual (more or less strong **judicial review**, more or less spoils recruitment to the civil service, more or less **decentralization** to local governments, etc.), the possible variation is in fact much larger than '1,024', if not endless. To be concrete, the Swiss, Danish, Brazilian, South African, and British democracies, to just take five examples, are institutionally configured in very different ways. And while it is true that there is some 'clustering' in these dimensions, there are also surprising differences. For example, the relation between the central civil service and the cabinet in Finland and Sweden are very different from how this relation is institutionalized in neighbouring Denmark and Norway. Australia is the only former British colony that has compulsory voting. Another important dimension is how expert knowledge is handled in the decision-making process. Some democracies have developed established routines in the decision-making process to ensure that expert knowledge is used in both the preparation and **implementation of public policies**. In other democracies, the use of expert knowledge is more ad hoc. In many policy fields, the demand is not only that decisions about policies are taken in a democratically correct manner, but that especially in areas such as population health, and environmental issues, we also want them to be 'true' or at least in line with the 'best available knowledge'.

Another important institutional variation is the extent of so-called veto points in a democratic system.

The argument is that some combinations in the figure above give rise to many such veto points that can make it difficult for governments to act in a determined and responsible way. If there are many un-coordinated actors (the executive, the courts, the legislative assemblies, the sub-national governments, organized interest groups), the democratic machinery may be unable to produce coherent and effective policies (Tsebelis 2002; Fukuyama 2014).

From the institutionalist-capabilities perspective presented above, we would like to know which institutional configuration of a representative democracy is most likely to produce a high level of human well-being. However, since the number of democratic countries is approximately one hundred, finding a solution to this '1,024' problem is empirically difficult. Moreover, even if there are some interesting results from this research, changing long-established political institutions may still be a Herculean task.

KEY POINTS

- We often think of democracy in terms of an either/or dimension—a country is either a democracy or (more or less) authoritarian. In reality, democracies turn out to have quite dramatic variation in their institutional configurations.
- The manner in which a democratic political system is organized is often linked to its capability for producing 'valued outcomes' such as economic prosperity, political legitimacy, and social justice.
- Knowledge about the link between the design of political institutions and 'valued outcomes' is therefore essential for the relevance of comparative politics.

Democracy and state capacity

As mentioned above, it has generally been taken for granted, both in comparative politics and in the general public debate, that when it comes to human well-being, the nature of institutions that make up the liberal electoral democracy is the most important factor. Research about democratization has been a huge enterprise in the discipline, with numerous studies of how, when, and why countries shift from various forms of authoritarian rule to electoral representative democracies. There has also been a lot to study since the waves of democracy that have swept over the globe have brought representative democracy to places where it seemed inconceivable fifty, thirty, or even ten years ago. Even though the 'Arab Spring' has not delivered much democratization and

there are some recent important set-backs in some parts of the world, the fact is that more countries than ever are now, by the most sophisticated measures used, classified as being democratic, and more people than ever live in democracies (Teorell 2010). While there are many reasons to celebrate this democratic success, if judged from the perspective of capability theory, there are also reasons to be disappointed. One example is South Africa, which miraculously managed to end apartheid in 1994 without falling into a full-scale civil war. As Nelson Mandela said in one of his speeches, the introduction of democracy would not only liberate people, but would also greatly improve their social and economic situation (Mandela 1994: 414). Available statistics give a surprisingly bleak picture for this promise. Since 1994, the country has not managed to improve the average time-frame over which children attend school by a single month, economic inequality remains at a world record level, life expectancy is down by almost six years, and the number of women that die in childbirth has more than doubled.¹ Simply put, for many central measures of human well-being, the South African democracy has not delivered many positive results.

Another example has been provided by Amartya Sen, in an article comparing 'quality of life' in China and India. His disappointing conclusion is that on almost all standard measures of human well-being, the communist and autocratic Peoples' Republic of China now clearly outperforms liberal and democratically governed India (Sen 2011). Perhaps the most compelling evidence for the lack of positive effects of democracy on human well-being comes from a recent study on child deprivation by Halleröd *et al.* (2013). They use data measuring seven aspects of child poverty (access to safe water, food, sanitation, shelter, education, health care, and information) from 68 low- and middle-income countries for no less than 2,120,734 cases (children). The results of this large study show that there is no positive effect of democracy on the level of child deprivation for any of the seven indicators. One argument against this is that it is unrealistic to expect high capacity of new democracies. We should only find a positive effect if we take into account the 'stock' of democracy (Gerring *et al.* 2012). This argument turns out to be valid in large-n analysis, but there are numbers of cases where democratic rule has been established for several decades but still score surprisingly low on measures of human well-being. India became a democracy in 1948, as did the southern regions in Italy. Jamaica has been a democracy since the late 1950s, Ghana has been democratic since 1993, and South Africa since 1994. In sum, the picture is this: representative democracy is not a safe cure against severe poverty, child deprivation, high levels of economic inequality, illiteracy, being unhappy or not satisfied with one's life, high infant mortality, short life expectancy,

high maternal mortality, lack of access to safe water or sanitation, low school attendance for girls, or low interpersonal trust.

The spectre that is haunting democracy

Why has democratization not resulted in more human well-being? One explanation was given by the noted democratization scholar Larry Diamond in a presentation at *National Endowment for Democracy* in the United States when the organization celebrated its first twenty-five years of operations:

There is a specter haunting democracy in the world today. It is bad governance—governance that serves only the interests of a narrow ruling elite. Governance that is drenched in corruption, patronage, favoritism, and abuse of power. Governance that is not responding to the massive and long-deferred social agenda of reducing inequality and unemployment and fighting against dehumanizing poverty. Governance that is not delivering broad improvement in people's lives because it is stealing, squandering, or skewing the available resources (Diamond 2007, 19).

The implication of Diamond's argument is that representative democracy is not enough for creating human well-being. Without control of corruption and increased administrative capacity, the life situation of citizens will not improve (see Box 1.2).



BOX 1.2. DEFINITION The conceptual 'scale' problem in comparative politics

Research in corruption has until recently not been very prominent in comparative politics. The exception is what is labelled 'clientelism', which is largely about various forms of vote buying. Most corruption, however, occurs in the implementation of public policies and varies a lot in scale and scope, from a minor sum paid to a police officer to avoid a speeding ticket to gigantic sums paid for arms deals. This variation in scale creates a conceptual problem since we tend to use the same term for these hugely different types of corruption. However, social science is not alone in having this conceptual 'scale' problem. Biologists, for example, use the same term (bird) both for humming birds and condors. The reason is that although there is a huge difference in 'scale', each phenomenon has important things in common.

State capacity, quality of government, and human well-being

If we follow Diamond's idea about the importance of what could be termed 'quality of government' and, instead of having degree of democracy as an explanatory variable, turn to measures of a state's administrative capacity, control of corruption, or other measures of 'good governance', the picture of what public institutions can do for human well-being changes dramatically. For example, the study on child deprivation mentioned above finds strong effects of measures of the state capacity and administrative effectiveness when it comes to implementation of policies on four out of seven indicators on child deprivation (lack of safe water, malnutrition, lack of access to health care, and lack of access to information), and also when controlling for GDP per capita and a number of basic individual-level variables (Halleröd *et al.* 2013). A study of how corruption impacts five different measures of population health finds similar strong effects, also when controlling for economic prosperity and democracy (Holmberg and Rothstein 2011). Other studies largely confirm that various measures of state's administrative capacity, quality of government, levels of corruption, and other measures of 'good governance' have strong effects on almost all standard measures of human well-being, including subjective measures of life satisfaction (aka 'happiness') and social trust (Ott 2010; Norris 2012). Recent studies also find that absence of violence in the form of interstate and civil wars is strongly affected by measures of quality of government, more so than by the level of democracy (Fjelde and De Soysa 2009; Norris 2012; Lapuente and Rothstein 2014). As shown in Figures 1.1. and 1.2, there is a huge difference in the correlations between one often-used measure of democracy² and a measure of 'bad governance' for the **Human Development Index** produced by the United Nations Development Program.

As can be seen, the correlation between human well-being and the level of democracy is quite low, while the correlation with 'government effectiveness' is substantial. This result is shown to be repeated for a large set of other measures of human well-being and what should generally count as 'successful societies' (Holmberg and Rothstein 2014; Rothstein and Holmberg 2014).

KEY POINTS

- Empirical research indicates that the administrative capacity of the political system in a country is essential for bringing about human well-being.
- Democracy alone seems not to generate human well-being.
- Corruption in the public sector and other forms of low quality of government has a strong negative effect on human well-being.

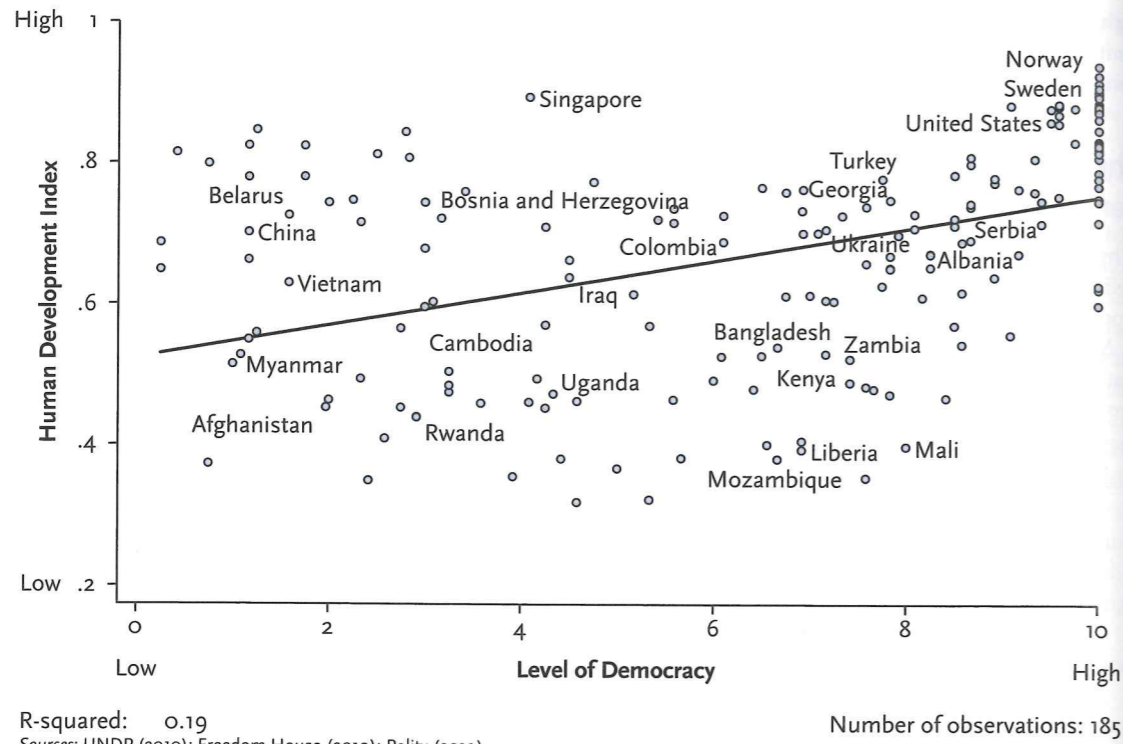


Figure 1.1 Democracy and human development

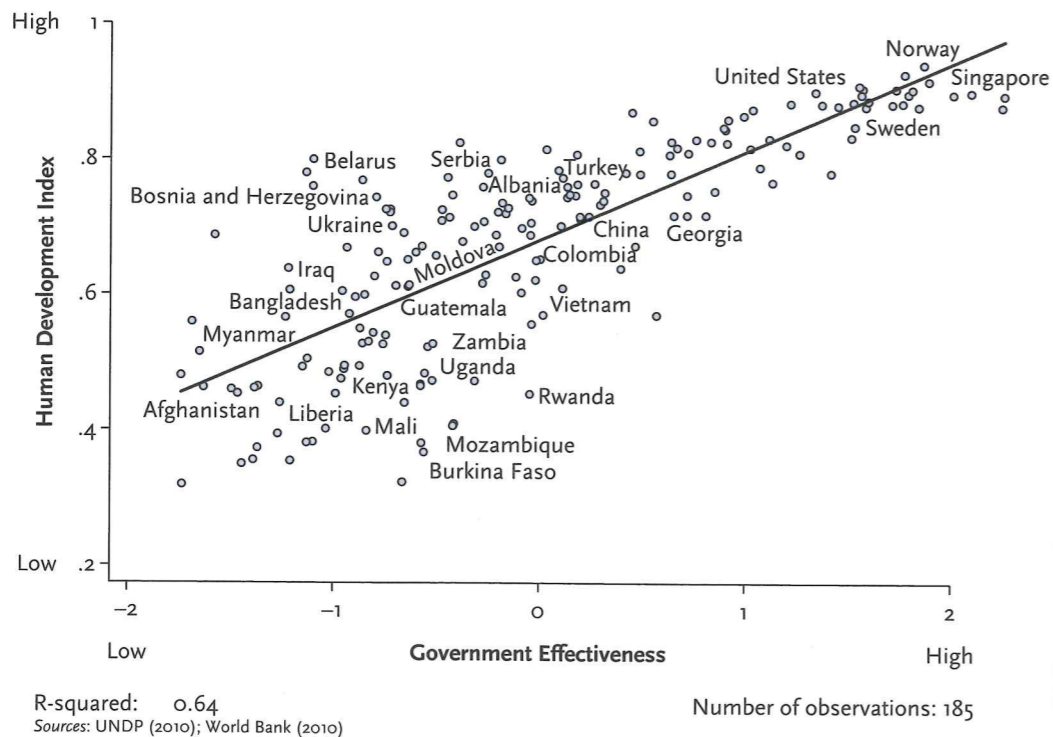


Figure 1.2 Government effectiveness and human development



BOX 1.3. DEFINITION Measuring corruption

A large debate exists about the possibility to operationalize and measure corruption. Since the practice is usually secret, getting accurate information is problematic. Most measures are based on assessments by country experts, but recently a number of surveys of representative samples of the population has been carried out. These measures correlate on a surprisingly high level, implying that 'ordinary people' and 'experts' judge the situation in the countries they assess in a

very similar way. Moreover, a number of related indexes have been constructed, for example measuring the rule of law, government effectiveness, and the impartiality of the civil service. These measures also correlate on a high level with measures trying to capture corruption. Thus, while far from perfect, the measures of corruption that have been launched are now widely used in comparative politics. For an overview, see Charron 2016.

Does democracy generate political legitimacy?

One counterargument to the lack of 'valued outcomes' from democratization is that the normative reasons for representative democracy should not be performance measures like the ones mentioned above, but political legitimacy. If people have the right to change their government through 'free and fair elections,' they will find their system of rule legitimate. In regard to this, empirical research shows even more surprising results, namely that democratic rights or the feeling of being adequately represented by elected officials does not seem to be the most important cause behind people's perception of political legitimacy. Based on comparative survey data, several recent studies show that 'performance' or 'output' measures, such as control of corruption, government effectiveness, and the rule of law, trump democratic rights in explaining political legitimacy (Gilley 2006, 2009). As stated by Bruce Gilley, 'this clashes with standard liberal treatments of legitimacy that give overall priority to democratic rights' (2006: 58). Using a different comparative survey data set, Dahlberg and Holmberg (2014: 515) conclude in a similar vein that 'government effectiveness is of greater importance for citizens' satisfaction with the way democracy functions, compared to factors such as ideological congruence on the input side. Impartial and effective bureaucracies matter more than representational devices.' Thus, if the relevance of political science is about understanding the causes of political legitimacy, most researchers in this discipline have studied the parts of the political system that are not the most relevant.

One way to theorize about this counter-intuitive result may be the following. On average, a third of the electorate in democratic elections does not bother to vote. Even fewer use their other democratic rights, such as taking part in political demonstrations, signing petitions, or writing 'letters to the editor.' When a citizen does not make much use of her democratic rights, usually nothing happens. However, if her children cannot get medical care because she cannot afford the bribes demanded by

the doctors, if the police will not protect her because she belongs to a minority, if the water is polluted because of the incompetence of the local water managers, if she is denied a job she has the best qualifications for because she does not belong to the 'right' political party, or if the fire brigade won't come when she calls because she lives in the 'wrong' part of the city, these are things that can cause real distress in her life.

It should be underlined that this analysis is not an argument against liberal representative democracy or that people in autocratic regimes should not demand democracy and civil rights. On the contrary, from this author's point of view, liberal democracy has intrinsic values that are irreplaceable and indispensable. The argument is that if a liberal democracy system is going to produce increased human well-being around the world, quality of government factors like administrative capacity, the rule of law, and control of corruption must be taken into account.

Does democracy cure corruption?

As special problem that so far has not found a persuasive explanation is that in many (but far from all) democracies, the electorate is not punishing corrupt politicians (Chang and Golden 2007). Instead, as shown in Figure 1.3, they are often re-elected, implying that the accountability mechanism in representative democracy does not work as it is supposed to. Some have argued that democracies allow for more political corruption through vote buying and illegal party financing (Della Porta and Vannucci 2007). However, this is not a general law. A recent study has shown that political parties in countries in Central and Eastern Europe that mobilize on a 'clean government' agenda have been remarkably successful in elections (Bågenholm and Charron 2015). One may interpret this as a tendency that 'clean governments' in some countries are becoming a separate political dimension. All in all, as the figure below indicates, the 'curve' between democracy and corruption is U- or J-shaped, and one important and very relevant issue for comparative politics is to understand why this is so.

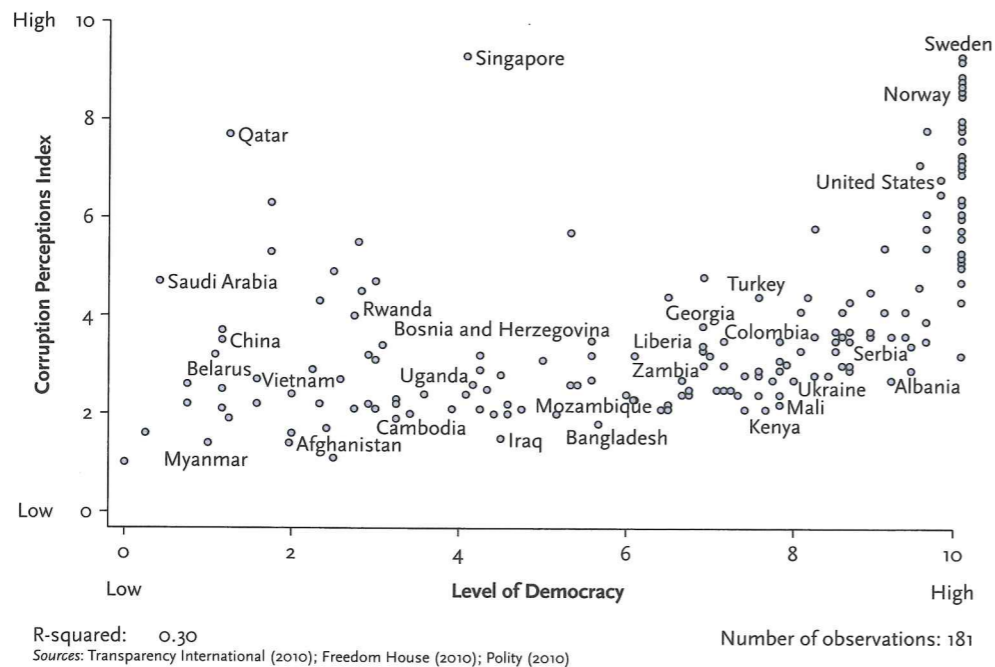


Figure 1.3 Democracy and corruption

KEY POINTS

- Democracy is important for broad-based political legitimacy, but less so than factors related to the quality of government institutions that implement public policies.
- Democracy is not a 'safe cure' against corruption and other forms of low quality of government.
- In many elections, voters are not punishing corrupt politicians. This implies that the accountability mechanisms in representative democracy are not working as intended.

What should be explained?

So far, the argument is that comparative political science, by focusing on institutions that make up the political system, has a huge potential for addressing issues about human well-being, economic prosperity, and social justice that most people care deeply about. In addition, it has been shown that the political institutions that seem to be most important for countries to achieve a high level of human development are those that exist at the 'output' side of the political system. This has two implications for the discussion on how to make comparative politics

relevant in relation to the capability theory of justice that underlies this line of reasoning. Firstly, human well-being ought to be the main dependent variable (that we should strive to explain), and the political institutions that operate on the output side of the political system (the quality of the legal system and the public administration) should be central. Secondly, this approach to relevance to some extent implies a change for the discipline. Instead of just explaining 'politics', more focus needs to be placed on what politics implies for the actual human well-being of the citizens. Questions like 'why do different countries have different party systems?', 'under what conditions do countries democratize?', and 'why is the relation between business, labour, and state different in different countries?' all need to be complemented by research questions that try to answer *why* there is such a stark variation between countries in the quality of their government institutions and how this can be improved. In general, comparative political science has so far paid relatively little attention to issues about state capacity, control of corruption, and institutional quality (Rothstein 2015).

Statistical significances versus real-life significance

If research and scholarship in an academic discipline is going to be relevant in the sense mentioned above, it is not only necessary to try to explain things that are

important for the lives people will have. There is also a normative perspective for the choice of which explanatory variables should be central. I will illustrate this with an example of explanation of the degree of corruption in countries. With the access to large amounts of contemporary and historical data, researches have shown that Lutheran nations, with a large amount of settlers from the colonizing country, and nations that are relatively small and ethnically homogeneous, tend to have lower degrees of corruption. Lately, some have added that countries that are islands do well on this account. Most of these explanations are correct and were carried out with scientifically established methods. However, from a relevance perspective, they are of little or no use. To advise a country plagued by systemic corruption to change its history, religion, population, size, and geographical location is meaningless since these are factors that cannot be changed. Just as a cancer patient is not helped by the advice that he or she should have had other parents, the government in, for example, Nepal benefits little from knowing that being landlocked and not being Lutheran have had a negative impact on the country's prospects of development. It is certainly the case that knowledge about such structural factors is of value, but not from a relevance perspective. Variables that have the strongest effects in statistical analysis, for example, may be of little relevance for the improvement of human well-being since they cannot be changed. As stated by Gerring (2015: 36), researchers 'sometimes confuse the notion of statistical significance with real-life significance'. One conclusion is that there is an argument for focusing the analysis on the types of political institutions mentioned above even if they do not show the strongest effects in the empirical analysis. For example: the way civil servants are recruited, paid and trained; the manner in which the educational system is accessible for various strata of the population; the possibility to hold people working in the public sector accountable; laws about the right to access public documents; and, of course, the ten institutional dimensions for creating a working democracy pointed out above (see Table 1.1) are all examples of what can be termed 'institutional devices' that are possible to change. Changing institutions may certainly be difficult to achieve, but such changes do occur. To sum up, the degree to which comparative politics is relevant is not only decided by the choice of the dependent variables, but also by the choice of the independent variables.

Quality of government, social trust, and human well-being

As mentioned in the Introduction, it is not only formal/legal institutions that have been put in focus by the 'institutional turn', but also informal ones. One such institution is the degree to which people in a society perceive

that 'most other people' can be trusted. This varies dramatically from Denmark, where more than 65 per cent say 'yes' to this survey question, to Romania, where only about 8 per cent answer in the affirmative. What makes this issue important in the discussion of relevance is that social trust tends to be systematically and positively correlated with many measures of human well-being (Rothstein 2013). There are many ways to interpret this question as an informal institution. One is that people are making an evaluation of the moral standard of their society based on their notions of others' trustworthiness (Uslaner 2002). The central question is then what generates high levels of social trust in a society? The most widespread idea has been that social trust is generated 'from below', by people being active in voluntary associations (Putnam 2000). In this approach, the capacity of a society to produce social trust depends on citizens' willingness to become active in broad-based, non-exclusionary voluntary organizations. However, the evidence that associational membership of adults creates social trust has not survived empirical testing (Delhey and Newton 2005).

The role of formal and informal institutions

As a response to the failure of the society-centred approach to produce good empirical indicators for its claims about how the causal mechanisms generating social trust operate, the *institution-centred* approach claims that for social trust to flourish it needs to be embedded in and linked to the political context, as well as to formal political and legal institutions. According to this approach, it is trustworthy, uncorrupt, honest, impartial government institutions that exercise public power and implement policies in a fair manner that create social trust and **social capital** (Rothstein 2013). For example, one large-n study concluded that countries in which corruption is low '[seem] to create an institutional structure in which individuals are able to act in a trustworthy manner and can reasonably expect that others will do the same' (Delhey and Newton 2005: 323). Using survey data from twenty-nine European countries, Bjørnskov (2004) concluded that a high level of social trust is strongly correlated with a low level of corruption. Another study, also based on comparative survey data, concludes that 'the central contention ... is that political institutions that support norms of fairness, universality, and the division of power, contribute to the formation of inter-personal trust' (Freitag and Buhlmann 2005).

Using scenario experiments in low trust/high corruption Romania and in high trust/low corruption Sweden, Rothstein and Eek (2009) found that persons in both these countries who experience corruption among public health care workers or the local police when travelling in an 'unknown city in and unfamiliar country' not only

lose trust in these authorities, but also in other people in general in that 'unknown' society.

In sum, what comes out of this research is that the major source of variations in social trust is to be found at the output side of the state machinery, namely in the quality of the legal and administrative branches of the state that are responsible for the implementation of public policies. Thus, the theory that high levels of states' administrative capacity and quality of government generate social trust—which makes it easier to create large sets of public goods in a society, and which explains why such societies are more successful than their opposites in fostering human well-being—is currently supported by an extensive amount of empirical research. One conclusion from this is that an important informal institution like social trust can be influenced by the design and quality of the formal and legal institutions.

KEY POINTS

- If the capability approach is to be used as the central metric for relevance of research in comparative politics, a shift of focus in what should be explained (the 'dependent variable') is necessary. The traditional and dominant ambition to explain 'politics' should be complemented by a striving to explain variations in human well-being, broadly defined.
- A focus on what politics can do for increasing human well-being, prosperity, and social justice in the world is also related to the choice of 'independent' variables—that is, factors that can explain the variation in human well-being, etc. Variables that have the strongest statistical significance may be less interesting if they are not able to be changed by political means.
- Much research in comparative politics is focused on formal institutions, leaving informal institutions out. One such institution that seems to have a huge impact on human well-being is general social trust. Recent research shows that there is a causal link between how people perceive the quality of formal institutions and their propensity to believe that other people in general can be trusted.

Conclusion

In October 2009, a Senator in the United States Congress from the Republican Party, Tom A. Colburn, proposed an amendment to cut off funding from the US National Science Foundation (NSF) to research in political science. His argument was that research produced by political scientist was a waste of tax-payers' money because it is irrelevant to human well-being. Instead, Colburn argued, NSF should redirect its funding towards research in the natural

sciences and engineering that would, for example, produce new biofuels or help people with severe disabilities. While not initially successful, Colburn's attack on funding for political science was approved by the US Congress in 2013 and again in 2015. The argument presented here is that while there may be many reasons to criticize the political science discipline, the argument that it does not have the ability to 'save lives' is patently wrong. Understanding how political institutions operate is the ultimate goal of comparative politics, and it would not be an exaggeration to say that if we today would summarize human misery in the world, most of it can be explained by the fact that a majority of the world's population live under dysfunctional political institutions. For the most part, it is not a lack of natural resources, financial capital, medical techniques, or knowledge that is the main cause of widespread human misery. Instead, the main culprit is the low quality of the political institutions in many countries. In 2013, the President of the World Bank, Jim Yong Kim, stated that 'in the developing world, corruption is public enemy No. 1'.³ While corruption certainly has legal, economic, and sociological connotations, it is predominantly an issue about the construction, the quality, and the ethical standards of the public institutions in a country which is an issue that should be at the heart of comparative political science.

In addition to the political consultant and public intellectual approaches to the issue of relevance, the argument here has been that comparative politics has a great potential for being relevant for things that most people care about—namely, the level of human well-being of their societies. This is based on connecting the empirical research carried out in the discipline with the normative theory of justice known as the capability approach. This should lead to three consequences that are important for the relevance of the discipline. Firstly, a shift of focus on what should be explained from 'mere politics' to questions that impact on human well-being. The internal operations of the political machine are less interesting than what the machine can, and should, do for people. Secondly, more focus on variables that both have an explanatory power and that are also possible to change. Thirdly, while not undervaluing the institutions for representative democracy, more focus ought to be given to the institutions that are related to issues like state capacity. A central issue for increasing the relevance of comparative politics would be to focus on the relation between the '1,024' problem mentioned above and the state's capacity to deliver human well-being. Are some ways of configuring a democratic system more likely to have a positive effect on human well-being than others?

One sometimes hears the argument that research of this type is of lower value because it is seen as 'applied', in contrast to research that is deemed as 'basic'. This distinction may be applicable to the natural sciences, but it is more doubtful if it is relevant for the social sciences. It should be remembered that the three Nobel Laureates

that can be said to be closest to comparative politics—John Nash, Douglass C. North, and Elinor Ostrom—all started out from applied research questions. Nash tried to understand how the superpowers should avoid a devastating nuclear war. North asked the question of why some countries are so much richer than others. Ostrom

asked why some local groups managed to handle their common natural resources in a sustainable way while others failed. If starting from applied 'real world' questions like these can lead to theoretical breakthroughs that deserve a Nobel prize, the distinction in value between 'basic' and 'applied' research cannot apply.



Questions

Knowledge based

1. What does the 'capability approach to social science' state?
2. Why is the design of political institutions relevant for societies?
3. In what ways can democracy reduce corruption?
4. How is corruption related to political legitimacy?
5. What can explain the variations in social trust between countries?

Critical thinking

1. Should comparative politics experts advise politicians?
2. Should comparative politics experts engage in public debates?
3. Is democracy helpful or even necessary for societies' well-being?
4. In what ways can knowledge in comparative politics 'save lives'?
5. What would be the optimal way to design institutions in a democracy?



Further reading

Andrews, M. (2013) *The Limits of Institutional Reform in Development: Changing Rules for Realistic Solutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Chayes, S. (2015) *Thieves of State: Why Corruption Threatens Global Security* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company).

Dahlström, C., and Lapuente, V. (2016) *Organizing the Leviathan: How the Relationship between Politicians and Bureaucrats Shapes Good Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

Fukuyama, F. (2014) *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux).

Hall, P. A., and Lamont, M. (eds.) (2009) *Successful Societies: How Institutions and Culture Affect Health* (New York: Cambridge University Press).

Holmberg, S., and Rothstein, B. (eds.) (2012) *Good Government: The Relevance of Political Science* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar).

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Rothstein, B., and Varraich, A. (2017) *Making Sense of Corruption* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

Stoker, G., Peters, B. G., and Pierre, J. (eds.) (2015) *The Relevance of Political Science* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan).



Web links

<http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>
World Value Survey

<https://www.v-dem.net/en/>
Varieties of Democracy Project

<http://www.qog.pol.gu.se>
The Quality of Government Institute

<http://www.themonkeycage.org/>
The Monkey Cage

<https://www.sites.google.com/site/electoralintegrityproject4/home>

The Electoral Integrity Project

<http://www.worldjusticeproject.org/rule-law-around-world>
The World Justice Project

<https://www.transparency.org/>
Transparency International



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

www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/caramani4e/



Endnotes

¹ Data from the Quality of Government Data Bank, www.qog.pol.gu.se.

² 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.

³ Reuters World Edition, 19 December 2013 at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-worldbank-corruption-idUSBRE9BI11P20131219>.

CHAPTER 2

Approaches in comparative politics

B. Guy Peters

Chapter contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction | 36 |
| Uses of theory in comparison | 36 |
| Alternative perspectives: the five 'I's | 39 |
| What more is needed? | 45 |
| Conclusion | 47 |

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.