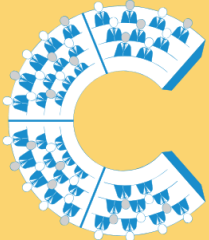


# COMPARATIVE GOVERNMENT - THE POLITICS OF ELSEWHERE



*Austin Minter*  
Lemoore College

FIRST EDITION



# COMPARATIVE GOVERNMENT

THE POLITICS OF ELSEWHERE

AUSTIN MINTER, PH.D.

Comparative Government - The Politics of  
Elsewhere

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## Licensing

## About the Authors

### 1: Why and How We Compare

- 1.1: What is Comparative Politics?
- 1.2: Approaches to Comparative Politics
- 1.3: The Scientific Method and Comparative Politics
- 1.4: Four Approaches to Research
- 1.5: How We Select Cases to Compare
- 1.6: Chapter Review Questions
- 1.7: Bibliography

### 2: States, Regimes, and the Role of the State

- 2.1: Introduction to States
- 2.2: The Modern State and Regime Types
- 2.3: Case Study - North and South Korea
- 2.4: Chapter Review Questions
- 2.5: Bibliography

### 3: Political Institutions

- 3.1: Institutions within Democracy
- 3.2: Systems of Democracy
- 3.3: Legislatures
- 3.4: Executives
- 3.5: Courts
- 3.6: Sub-National Governments
- 3.7: Bureaucracy
- 3.8: Case Study - UK, France, and Germany
- 3.9: Chapter Review Questions
- 3.10: Bibliography

### 4: Democracy, Authoritarianism, and Regime Change

- 4.1: What is Democracy?
- 4.2: Democratic Consolidation
- 4.3: What are Non-Democracies?
- 4.4: Strategies for Staying in Power
- 4.5: Varieties of Non-Democracy
- 4.6: Democratic Backsliding
- 4.7: Case Study - Hungary and Poland
- 4.8: Chapter Review Questions

#### 4.9: Bibliography

### **5: Political Culture, Identity, and Public Opinion**

#### 5.1: Introduction to Political Identity

#### 5.2: Culture

#### 5.3: Race and Ethnicity

#### 5.4: Gender

#### 5.5: National Identity

#### 5.6: Religious Identity

#### 5.7: Class Identity

#### 5.8: Political Socialization and Public Opinion

#### 5.9: Measuring Public Opinion

#### 5.10: Case Study - Israel and Iran

#### 5.11: Chapter Review Questions

#### 5.12: Bibliography

### **6: Contentious Politics- Movements and Violence**

#### 6.1: What is Collective Action? What are Social Movements?

#### 6.2: Frameworks for Collective Action

#### 6.3: A Framework for Explaining Social Movements

#### 6.4: What is Political Violence?

#### 6.5: State-Sponsored Political Violence

#### 6.6: Non-State Political Violence

#### 6.7: Post-Conflict Strategies

#### 6.8: Case Study - South Africa and Northern Ireland

#### 6.9: Chapter Review Questions

#### 6.10: Bibliography

### **7: Political Economy and Global Challenges**

#### 7.1: What is Political Economy?

#### 7.2: Political Economic Systems

#### 7.3: Contemporary Drivers of Global Inequality

#### 7.4: Understanding the Tragedy of the Commons

#### 7.5: Cybersecurity and Artificial Intelligence

#### 7.6: Globalization

#### 7.7: Case Study - Germany and China

#### 7.8: Chapter Review Questions

#### 7.9: Bibliography

**List of Key Terms**

**Detailed Licensing**

**Index**

**Glossary**

**Instructor Resources**

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# About the Authors

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## Author: Austin Minter

Austin Minter teaches political science, sociology, and ethnic studies at Lemoore College, Fresno City College, and California State University, Fresno. He holds degrees in political science, sociology, and public administration. His research interests include political institutions, public policy, and government-society relations. He focuses on how emerging technologies, particularly artificial intelligence, shape government operations, administrative decision-making, service delivery, and institutional accountability. He also studies aviation policy and regulation, transportation governance, and aviation safety. Using qualitative and mixed methods, he examines how policies are developed, implemented, and experienced by individuals and communities. Additional interests include intergovernmental relations, administrative burden, disaster management and recovery, rural governance, economic inequality, civic engagement, and the intersection of technology, education, and public institutions.

Dr. Minter adapted this textbook so that it flows with the way the course is taught, particularly in eight-week and other short-term formats, and so that faculty have resources they can readily integrate into their own courses. He believes course textbooks should be relevant and accessible, with examples that are meaningful to students and closely tied to the material they are reading.

## Acknowledgments

This textbook is adapted from *Introduction to Comparative Government and Politics* by Dino Bozonelos, Julia Wendt, Charlotte Lee, Jessica Scarffe, Masahiro Omae, Josh Franco, Byran Martin, and Stefan Veldhuis (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative), licensed under [CC BY-NC 4.0](#).

# 1: WHY AND HOW WE COMPARE

1.1: What is Comparative Politics?

1.2: Approaches to Comparative Politics

1.3: The Scientific Method and Comparative Politics

1.4: Four Approaches to Research

1.5: How We Select Cases to Compare

1.6: Chapter Review Questions

1.7: Bibliography

# 1.1: What is Comparative Politics?

## Chapter Learning Objectives

Comparative politics looks beyond a single country to examine how political systems differ, why those differences exist, and what comparing them can teach us. This chapter introduces the foundations of comparative research, including the types of questions comparativists ask, the role of evidence and the scientific method, and the main approaches researchers use. It also covers case selection, or how political scientists choose which countries to compare and what conclusions the comparison can support.

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Explain the purpose of comparative politics and describe how political scientists use evidence, research methods, and comparison to study political systems.
- Evaluate how researchers select cases for comparative analysis and explain why particular cases may be useful for answering different political questions.

## Introduction

Have you ever read the news and wondered,

- “Why is this country at war with another country?” or
- “Why did that world leader say or do that?” or
- “Why doesn’t this country trade with that country?” or maybe, very simply,
- “Why can’t all these countries just get along?”

If you have, you’ve already begun asking a few of the many questions scholars within the field of comparative politics ask when practicing their craft. Many of the questions and concerns within the realm of comparative politics are centered on a wide spectrum of social, political, cultural, and economic circumstances and outcomes, which provide students and scholars alike with robust and diverse opportunities for inquiry and discussion. The field of comparative politics is broad enough to enable provocative conversations about the nature of violence, the future of democracy, why some democracies fail, and why vast disparities in wealth are able to persist both globally and within certain countries. Whether a student watches or reads the news, or expresses any outward concern for global and current events, many of the problems and issues within comparative politics inevitably affect every person on the planet.

So, what exactly is comparative politics? What differentiates comparative politics from other subfields within political science? What can be gained from studying comparative politics? The following sections introduce the field, outlook, and topics within comparative politics that this textbook will further explore.

## Overview

When defining and describing the scope of comparative politics, it is useful to back up and recall the purpose of political science from a broad perspective. **Political science** is a field of social and scientific inquiry which seeks to advance knowledge of political institutions, behavior, activities, and outcomes using systematic and logical research methods in order to test and refine theories about how the political world operates. Since the field of political science is so broad, it has a number of subfields within it that enable students and scholars to focus on various phenomena from different analytical lenses and perspectives. Although there are many topics that can be addressed within political science, there are eight subfields that tend to garner the most attention. These subfields include: (1) comparative politics, (2) American politics, (3) international relations, (4) political philosophy, (5) research methodology, (6) political economy, (7) public policy, and (8) political psychology. All of these subfields, to varying degrees, are able to leverage findings and approaches from a diversity of disciplines, including anthropology, economics, history, law, philosophy, psychology, and sociology. Given the vast scope of political science, and in order to understand where comparative politics fits within the discipline, it is useful to briefly consider each of these subfields.

## Comparative Politics

This subfield of political science seeks to advance understanding of political structures from around the world in an organized, methodological, and clear way. Scholars can, for instance, analyze countries, in part or in whole, in order to consider similarities and differences between and among countries. While the name of the field itself suggests a methodology of comparing and contrasting, there is ample room for debate over the best way to analyze political units side-by-side. In this chapter, we show different ways to prepare a comparison, whether one focuses on area studies, cross-national studies, or subnational studies. Comparative politics involves looking first within countries and then across designated countries (this contrasts with international relations, which is described below, but entails looking primarily across countries, with less attention given to within-country analysis). Throughout this textbook, we discuss many of the themes for analysis, whether the scholar is focusing on “the state,” political institutions, democracies and non-democracies, political identity, collective action, or political violence. After briefly considering the other subfields within political science, we will revisit the question of the definition and scope of comparative politics.



Figure 1.1.1: Comparativists (those studying comparative politics) look within countries and then across designated countries to compare and contrast. One theme a comparativist may study is how types of leadership, and the associated political regime types (e.g., democracy, dictatorship), differ across countries. A scholar may ask: Who are the heads of state, where do they conduct their official government work, and how does this vary across countries? (Sources (from left to right): [White House](#) by Matt Wade is licensed under [CC-BY-SA 3.0](#); [Tokyo, Japan, Seimon Ishibashi Bridge](#) by Kakidai is licensed under [CC-BY-SA 3.0](#); [Madrid, Spain, Royal Palace of Madrid](#) by Bernard Gagnon is licensed under [CC BY-SA 3.0](#); [London, Britain, Number 10 Downing Street](#) by Sergeant Tom Robinson RLC is licensed under [Open Government License version 1.0](#); [Reykjavík, Iceland, Bessastaðir, Wohnsitz der isl. Präsidenten](#) by Balou46 is licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](#))

## American Politics

This subfield of political science focuses on political institutions and behaviors within the United States. Those interested in American politics will focus on questions like: What is the role of elections in American democracy? How do interest groups affect legislation in the United States? What is the role of public opinion and the media in the United States, and what are the implications for democracy? What is the future of the two-party system? Do political parties delay important political action? Those who decide to specialize in American politics could find themselves with a variety of career opportunities, such as the following: teaching; journalism; working for government think-tanks; working for federal, state, or local governmental institutions; or even running for office.

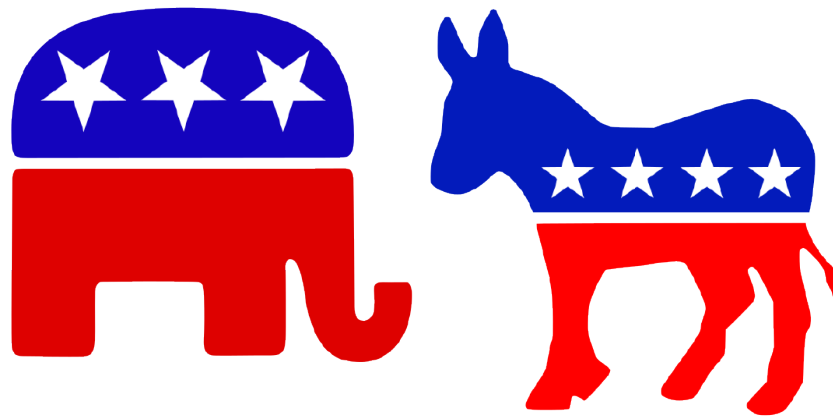


Figure 1.1.2: Political scientists who study American politics have a variety of research interests, and one area of inquiry is the study of political parties and partisanship in the United States. Political parties began forming almost immediately upon the United States' Declaration of Independence, though a number of founders, including George Washington, warned early on about the influence and possible dangers of political parties on the state of democracy. The two main political parties in the United States are the Republican Party (logo in the image on the left) and the Democratic Party (logo in the image on the right). (Sources (from left to right): [Republican Elephant](#) by Republican Party (United States) is licensed under [CC01 - Universal Public Domain](#); [Democratic Donkey](#) by Steven Braeger is licensed under [Public Domain CC0 1.0 Universal](#))

## International Relations

Sometimes called world politics, international affairs, or international studies, international relations is a subfield of political science which focuses on how countries and/or international organizations or bodies interact with each other. Those interested in international relations consider questions like: What causes war between countries? How does international trade affect relationships between countries? How do international bodies, like non-governmental organizations, work with various countries? What is globalization and how does it affect peace and conflict? What is the best balance of power for the global system? Individuals interested in this field of political science may be looking for careers in teaching, non-governmental organizations, the United Nations, or governmental think-tanks focused on foreign policy.



Figure 1.1.3: Academics involved in the study of international relations are often interested in themes of international conflict. To this end, some studies involve looking at members of the United Nations (headquarters in New York City pictured above). The United Nations is an intergovernmental organization formed in 1945 with the goal of promoting peace and preventing international conflicts. (Source: [The United Nations](#) by Tom Page is licensed under [CC BY-SA 2.0](#))

## Political Philosophy

Sometimes called political theory, political philosophy is a subfield of political science that reflects on the philosophical origins of politics, the state, government, fairness, equality, equity, authority, and legitimacy. This field can consider themes in broad or

narrow terms, considering the origins of political principles, as well as implications for these principles as they relate to issues of political identity, culture, the environment, ethics, distribution of wealth, and other social phenomena. Those interested in political philosophy may ask questions like: Where did the concept of “the state” arise? What were the different ancient beliefs regarding the formation of states and cooperation within societies? How is power derived within systems, and what are the best theories to explain power dynamics? Individuals who are interested in political philosophy may find careers in teaching, research, journalism, or consulting.

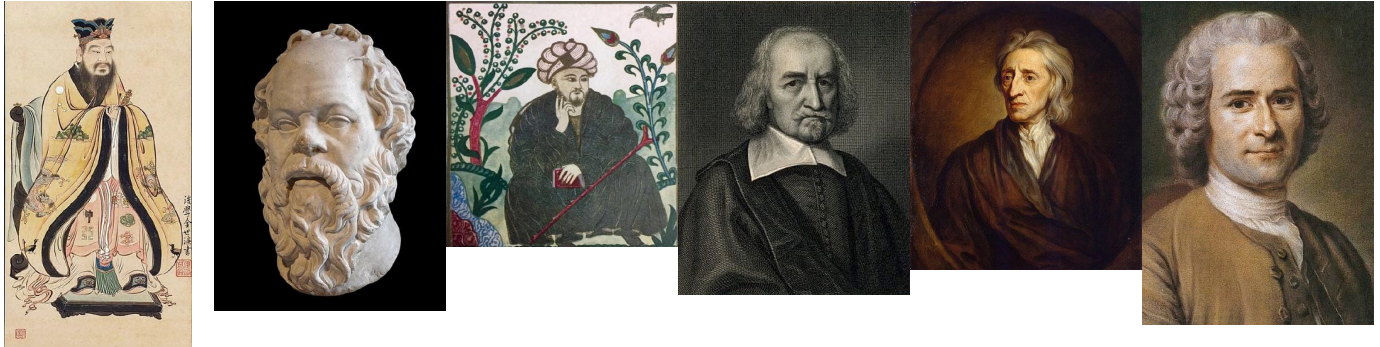


Figure 1.1.4: Political philosophers are interested in a large scope of issues relating to the nature and basis of political power. They consider concepts like authority, equality, freedom, justice, legitimacy, and rights. The above-pictured political philosophers considered many of these themes. (Sources (from left to right): [Confucius](#) by Kanō Sansetsu is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](#); [Socrates](#), by Eric Gaba is licensed under [CC BY-SA 2.5](#); [Al Farabi](#), by Unknown Author is [CC01 - Universal Public Domain](#); [Thomas Hobbes](#), Line engraving by W. Humphrys is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](#); [John Locke](#), by Godfrey Kneller is licensed under [CC01 - Universal Public Domain](#); [Jean-Jacques Rousseau](#) by Maurice Quentin de La Tour is licensed under [CC01 - Universal Public Domain](#)).

## Research Methodology

Research methodology is a subfield of political science that seeks to consider the best practices for analyzing themes within political science through discussion, testing, and critical analysis of how research is constructed and implemented. This subfield is concerned with finding techniques for testing theories and hypotheses related to political science. An ongoing and heated debate often arises out of the proper or applicable usage of quantitative versus qualitative research designs, though each inevitably can be appropriate for various research scenarios.

**Quantitative research** centers on testing a theory or hypothesis, usually through mathematical and statistical means, using data from a large sample. Quantitative research can be beneficial in situations where a researcher is looking to test the validity of a theory, or general statement, while looking at a large sample size of data that is diverse and representative of the subjects being studied. Scholars in many subfields of political science can, depending on the subject they are considering, find practical applicability for quantitative research methods. Someone interested in international relations, for instance, may want to test the influence of global trade on conflict. For this, the sample size of the study may be 172 countries engaged in international trade over a period of 10, 20, or even 50 years. Looking at data from this sample, the researcher may wish to test this theory: Trade improves relations between states, making conflict less likely. The researcher testing the theory would need to find ways to quantify the two key variables over time—trade relations and conflict—and collect data for the entire sample. The method for testing this theory quantitatively would then involve statistical analysis.

**Qualitative research** centers on exploring ideas and phenomena, potentially with the goal of consolidating information or developing evidence to form a theory or hypothesis to test. Qualitative research involves categorizing, summarizing, and analyzing cases thoroughly to gain greater understanding. Often, given the need for detailed description, qualitative research will have a small sample size, perhaps only comparing a small number of countries at a time, or even examining an individual country as a single case study. Some of the methods for qualitative research involve conducting interviews, constructing literature reviews, and preparing ethnographies.

Regardless of a quantitative or qualitative approach, topics of interest within the subfield of research methodology focus on advancing discussions of best practices in research design; understanding causal relationships; considering how to validly and reliably measure social, economic, cultural, and political trends; and reducing errors due to issues like selection bias and omitted variable bias (among many others). This subfield is critical to all other subfields within political science, and this book will examine the topics identified above in greater detail in Chapter 2. Those who are interested in pursuing research methodology as a subfield will find career openings related not only to political science, but also to data science, mathematics, the nature of inquiry, and statistics.

## Political Economy

This subfield of political science considers various economic theories (e.g., capitalism, socialism, communism, fascism), practices, and outcomes either within a country, or among and between countries in the global system. Those interested in political economy will become versed with the theories brought forth by Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Karl Marx, and Max Weber (among others) to gain greater understanding into economic systems, their outputs, and their effects on society. Political economy can be studied from the standpoints of a few other subfields in political science. For instance, a scholar of comparative politics may consider political economy when comparing and contrasting countries. A scholar of international relations may consider questions relating to global inequalities, relationships between poor and wealthy countries, or the role of non-governmental organizations or multinational corporations on international trade and finance. Those who are interested in political economy may pursue careers in analysis (e.g., of the stock market), economics, teaching, or research.

## Public Policy

This subfield of political science explores political policies and outcomes, and focuses on the strength, legitimacy, and effectiveness of political institutions. Scholars in this subfield may ask questions similar to the following: How is the agenda for public policies set? Which public policy issues get the most attention, and why? How do we evaluate the effectiveness of a public policy? To what extent can a public policy hurt or help democracy? Those who are interested in public policy may seek careers relating to almost any item on the political agenda (e.g., education, healthcare, military affairs, welfare); they may go into teaching and research; or they may serve as public policy consultants for federal, state, or local governmental organizations.

## Political Psychology

This subfield of political science weds together principles, themes, and research from political science and psychology to understand the psychological roots of political behavior. Is there a psychological reason world leaders behave in a certain way? Is a leader's behavior strategic and, consciously or not, rooted in some psychological basis? Can theories of cognitive and social processes explain various political outcomes? Those who are interested in the psychological origins of political behavior may find interesting careers in teaching, research, and consulting.



Figure 1.1.5: Political psychologists are interested in the psychological roots of political behavior. To this end, they may conduct research and analysis on various personality types and potential psychological determinants for political behavior. Political psychologists have considered the personality characteristics of the three leaders pictured above: Kim Jong-Un (North Korea), Vladimir Putin (Russia), and Xi Jinping (China). (Sources (from left to right): [Kim Jong-Un](#), by Alexei Nikolsky is licensed under [CC-BY 4.0](#); [Vladimir Putin](#), by [The Presidential Press and Information Office](#) is licensed under [CC-BY 4.0](#); [Xi Jiping](#), by [Palácio do Planalto](#) is licensed under [CC-BY-SA](#))

Figure 1.1.6 provides a graphical representation of the subfields within political science, though it is important to point out that the subfields are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For instance, public policy, political economy, and political psychology can each be analyzed through the lens of American politics, but they can also be the key point of consideration for studies within comparative politics or international relations. All of these subfields will need some level of specialization in research methodology to enable the systematic analysis of their subjects of interest. Without a basis in research methodology, these subfields would not be able to advance knowledge in the field in a substantive way.

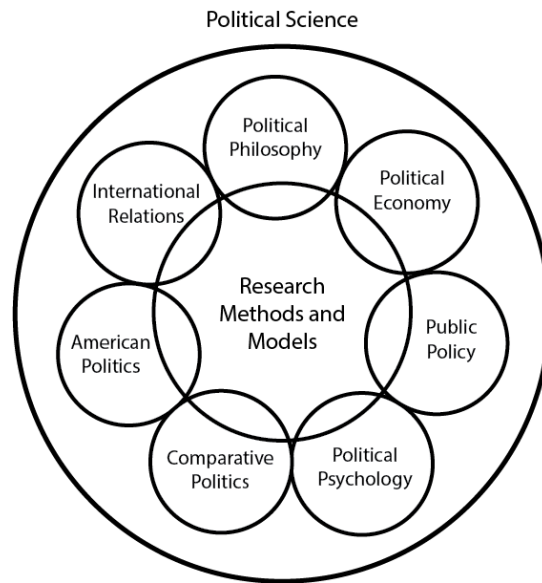


Figure 1.1.6: This Venn-style diagram shows the major subfields of political science as overlapping circles enclosed within a larger oval labeled “Political Science.” Seven subfields—Political Philosophy, Political Economy, Public Policy, Political Psychology, Comparative Politics, American Politics, and International Relations—are arranged in a ring, each partially overlapping its neighbors to indicate that the subfields share concerns and borrow from one another. At the center, overlapping all seven, is a circle labeled “Research Methods and Models,” conveying that rigorous methodology is the shared foundation on which every subfield’s work depends. (Source: Author Creation.)

Given the overall spectrum of subfields available within the field of political science, we will now take a closer look at comparative politics. In the following section, we will examine the origin of comparative politics, provide an expanded definition of the subfield, and highlight terminology frequently used by comparativists (those who study comparative politics).

## A Brief History and Expanded Definition

In considering the other subfields within political science, it may not seem like a complicated process to define comparative politics. Comparative politics seems to be an area of study wherein scholars compare and contrast political systems, institutions, characteristics, and outcomes on one, a few, or a group of countries. In actuality, there has been ample debate over the ideal definition and scope of comparative politics. To consider comparative politics more thoroughly, it is helpful to consider its historical origins.

Most often, comparative politics is considered to have ancient origins, going back to at least Aristotle. Aristotle has sometimes been credited with being the “father” of political science, and attributed with being one of the first to use comparative methodologies for analyzing competing Greek city-states. The word politics derives from the Greek word, *politikos*, meaning “of, or relating to, the polis,” with polis being translated as city-state. Aristotle envisioned the study of politics to be one of the three major forms of science individuals could engage in. The first form of science, according to Aristotle, was theoretical science, and in modern terms, this refers closest to the studies of both physics and metaphysics, which he considered to be concerned with the pursuit of truth and knowledge for intrinsic purposes. The second form of science that Aristotle identified was practical science, which was the study of what is ideal for individuals and society. The final area of science Aristotle identified was productive science, which he envisioned as the making of important or beautiful objects. To Aristotle, political science fell within the realm of practical sciences, and political science (“the most authoritative science”) was of critical concern when discussing what is best for society. To Aristotle, political science must concern itself with what is “good” or “right” or “just” for society, as the lives of citizens are at stake given political structures and institutions.

It is not difficult to appreciate why Aristotle found political science, and comparative politics, so important given his overall beliefs on the function of politics within a society. In Aristotle’s time, the units of analysis were Greek city-states. If these city-states were stable, they enabled people to live productive lives; if these city-states were unstable, they did not produce such benefits. For Aristotle, it was critical to find ways to compare and contrast the city-states to understand how they operated and what outcomes they produced. To this end, Aristotle looked at the constitutions for various city-states, finding much variation in political outcomes. A city-state could have one ruler, who, depending on how the government was run, was either a rightful king or a tyrant running an authoritarian regime. Or, a city-state could have a few rulers, which, at best, could be an aristocracy, or at worst, could be an oligarchy where only the elite were included in decision-making and rewards. Finally, a city-state could

have multiple rulers, balanced by a “middle” class that attempted to rule on behalf of the people’s interests. This “middle” group was not tremendously wealthy, nor woefully poor, and was able to understand the needs of society at large by virtue of being in the “middle.” While Aristotle considered democracy to have the possibility of being “deviant,” he also entertained the possibility that having more people involved in government could be a way to limit corruption. In either case, Aristotle spent much time comparing and contrasting political regime types to determine which produced the best outcomes for society.

Aristotle’s work influenced a number of thinkers to continue the tradition of scientifically approaching problems in political science and comparative politics, including Niccolo Machiavelli (author of *The Prince*, 1532), Charles Montesquieu, (author of *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1748), and Max Weber (author of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 1905), to name only a few.

Despite its extensive history, scholars still disagree on the exact definition of comparative politics. Table 1.1.1 provides three definitions from textbooks in comparative politics.

Table 1.1.1: No, really... What is Comparative Politics?

| Textbook                                                                  | Definition of Comparative Politics                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b><i>The Art of Comparative Politics</i> (Lane, 1997, p. 2)</b>          | “What is comparative politics? It is two things, first a world, second, a discipline. As a ‘world,’ comparative politics encompasses political behavior and institutions in all parts of the earth... The ‘discipline’ of comparative politics is a field of study that desperately tries to keep up with, to encompass, to understand, to explain, and perhaps to influence the fascinating and often riotous world of comparative politics.” |
| <b><i>Essentials of Comparative Politics</i> (O’Neil, 2004, p. 3)</b>     | “Politics is...the struggle in any group for power that will give a person or people the ability to make decisions for the larger groups...comparative politics is a subfield that compares this struggle across countries.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b><i>New Directions in Comparative Politics</i> (Wiarda, 2000, p. 7)</b> | “Comparative politics involves the systematic study and comparison of the world’s political systems. It seeks to explain differences between as well as similarities among countries. In contrast to journalistic reporting on a single country, comparative politics is particularly interested in exploring patterns, processes, and regularities among political systems.”                                                                  |

While the differences in Table 1.1.1 may appear small on the surface, debate on the definition of comparative politics can sometimes be contentious. For example, Zahariadis (1997) argued that comparative politics needs to be a study of *foreign* countries. If this is true, does it mean that someone who lives in a country is unable to study their own country and still call it comparative politics? Was Aristotle’s study of city-states methodologically flawed since he occasionally lived in different city-states? As another example, comparativists often disagree on the appropriate sample size for inquiry. Does the definition of comparative politics mandate that a researcher study a certain number of countries at a time? When Alexis de Tocqueville wrote *Democracy in America* (1835), was this study flawed because it only considered the political lives of Americans? If we use Zahariadis’ definition, de Tocqueville did focus on a *foreign* country, but since it was only *one* country, does it fall outside the realm of comparative politics? While we will not definitively answer these questions in this textbook, we will provide an overview of various research methodologies used within comparative politics in Chapter 2.

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## 1.2: Approaches to Comparative Politics

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### Introduction

Comparative politics involves looking inside countries, regions, institutions, or other entities and then comparing across them. But how do comparativists know what to compare? Comparativists often compare countries, but can they compare *any* two countries? What if those countries systematically differ? Do they *ever* want to compare countries that are systematically different? What best practices do comparativists follow when choosing cases? As we will discuss in Chapter 2, case selection is a foundational aspect of research design in comparative politics. However, before delving into the details of case selection, we first need to understand three broad approaches to comparative analysis: area studies, cross-national studies, and subnational studies. After defining key terms related to institutions that transcend the approaches, we will discuss each approach.

### Institutions

No matter the approach to comparative analysis, comparativists often study institutions. **Institutions** are the beliefs, norms, and organizations that structure social and political life. They encompass the rules, norms, and values of a society. As March and Olsen (2006, p. 3) define, institutions are “a relatively enduring collection of rules and organization practices, embedded in structures of meaning and resources that are relatively invariant in the face of turnover of individuals and relatively resistant to the idiosyncratic preferences and expectations of individuals and outside circumstances.” Peters (2019, p. 23) adds that institutions “transcend individuals to involve groups of individuals in some sort of patterned interactions that are predictable.”

Institutions are therefore predictable, stable, and affect individual behavior, yet they come in many shapes and sizes. There are **formal institutions**, which are based on a clear set of rules that have been formalized, often with the authority to enforce the rules through punitive measures. Examples include universities, sports leagues, and corporations. Formal institutions often (though not always) have physical tangibility, such as through a building or a location (e.g., a university campus).

There are also **informal institutions**, which are based on an unwritten set of rules that have not necessarily been formalized. Informal institutions are based on conventions on how one should behave, and there is no authority that monitors the behavior. An example of an informal institution is the societal expectation for waiting in line. While expectations for waiting in line will vary by location (e.g., in a school cafeteria, the line order will be first-come, first-serve; in an emergency room, the line order will depend on the severity of medical need), people are generally expected to self-regulate.

Finally, there are political institutions, which can be formal or informal. **Political institutions** are “structures that lend the polity its integrity” (Orren & Skowronek, 1995, p. 298). These are the spaces in which the majority of politics and political decisions take place. Formal political institutions include written constitutions, legislatures, judiciaries, executives, militaries, and police forces. Informal political institutions, as one example, include expectations during negotiations. During the lawmaking process, lawmakers may logroll, or exchange reciprocal promises of voting support for legislation. Without logrolling, the number of laws passed would likely decrease substantially. Other examples of informal political institutions include norms surrounding levels of corruption, political ideology, and political culture.

The study of formal, informal, and political institutions occurs in each of the three broad approaches to comparative analysis: area studies, cross-national studies, and subnational studies.



Figure 1.2.1: Political institutions can be either formal or informal. A Trump supporter, pictured on the left, represents informal political institutions through political culture. The Supreme Court, pictured on the right, is a formal institution. (Sources (from left to right): [Trump Supporter](#), by Johnny Silvercloud is licensed under [CC BY-SA 2.0](#); [The Supreme Court](#), by Joe Ravi is licensed under [CC BY-SA 3.0](#), [Trump Supporter](#))

## Area Studies

The first approach to comparative analysis is through area studies, in which scholarship is organized geographically. The field of **area studies** has its roots in the age of empires when European powers expanded their borders beyond the continent of Europe. As imperial forces, such as the British and the French, occupied more territory, the 'enlightened' Europeans attempted to understand the 'exotic' peoples and the indigenous languages, cultures, and social norms of the regions they conquered. Eurocentrism was the norm, with invaders filling their home museums with items stolen or 'bought' from other civilizations.

World War II transformed area studies from a colonial enterprise into a geopolitical imperative. In the United States, military campaigns in Europe, Asia-Pacific, and North Africa required deep understanding of terrain from area specialists. The Cold War further solidified the need for area studies. The conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union included proxy wars across many continents, pushing the U.S. military to rely on the university system for expertise. Universities established various centers, programs, and initiatives, such as the Center for Latin American Studies at Stanford University, the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University, and the Asian Studies Initiative at Boston University. The 1958 National Defense Act, moreover, provided funding for training in critical languages, and entities such as the Ford Foundation, the Social Science Research Council, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the American Council of Learned Societies contributed to the area-specific efforts.

Despite the controversial origins of this approach to research, area studies are important interdisciplinary segments of contemporary university curricula. Area studies can include disciplines such as anthropology, economics, geography, history, linguistics, literature, political science, religious studies, and sociology. Within the broad approach of area studies, there are also numerous (and sometimes contentiously-defined) fields corresponding to geographical areas. Table 1.2.1 provides select examples.

Table 1.2.1: *Select Examples of Geographically-Defined Fields within Area Studies*

| Africa                   | Asia                    | Europe                     | Latin America            | Middle East            |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| African Studies          | Asian Studies           | European Studies           | Amazonia Studies         | Gulf Studies           |
| Africana Studies         | Asian-Pacific Studies   | East European Studies      | Caribbean Studies        | Levantine Studies      |
| East African Studies     | East Asian Studies      | Mediterranean Studies      | Central American Studies | Maghrib Studies        |
| Southern African Studies | South Asian Studies     | Post-Soviet Studies        | Latin American Studies   | Middle Eastern Studies |
| West African Studies     | Southeast Asian Studies | Southeast European Studies | Southern Cone Studies    | Near Eastern Studies   |

## Cross-National Studies

A second approach to comparative analysis is through **cross-national studies**, a type of research transcending national boundaries that is “*explicitly* comparative, that is, studies that utilize systematically comparable data from two or more nations” (Kohn, 1987, p. 714). In this sense, area studies may also be cross-national studies (within a defined geographical region), yet we distinguish cross-national studies from area studies as approaches to comparative analysis. Cross-national studies place much emphasis on appropriately measuring variables across cases to increase external validity, the extent to which a researcher can generalize their findings.

A good example of cross-national research is Arend Lijphart's (1999) book, *Patterns of Democracy*. In this seminal study, Lijphart examines 36 diverse democracies, comparing institutions ranging from electoral systems to the role of central banks to internal policy-making techniques. Another example is the cross-national analysis of the 38 countries making up the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), an intergovernmental organization that facilitates dialogue on macroeconomic policies. OECD countries, which span multiple continents, have harmonized their economic indicators, allowing for easier comparisons. A final example of cross-national research is the Polity data series, which ranks countries from strongly democratic to strongly autocratic based on political regime characteristics. To summarize the commonalities among these examples, in comparative politics, cross-national studies often involve the comparisons of countries, or country institutions, across geographical regions and through quantitative analysis.

Due to the quantitative focus, one of the major critiques of cross-national studies relates to measurement. Can we properly measure variables and compare across large swaths of countries? Does consistent data exist across space and time? Do our measures have internal validity (that is, do they accurately reflect the concept we aim to measure)? Does our study have external validity (that is, is it generalizable)? These difficult questions have led some to reject cross-national research in comparative politics, but the attempt to systematize analyses across countries is important. Measurement is a problem that all social scientists face, and deliberations on how to appropriately measure concepts like democracy, capitalism, and election integrity are necessary to support shared understanding.

## Subnational Studies

A third approach to comparative analysis is through **subnational studies**, research in which scholars compare subnational governments (any level of government lower than the national level). A researcher may compare subnational governments within one country (e.g., state, county, or city governments within the United States), or a researcher may compare subnational units across countries (e.g., provincial, regional, or municipal governments in multiple countries).

Across countries, subnational governments vary significantly in their level of sovereignty. **Sovereignty** is fundamental governmental power and authority in decision-making within a given territory. This fundamental power and authority means that a government has the power to coerce others to do things they may not want to do, such as paying taxes or not speeding on freeways. In some countries, sovereignty is shared between the national government and subnational governments. An example is the United States, in which power is shared between the national government in Washington, D.C. and the 50 state governments. Countries with this shared power structure have **federal governments**. Other countries do not share power in this manner. When the power is concentrated at the national level, a country has a **unitary government**. An example is France, where the majority of power lies in Paris in the hands of the president and parliament. When power is instead concentrated at a subnational level, a country has a **confederal government**. While few contemporary examples exist, Switzerland offers one; within Switzerland, there are 26 subnational governmental units called cantons, and each canton has its own constitution.

Subnational research traces its roots to the 1970s. At this time, there was a surge in the number of democracies worldwide and an increase in the empowerment of subnational governments through the process of decentralization (Snyder, 2001). This process is known as devolution. **Devolution** occurs when the central government in a country deliberately transfers power to a government at a lower level. Examples of devolution include the creation of parliaments in Scotland and Wales and the creation of the Catalan, Basque, and Galician autonomous regional governments in Spain.

To study questions of sovereignty and devolution, subnational research can take two approaches. The first approach is a within-nation comparison. In a **within-nation comparison**, a researcher studies the subnational governments or institutions within a single country. For example, a researcher within the subfield of American politics might analyze and compare all 50 states' policies toward COVID-19. The second approach is a **between-nation comparison**, in which a researcher compares subnational governments across different countries. As an example, a researcher studying postcolonial Africa may study contiguous subnational governments because tribal, ethnic, and religious group boundaries often overlap national borders.

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## 1.3: The Scientific Method and Comparative Politics

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### Introduction

When many people consider the field of science, they think of laboratories filled with clinicians in white lab coats, chemical experiments with bubbling vials, and vast chalkboards of mathematical equations. These images represent the "hard sciences," such as chemistry, mathematics, and physics, and those researching in the hard sciences work to advance scientific understanding in the natural or physical sciences. Yet the "soft sciences," such as psychology, sociology, and political science, are also science. Those researching in the soft sciences work to advance scientific understanding of human behavior, institutions, society, government, decision-making, and power. Both hard and soft sciences provide significant contributions to the world of scientific inquiry and rely on the scientific method, yet they face different challenges. Highlighting a major challenge in the soft sciences, Physicist Heinz Pagels (1988) refers to the social sciences, those that scientifically study human society and relationships, as the "sciences of complexity." Numerous factors influence social phenomena and, in many cases, experimentation is not possible; it is inconceivable, for instance, to randomly assign a dictator to some countries and a democratic leader to others and then to measure how outcomes differ among the two sets of cases.

Despite this difficulty, **science** is simply the systematic and organized approach to any area of inquiry that utilizes scientific methods to acquire and build a body of knowledge, and political scientists use scientific methods to gain knowledge. As defined in Chapter 1, "comparative politics is a subfield of political science that seeks to advance understanding of political structures around the world in an organized, methodological, and clear way." To this end, political scientists rely on the rules of scientific inquiry to conduct their research. In the sections below, we introduce how the principles of scientific methods apply to the study of comparative politics.

### Why is Political Science a Science?

While ancient political thinkers like Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, and Thucydides provided observations on their political worlds, they did not always operate under a strictly scientific scope. In some instances, these thinkers used a normative approach, focusing on how the political world *should* be. However, the modern conception of political science is one that, like the other social sciences, follows the scientific method. It also largely engages in **empirical research**, analysis based on experiment, experience, or observation (as opposed to normative analysis).

Summarizing the features of empirical scientific research within the field, Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba wrote *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (1994). Although much of the book discusses political science in relation to qualitative research methods, which we will discuss later in this chapter, it also considers the general approach to scientific research in political science.

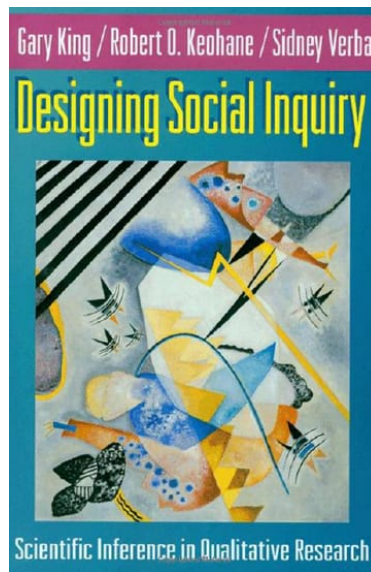


Figure 1.3.1: Book cover of *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*, by Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba. (Source: King G., & Keohane, R.O., & Verba, S. (1994). *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. Princeton University Press.)

According to King, Keohane, and Verba (1994), scientific research has four main characteristics. First, one of the primary purposes of scientific research is to make descriptive or causal inferences. An **inference** is a process of drawing a conclusion about an unobserved phenomenon, based on observed (empirical) information. A descriptive inference summarizes observed data while a causal inference identifies the causes of observed effects. The accumulation of facts, by itself, does not make an effort scientific; this is true no matter how systematically a researcher collects the facts. In order for a study to be scientific, it requires the additional step of going beyond the immediately observable information in an effort to learn about something broader that is not directly observable. The process of making inferences can help us learn about the unobserved facts by describing them based on empirical information. For example, while we cannot directly observe the concept of "democracy," political scientists identify various characteristics of democratic states, which we can then use to describe and measure the concept.

Second, the procedures of scientific research must be public. Scientific research relies on "explicit, codified, and public methods" so that others can effectively assess the validity (accuracy) and reliability (consistency) of a study's results. As a condition for publication, publishers often require authors to share data files to ensure that other researchers can replicate the results, thereby allowing for ongoing assessment.

Third, because the process of making inferences is imperfect, the conclusions of scientific research are also uncertain. Researchers must therefore be aware of a reasonable estimate of uncertainty in their work to ensure that they can appropriately interpret, and qualify as necessary, their conclusions.

Fourth, scientific research depends on the method, not the content. This means that the manner of conduct, rather than the subject matter of study, is what determines whether a researcher's work is scientific. Scientific research must adhere to a set of rules related to inference, which relies on an understanding of the scientific method.

## The Scientific Method

The **scientific method** follows a sequence of steps to standardize the research process: asking a research question, conducting background research, developing hypotheses, testing hypotheses, analyzing results, and reporting findings. Below, we discuss each step.

### Step One: Asking a Research Question

The first step in the research process is to develop a clear, focused, and relevant research question. What characteristics define a good research question in political science?

First, the research question must be relevant to the real political world. This does not mean that a research question must

address current political affairs; in fact, many political scientists study historical events and past political behaviors. However, the results of political science research are often relevant to the current political environment and may come with policy implications. Second, the question must be "falsifiable." **Falsifiability**, a term coined by Karl Popper, is the ability for a statement to be logically contradicted through empirical testing. Some research questions or claims are inherently **non-falsifiable**, meaning the question cannot be proven false. This occurs when questions are subjective (e.g., "Are oranges better than lemons?") and when technical limitations exist that make gathering evidence impossible (e.g., "Do angry ninja-robots live in Alpha Centauri?").

Suppose that a political scientist started with the following research question: "Is Argentina or Brazil better?" This question is subjective. What does "better" mean? This will vary according to an individual's taste. To refine this research question, the researcher will need to define "better." For example, the researcher may alter the question to the following: "Is Argentina or Brazil more economically productive?" This is a question on which a researcher can gather evidence. The researcher will describe metrics for what shows "economic productivity," then gather data and compare across the two countries.

Now consider a political scientist who asks: "Does investing heavily in a country's education system always mean that country will eventually become democratic?" This question has two technical limitation problems. First, the blanket statement that "investing heavily in a country's education system *always* leads to democracy" implies that a researcher will have to test every instance in which a country invests in education and democracy occurs (in addition to defining what "heavily" means). Second, and related, the word "eventually" implies that a country that invests heavily in education today may become democratic 500, 700, or 900 years from now. It is impossible to gather the evidence needed to test this research question.

## Step Two: Conducting Background Research

The second step in the research process is to conduct background research. Before formulating hypotheses or gathering any data, researchers need to complete a "literature review" to situate themselves within the field. A **literature review** is a survey and synthesis of existing scholarly research that discusses prior research findings, best practices in methodology, existing theories, and remaining limitations related to the question of interest.

A literature review may take various forms, such as chronological, thematic, methods-focused, or theory-focused. Depending on the research question, a researcher may find that it makes the most sense to arrange the research in chronological order, beginning with the early research and culminating in the most recent research on a topic. Or, a researcher may find that previous scholars' works naturally fall into themes or categories (e.g., scholars A, B, and C argue that democracy leads to economic growth; scholars X, Y, and Z argue that economic growth leads to democracy). Or, a researcher may find that the most interesting part of previous research relates to the varying methods or theories used to explain the topic and therefore choose to organize the literature review accordingly.

No matter the form it takes, conducting background research to create a literature review is a key step in the research process. It allows a scholar to showcase, summarize, and synthesize previous research, and it also allows a researcher to demonstrate why their specific research question deserves attention.

## Step Three: Developing Hypotheses

The third step in the research process is to develop a hypothesis, or a set of hypotheses. A **hypothesis** is a specific and testable prediction about the relationship between variables. A **variable** is any factor that can vary (i.e., take on different values). In a hypothesis, the researcher will identify a minimum of two types of variables: (1) an independent variable and (2) a dependent variable. In a cause-and-effect relationship, an **independent variable** (also called an "explanatory variable") is the presumed cause. A **dependent variable** (also called an "outcome variable") is the assumed effect. The independent variable leads to a change in the value of the dependent variable; in other words, the dependent variable's value depends on the changes in the independent variable. While a hypothesis is a testable prediction, a **theory** is a statement that explains how the world works based on experience and observation. An existing theory will often help a researcher build their hypotheses and, over time, repeated testing of hypotheses may lead to a new theory.

To develop, and later test (step four), a hypothesis, researchers may use either inductive or deductive reasoning. **Inductive reasoning** occurs when researchers make specific observations and attempt to form a hypothesis (and eventually a broader theory). **Deductive reasoning** occurs when researchers start with a broad theory and then test it with specific observations. While inductive reasoning uses a bottom-up approach (using specific observations to develop general theories), deductive reasoning uses a top-down approach (starting with general theories and testing with specific observations).

## Steps Four and Five: Testing Hypotheses and Analyzing Results

The fourth and fifth steps in the research process work in tandem: testing hypotheses and analyzing results. The precise manner in which a researcher tests hypotheses depends on the research method that they employ (we will expand on types of research methods in the following section), but all testing requires a researcher to make observations of the relationship between the variables in the hypothesis.

When the testing is complete, researchers analyze their results and draw conclusions about the findings. Do the results provide evidence against the hypothesis? If not, this provides some evidence in support of the hypothesis and suggests the researcher may be on the right track. If so, the researcher will need to go back to the drawing board, develop a new hypothesis, and conduct testing again.

## Step Six: Reporting Findings

The sixth step in the research process is to report findings. While not all research will result in academic publication, researchers can still share findings through research conferences, books, articles, or digital media. This information-sharing helps others to provide feedback and conduct their own research on the topic. It can also spawn new and interesting directions of research for the future.

Why is reporting findings so important? Consider the difference between two pandemics.

During the Spanish Flu, a pandemic in 1918, many countries of the world did not have freedom of press. In the midst of a hindered press and the lack of freedom of speech, doctors were unable to communicate their ideas and treatment plans for handling flu patients. Inundated with swarms of patients and flummoxed by the nature of a flu that was killing young, healthy adults, but largely sparing older individuals, doctors tried many treatment methods, yet were unable to broadly share their results.

In contrast, during COVID-19, many doctors worldwide worked on treatment plans, and were able to share their ideas on how to best treat patients. As one example, while there was a heavy reliance on ventilators initially, in time, doctors found that repositioning patients on their stomachs provided more time for patients to recover prior to resorting to a ventilator.

This contrast illustrates how the sharing of results can be critical to learning about a research question. If researchers are unable to share what they learn, it can stall the advancement of knowledge.

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## 1.4: Four Approaches to Research

### Introduction

In empirical research, there are four basic approaches: experimental methods, statistical methods, comparative methods, and case study methods. Each of these methods is an attempt to understand the relationship between two or more variables, which may be correlational or causal. Each method involves crafting good research questions, using existing theories to inform the understanding of the research problem, and generating and testing hypotheses. We will first discuss the difference between correlation and causation, and we will then provide an overview of each research approach.

### Correlation and Causation

When assessing relationships between variables, such as between an independent variable (X) and a dependent variable (Y), these relationships may reflect correlation or a causal relationship. A **correlation** is a relationship between two variables. If two variables show "positive correlation," they increase or decrease together (i.e., as X increases, Y increases; as X decreases, Y decreases). If two variables show "negative correlation," when one variable increases, the other decreases (i.e., as X increases, Y decreases; as X decreases, Y increases). If the two variables show "no correlation," there is no apparent linear relationship. A **causal relationship** is more than a correlation; it is a cause-and-effect relationship between two variables (i.e., X *causes* Y).

Correlation does not imply causation. If a researcher observes a correlation (a relationship) between two variables, this does not mean that one variable *caused* the other. Correlations may be spurious, or false. For instance, suppose a researcher observes a positive correlation between ice cream sales and crime rates (i.e., as ice cream sales increase, crime rates increase). This does not mean that ice cream sales *cause* crime. Rather, something else (called a "confounding variable") likely explains the increase in both ice cream sales and the increase in crime (in this case, both variables tend to increase with warm weather). In research, spurious relationships often appear if a researcher leaves out particular variables that influence both the independent and dependent variables in their analysis (referred to as "omitted variable bias").

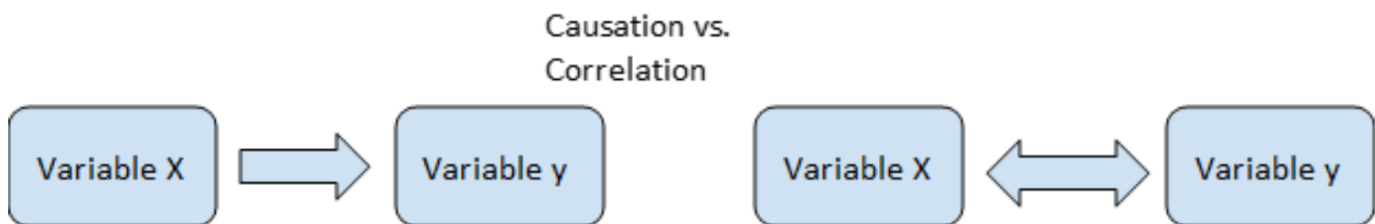


Figure 1.4.1: This image illustrates the difference between causation and correlation. On the left, we see causation: Variable X directly leads to Variable Y. On the right, we see correlation: Variable X and Variable Y show a relationship. The arrows indicate that there is no way to assess causality (i.e., Does X lead to Y or does Y lead to X?).

As an example, in comparative politics research, there appears a positive correlation between economic development and democracy. That is, countries with higher levels of economic development (e.g., as measured by GDP per capita) tend to be more democratic (e.g., as measured by a democracy index). This is not a causal relationship. Perhaps economic development causes democracy; perhaps democracy causes economic development; perhaps there is an additional variable, Z, that causes *both* economic development *and* democracy (e.g., stability stemming from the absence of war (Z) may allow both economic development and democracy to flourish); or perhaps there is an intervening variable, A, that connects economic development and democracy (e.g., economic development leads to an accumulation of wealth (A), which then leads to democracy). There are too many possibilities here to assert a causal relationship; rather, the researcher is stuck with only a correlation. And, in fact, there are numerous exceptions to this positive correlation. Oil-producing countries in the Persian Gulf, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have high levels of economic development without democracy; countries like Senegal and India are democratic, but lack high levels of economic development.

These potential contradictions force researchers to be very careful when making causal inferences in political science. Causality is always difficult to establish, but this is especially true when the unit of analysis involves countries, which is often the case in comparative politics.

## Experimental Methods

Given the discussion above, one manner in which a researcher can attempt to establish causality is through experimental methods. **Experiments** are "laboratory studies in which investigators retain control over the recruitment, assignment to random conditions, treatment, and measurement of subjects" (McDermott, 2002, p. 32). In an experiment, the researcher controls the "treatment," the independent variable of interest, meaning that the researcher will randomly assign the treatment to some cases in the experiment (the "treatment group") and not others (the "control group"). The researcher will then observe the effect that this treatment has on the outcome, the dependent variable of interest. Through random assignment, the researcher is able to "control" for any potential confounding variables--observable or unobservable--because the randomization process evenly distributes participants across the treatment and control groups. The experimental method therefore reduces bias (Druckman, et. al. 2011) by ensuring comparability across groups, and this allows a researcher to isolate the causal impact of the treatment.

While a laboratory experiment provides the best chance for researcher control over experimental conditions, conducting a laboratory experiment at the country-level is impossible. There are, however, field experiments and natural experiments, both of which are frequently used by comparativists in an attempt to establish causality. A **field experiment** is an experiment that takes place in a real-world setting instead of in a laboratory. For example, a researcher may want to learn about how a political candidate's ethnic background (X) influences voter behavior (Y). Prior to an election, the researcher may send out information to a group of voters; one randomly-selected group will receive a flyer that includes a candidate's ethnic background (the "treatment" group) while another randomly-selected group will receive a flyer that does not include the candidate's ethnic background (the "control" group). The researcher will then measure the effect of the treatment on voting. In comparison to a laboratory experiment, the researcher worries more about bias in a field experiment because they are not able to retain as much control over the environment.

A "natural experiment" is technically not an experiment, but instead an "observational study." An **observational study** is a type of research in which researchers do not control a treatment (as in a laboratory or a field experiment), but simply observe outcomes. What makes a **natural experiment** interesting, however, is that it occurs when random assignment of a "treatment" occurs naturally or due to some factor other than a researcher. For example, suppose that a government randomly selects subnational units to receive an influx of money to put toward education. Setting aside ethical concerns in this hypothetical example, a researcher could exploit the government's randomization to measure how the money provided to the treatment group influenced education outcomes in comparison to the control group. If true randomization exists in a natural experiment (something that a researcher will need to demonstrate), the researcher will be able to make causal inferences.

## Statistical Methods

Beyond experimental methods, statistical methods are another approach to research analysis. As a reminder from Chapter 1, statistical methods reflect quantitative research. Quantitative research centers on testing a theory or hypothesis, usually through mathematical and statistical means, using data from a large sample. Statistical methods work well to discern correlations among variables in large-N research, meaning in situations where there is a large population size (i.e., a large number of observations). Statistical methods are an *analysis tool* and their use, on its own, does not allow researchers to claim causation.

Many researchers default to the use of statistical analyses to uncover correlations in "applied research." **Applied research** is "research that attempts to explain social phenomena with immediate public policy implications" (Knoke, et. al., 2002, p. 7). Researchers will conduct statistical analysis on existing data from various sources--such as government agencies, think tanks, and other researchers--and probe for correlations among the variables to test their hypotheses (Omae and Bozonelos, 2020). Researchers also use statistical methods to analyze survey data (for a discussion of survey data and comparative political opinion, see Chapter 10).

## Comparative Methods

Unlike experimental and statistical methods, comparative methods can reflect either quantitative or qualitative research (and many researchers use "mixed-methods" approaches that combine the two). As defined in Chapter 1, qualitative research is a type of research that centers on exploring ideas and phenomena, potentially with the goal of consolidating information or developing evidence to form a theory or hypothesis to test. Qualitative research involves categorizing, summarizing, and analyzing cases thoroughly to gain greater understanding, often using a small sample.

All comparative methods focus on analyzing the differences and/or similarities between cases, which necessitates clear

processes of conceptualization and operationalization (making concepts measurable). As Merriam-Webster defines, a concept is "an abstract or generic idea generalized from particular instances." For political scientists, concepts are "generally seen as nonmathematical and deal with substantive issues" (Goertz, 2006). For example, if we want to compare democracies, we must first define what exactly constitutes a democracy, and we must formulate measurements that appropriately reflect our conceptualization.

Comparative methods involve "the analysis of a small number of cases, entailing at least two observations." This includes "too few [cases] to permit the application of conventional statistical analysis" (Lijphart, 1971; Collier, 1993, p. 106). This means that comparative methods involve more than a single case study, but fewer cases than included in a large-N statistical analysis (sometimes called "intermediate-N," reflecting the analysis of anywhere from a few to a few dozen cases).

## Case Study Methods

Moving from intermediate-N to "single-N" research, a **case study** is an intensive look into a single case, often with the intent that the single case will help researchers to better understand a particular variable of interest. A **case** is a "spatially delimited phenomenon (a unit) observed at a single point in time, or over some period of time" (Gerring, 2007). Others define a case as "factual description of events that happened at some point in the past" (Naumes and Naumes, 2015). A case could be an individual, a family household, a group or community, an institution, or a subnational unit within a country. Often, comparativists observe the country as the case of interest.

While a case study traditionally conducts an in-depth examination into one case, a **comparative case study** is a study compares two or more cases. There can also exist a **subnational case study** that focuses on subnational governments, rather than countries, as the cases of interest. Subnational case studies may occur entirely within a country (e.g., examining a policy response within all Mexican states) or across countries (e.g., examining a policy response among autonomous subnational governments in countries within the European Union).

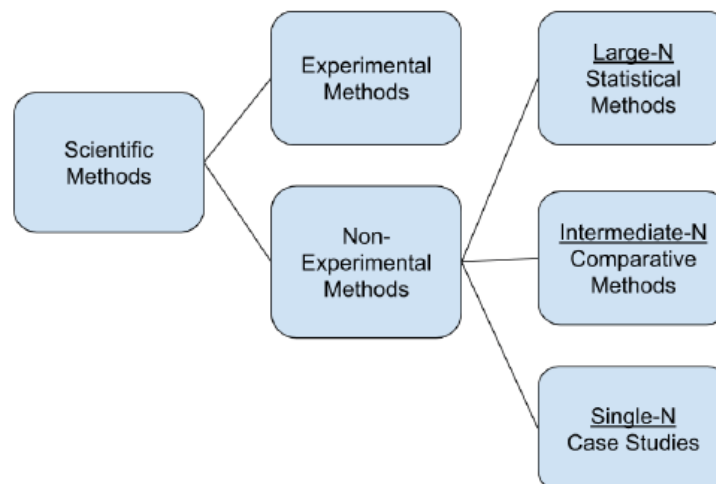


Figure 1.4.2: Diagram summarizing empirical research approaches. There are experimental methods. There are also non-experimental methods, including large-N (statistical) methods, intermediate-N (comparative), and single-N (case studies).

## Use of Case Studies in Comparative Politics

Case studies are vital to theory development in political science. They are the cornerstones of different discourses in the discipline. Blatter and Haverland (2012) note that a number of case studies have reached "classic" status in political science. These include Robert Dahl's *Who Governs?* (1961), Graham T. Allison's *Essence of Decision* (1971), Theda Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions* (1979), and Arend Lijphart's *The Politics of Accommodation* (1968). Each of these classics is a seminal study into an important aspect of political science. Dahl's work popularized the concept of pluralism, where different actors hold power. Allison studied the decision-making processes during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, and this work was influential for public policy analysis. Skocpol's book laid out the conditions from which a revolution may take place. Lijphart defined concepts that remain central to comparative studies of democracy, such as "politics of accommodation" and "consensus democracy."

As mentioned earlier, cases in comparative politics historically focus on countries (typically referred to as "states," as we will describe in Chapter 3). Comparisons often involve regime types (democratic and non-democratic), political economies, political identities, social movements, and political violence. All of these comparisons require scholars to look within countries and then compare. As stated in Chapter 1, "looking within" is what separates comparative politics from other subfields of political science. Thus, as the country is the most relevant political actor (though others exist, such as subnational, non-state, and transnational actors), this is where the emphasis tends to be.

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## 1.5: How We Select Cases to Compare

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### Introduction

Case selection is an important part of any research design. Deciding how many cases to include--and which cases to include--determines the appropriate research analysis methods. For instance, if a researcher decides to select a large number of cases (e.g., a survey of 1500 individuals), they will use statistical methods to conduct large-N analysis, as described in the previous section. In many facets of comparative politics, particularly if using the country as the unit of analysis, researchers rarely reach the number of cases needed for large-N analysis. If the focus is on one case, or a few cases, what strategies should researchers use to choose those cases?

A number of factors can drive case selection in comparative politics. First, case selection can derive from the interests of the researcher(s). For example, if a researcher lives in Germany, they may want to research a topic within that country, possibly using a subnational approach to compare an outcome among German states. Second, case selection can derive from an area studies-focus (e.g., a desire to understand a topic within the member-states of the European Union). Third, researchers may choose cases to facilitate a particular *type* of case study. Below, we discuss case selection among various types of case studies.

### Types of Case Studies

As John Gerring (2017) categorizes, case studies can be descriptive or causal. **Descriptive case studies** are "not organized around a central, overarching causal hypothesis or theory" (p. 56). In a descriptive case study, a researcher simply seeks to describe what they observe. Suppose, for instance, that a researcher wants to describe how political institutions function in Switzerland. The researcher may discuss Switzerland's federalist system, how the Swiss use elements of direct democracy, or how the presidency rotates annually. The goal in such a study is not to make a claim about *why* Switzerland has a federalist system that uses direct democracy and a rotating presidency; the goal is simply to describe what exists.

Depending on the research question, a researcher may choose cases that are typical or cases that offer diversity. Suppose, for instance, that a researcher is investigating the effects of the pandemic on medium-sized cities within the United States. If choosing a typical case, the researcher will want to find a medium-size city that exhibits key characteristics of medium-sized cities throughout the entire country. This will require the researcher to define "medium-size city" and establish the important characteristics of medium-sized cities. With those definitions, the researcher can work to identify a typical case. If choosing cases that offer diversity, the researcher may decide to examine a range of medium-size cities that vary on some dimension, such as geographical location.

Unlike descriptive case studies, **causal case studies** are "organized around a central hypothesis about how X affects Y" (Gerring, 2017). In a causal case study, the researcher identifies a **causal mechanism**, which "explain[s] how and why a hypothesized cause, in a given context, contributes to a particular outcome" (Falleti and Lynch, 2009). Case selection in causal case studies may follow an exploratory, estimating, or diagnostic approach, depending on how the researcher aims to develop a hypothesis.

Researchers use exploratory case studies to identify potential causal hypotheses. They single out the independent variables that seem to affect the outcome, or dependent variable, the most. The case study provides context that allows the researcher to assert a potential causal mechanism. If the scholar is looking to develop an "ideal-type" through their case study, they might seek out an extreme case. For example, if the researcher aims to understand the ideal-type capitalist system, they may want to investigate a country that practices a pure, or extreme, form of the economic system.

Researchers use estimating case studies when they already have a hypothesis in place. They want to use the case study to gather evidence and test the hypothesis. The appropriate case to use therefore depends on the existing hypothesis.

Researchers use diagnostic case studies to "confirm, disconfirm, or refine a hypothesis" (Gerring 2017). In a diagnostic case study, a researcher may choose a least-likely case, or a case that provides surprising evidence against the hypothesis. For example, India's high level of ethno-linguistic diversity, its relatively underdeveloped economy, and its low level of modernization through large swaths of the country suggest that it should *not* have democratized, or it should have *failed* to remain a democracy. In reality, India has been a democracy for over 70 years, making it a "least-likely" case that can provide evidence against a hypothesis about a necessary relationship between economic development and democracy.

## Methods of Agreement and Difference

The discussion above tends to focus on case selection when it comes to a single case. When conducting comparative case studies, as we do in comparative politics, we must select more than one case. This presents a set of challenges. First, how many cases do we pick? Second, how do we apply the previously mentioned case selection techniques? Do we choose typical, diverse, extreme, or least-likely cases?

John Stuart Mill, an English scholar (1806-1873), developed several approaches to comparison with the explicit goal of isolating a cause within a complex environment. Two of these methods, the "method of agreement" and the "method of difference," are particularly important in comparative politics. In the "method of agreement," a researcher compares two or more cases for their commonalities. The researcher aims to isolate the characteristic, or variable, that the cases have in common (the reason for their similarities). In the "method of difference," a researcher compares two or more cases for their differences. The researcher aims to isolate the characteristic, or variable, that the cases do *not* have in common (the reason for their differences). From these two methods, comparativists developed two approaches.

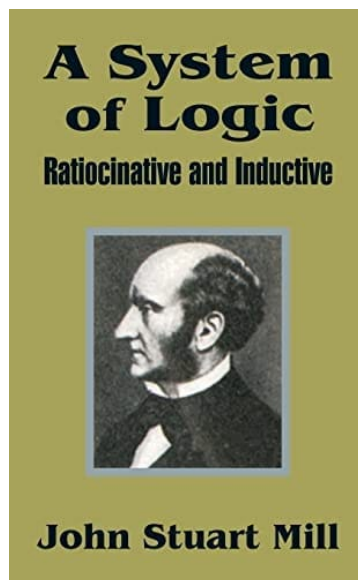


Figure 1.5.1: Book cover of *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive*. John Stuart Mill developed several approaches to comparison. (Source: Mill, J.S. (1843). *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive*. University of Toronto Press.)

## Most Similar Systems Design

The Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) stems from Mill's "method of difference." In a MSSD, researchers select cases for comparison that are similar to each other, but in which the outcomes differ. In this approach, a researcher aims to ensure that as many of the independent variables as possible are similar across cases. While the researcher does not have randomization to rely on, as in an experiment, this case selection method attempts to "control" for as many observable confounding variables as possible. A researcher asks: If these cases look similar on variables A, B, C, D, and E, why do they have different values on the dependent variable? The researcher then aims to identify the potential cause for the difference in outcomes.

For example, if a researcher wants to study the existence of publicly-accessible national health systems as the dependent variable, they may choose to compare Canada and the United States. Both of these countries have English heritage, English language use, liberal market economies, strong democratic institutions, high levels of wealth, and high levels of education. Yet, despite these similarities, the outcome differs: Canada has a robust publicly-accessible national health system; the U.S. does not. A MSSD design would aim to describe *why* these two seemingly similar cases differ on the outcome (e.g., one explanation may relate to varying political culture within Canada and the U.S.).

## Most Different Systems Design

The Most Different Systems Design (MDSD) stems from Mill's "method of agreement." In a MDSD, researchers select cases for comparison that are different from each other, but in which the outcome is the same. In this approach, a researcher aims to select

cases with the same value on the dependent variable, but that are quite different from one another in terms of other variables.

As an example, a researcher may be interested in learning how different countries reach the same classification of "economically liberal." In its Index of Economic Freedom, The Heritage Foundation lists countries as varied as Australia, Chile, Estonia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, Switzerland, and Taiwan as either free or mostly free. Yet these countries differ greatly from one another. Singapore is a non-democratic regime, whereas Estonia is a democratic regime. Australia and New Zealand are wealthy, whereas Malaysia is not. Chile and Taiwan became economically free countries under authoritarian military regimes, whereas Switzerland did not. A researcher will ask: Why do these different systems produce the same outcome?

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## 1.6: Chapter Review Questions

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### Study Questions

Use these questions to review the chapter. Try answering each one in your own words. If a question stops you, that is the section worth rereading.

1. What distinguishes comparative politics from international relations?
2. Why does correlation not imply causation? Give an example.
3. When would you use a Most Similar Systems Design rather than a Most Different Systems Design?
4. Why must a research question be falsifiable?
5. Distinguish formal from informal institutions, with an example of each.
6. Why does case selection matter so much in comparative politics?

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## 2: STATES, REGIMES, AND THE ROLE OF THE STATE

2.1: Introduction to States

2.2: The Modern State and Regime Types

2.3: Case Study - North and South Korea

2.4: Chapter Review Questions

2.5: Bibliography

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## 2.1: Introduction to States

### Chapter Learning Objectives

Political systems are organized around states, but states differ considerably in how power is structured, exercised, and maintained. This chapter examines the modern state, the role of sovereignty, and the different types of political regimes that shape how governments operate. It then applies these concepts to North and South Korea, two states with shared historical and cultural roots that developed very different political systems and governing institutions.

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Explain the defining characteristics of the modern state and describe how sovereignty and political authority shape state power.
- Compare different regime types and apply those distinctions to the political development and governing systems of North and South Korea.

### Introduction

What is a government? Is government necessary? Why do governments exist?

There are approximately eight billion people on the planet and nearly 200 identified countries worldwide, each of which has a government running the country. A **government** is the organization, or the group of people, with the power to set rules, to manage, and to regulate a political unit. Yet the question of *why* most people live under a government, or in a country that has rules and societal norms, can be difficult to grasp. Why do people consent to being ruled over? The existence of nearly 200 countries for eight billion people suggests that, while daily life for the average person may be filled with myriad to-do lists and activities, political powers *also* influence daily life in small and big ways.

To this end, this section considers the historical formation of political power within countries and introduces several pieces of foundational terminology in the field of comparative politics.

### Social Order and the Social Contract

Let's begin with some critical questions: Why does government exist? Is government necessary?

A society without government or central leadership is one that lives in anarchy. **Anarchy** is a situation in which there is a lack of societal structure and no established hierarchy of power or central governing authority. While many scholars have considered the phenomenon and applicability of anarchy, it has not been a norm within the communities of humans living over the past 15,000 years. Even prior to the establishment of formal governments and formalized institutions, human beings organized themselves for survival purposes. Over the course of human history, humans began to understand that survival seemed more feasible when they cooperated with one another. While they did not have established, written laws, early humans did have informal rules and norms for how they handled themselves in society. Informal leaders also sometimes guided small groups, mostly composed of family members, in their pursuit of survival.

Take a moment to consider your own family when you were a child. Were there rules within your household? Who was in charge? Who told you what to do and when to do it? Whether your household had many or few rules, consider now how those rules contributed to the manner in which your family worked and lived. Did rules help your family? Did you think the family leaders were legitimate? Did you follow their rules voluntarily?

Over time, the small family groupings banded together into tribes with the common goal of surviving. These tribes then formed their own rules and norms for how their group should act. Over time, the sophistication of these tribes' survival techniques increased, moving from a hunter-gatherer approach--in which humans hunted for their food and gathered fruits, berries, and other available plant life--toward farming.



Figure 2.1.1: Painting of a Kali'na hunter with a woman gatherer. (Source: [A Kali'na hunter with a woman gatherer](#) by Pierre Barrère is licensed under [Public Domain - US](#))

Approximately 12,000 years ago, developments during the Agricultural Revolution allowed humans to stay in one place for longer. Humans learned to grow crops by tilling the land and introducing early irrigation methods. With the ability to stay in one place for longer, rather than moving around constantly to hunt and gather, human groups began to aggregate in common locations. This aggregation also led to human population growth. A larger number of people living closer together led to the need for formal societal organization. To ensure successful coexistence, and ultimately survival, humans needed order. Rather than by pursuing an anarchical system, humans calculated that a strong set of rules would improve the status quo (individually and collectively), and therefore embraced mutual cooperation in a rules-based society.

This ultimately led to the development of ideas by philosophers like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau to create what we now term "social contract theory." In short, a **social contract** is a formal or informal agreement between the rulers and those ruled in a society. Those who are ruled submit to the laws of the rulers in exchange for certain benefits.

Social contract theory developed gradually. Hobbes (1588-1679) acknowledged that all people act within their own self-interest, and in acting in their own self-interest, make calculations to ensure their survival. This selfish nature of human beings creates an unstable and dangerous state of nature. According to Hobbes, a government is therefore necessary, and beneficial, to control the masses. Locke (1632-1704), in his *Two Treatises of Government*, took a more positive view of human nature. He argued that all people are born with "certain, unalienable" rights, which governments should protect through their political institutions and structures. Rousseau (1712-1778), in *The Social Contract*, argued that society does not lend itself to equal and equitable treatment, and a government is therefore only legitimate if it comes from the consent of the people. He argued that there must be a "unified will" that takes into consideration the interests of the people for the common good.

We observe an early form of the social contract in Ancient Greece, where elite men participated in government and representatives worked on behalf of the people. While a **direct democracy** is a political system in which all citizens are involved in political decision-making, an **indirect, or representative, democracy** is one in which the people elect representatives to serve on their behalf to make the laws and rules of society. Though Ancient Greece excluded many members of the population from decision-making processes and therefore did not have a true democracy, people *did* submit to the ruling class, through a type of representative leadership, in order to gain protection from the political system---a social contract.

As a second historical example, we can consider the development of feudalism. **Feudalism** was a system of social order that arose out of the Middle Ages, particularly in Europe, wherein peasants (sometimes called Serfs) were forced to provide members of the upper class with their crops, goods, services, and loyalty. The upper class, usually Nobles, would provide some level of protection to the Serfs in exchange for their products and services. Though not the ideal social contract, the Serfs were able to exchange their goods and services for some level of protection of their lives and property.

Today, we observe social contracts in almost every type of political system, democratic and non-democratic, and these social contracts can be voluntary or involuntary. A voluntary social contract is one in which the people agree to submit to the ruling class. The benefits of doing so may be as simple as military protection. In the United States, for example, citizens are expected to obey the laws of the land, as expressed (in part) through the U.S. Constitution. This is in exchange for protection of their "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," as famously written in the Declaration of Independence. Though a social contract may be voluntary, it does *not* always mean that those who are ruled enjoy privileges like freedom of speech. Rather, the people may simply need protection from outside threats, and they may voluntarily agree to submit to the ruling class *without* any guarantees of other

protections like civil liberties. Alternatively, an involuntary social contract is when the ruling class dominates in a given territory and demands obedience from the people. In this case, those being ruled are coerced into a social contract.

There are also implicit social contracts. For example, most U.S. citizens are born into their social contract because the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution guarantees birthright citizenship. By being born into citizenship, Americans may never need to actualize, or act upon, their citizenship. They benefit from a system that protects their rights and liberties, even when they choose *not* to obey the law. In contrast, there are other U.S. citizens who are not born into this social contract, and instead go through a formal process, called naturalization, for citizenship. **Naturalization** is the process by which non-citizens formally become citizens of the country they reside in. Naturalization is a long process that requires multiple steps, including but not limited to background checks, oral examinations, paperwork, and pledging allegiance to the host country in a formal ceremony. The process of naturalization is an example of a voluntary and formal social contract.



Figure 2.1.2: Naturalization Ceremony at Harriet Tubman National Historical Park on August 8, 2019. (Source: [Naturalization Ceremony at Harriet Tubman National Historical Park](#) by Mary O'Neill is licensed under [Public Domain - US](#))

To summarize, our understanding of and need for government comes from this historical reckoning of the social contract and the drive for social order. We will now define several related, but distinct, terms that are foundational to the study of comparative politics.

## Defining Terms

One of the most frequently used words in the study of comparative politics is the word "state." For many students, "state" implies a subnational government, such as states within the United States like California, Louisiana, Montana, and Rhode Island. In comparative politics, however, a **state** is a national-level group, organization, or body that administers its own legal and governmental policies within a designated region or territory. As a reminder from a term introduced in Chapter 1, a state must have **sovereignty**, which is fundamental governmental power and authority in decision-making within a given territory.

States, then, are the major political actors in global politics. The United Nations, in fact, includes 193 member-states. Outside of the comparative politics discipline, many people tend to use the terms state, country, nation, and government interchangeably. Within comparative politics, each of these terms is distinct, and each term has different implications when observing political landscapes around the world.

If a state is a national-level organization that administers its own legal and governmental policies within a designated region or territory, what are nations and countries? While a state relates specifically to how a designated territory operates politically through institutions (e.g., legislatures, courts, the military), a **nation** is broadly defined as a population of people joined by common culture, history, language, and/or ancestry within a designated region or territory. It is therefore possible for a nation to exist *without* sovereignty. A **country** is similar, and the term that most people tend to use colloquially, but this term can encompass aspects of *both* the nation *and* the state. A country is a nation, which may have one or more states within it. Finally, as a reminder from the introduction to this section, a **government** is the group of people in charge of running a state. The

government therefore changes over time (e.g., in a democracy, the government may change after an election).

As an example to better differentiate these terms, we will briefly consider the case of Spain. Spain, meaning all of the political institutions that manage the Spanish territory, is a state. Within Spain, there are several nations with unique languages, cultures, and traditions, such as the Basques, the Catalans, and the Galicians. When we speak of Spain as a country, we include *both* the political institutions making up the state *and* the diverse nations within the Spanish territory. Finally, the leadership in power at a given time--in Spain, a prime minister and their cabinet--is the Spanish government. When a new election takes place, the government may change, but the state remains the same.

As noted above, one of the crucially important characteristics of a state is its ability to independently organize its policies and goals. Sovereignty is not only fundamental governmental power to coerce, but it also involves the ability to manage the state's affairs independently from outside interference (external sovereignty) and the ability to deflect internal resistance (internal sovereignty). If a state does not have the ability to manage its own affairs and issues, it will not be able to maintain power.

**Power**, broadly defined, is the ability to get others to do what you want them to do. **Soft power** means being able to get others to do what you want them to do using the methods of persuasion and attraction, such as through diplomacy or cultural influence. **Hard power**, in contrast, is the ability to get others to do what you want using physical, military might and/or aggressive economic measures. While hard power aims to coerce, soft power aims to persuade, and both types of power hold critical places in the world of politics.



Figure 2.1.6: The first photo is a photo of the United Nations General Assembly Hall. Negotiating for ideal political terms is an example of soft power. The second photo is a photo of a Test launch of an LGM-25C Titan II Intercontinental Ballistic Missile at Vandenberg Air Force Base in the United States, 1975. Launching a missile would be an example of trying to exercise hard power. (Sources: From left to right, [United Nations General Assembly Hall](#) by Patrick Gruban is licensed under [CC BY-SA 2.0](#); [An LGM-25C Titan II missile is launched at Vandenberg Air Force Base](#) by the U.S. Air Force is licensed under [Public Domain - US](#))

Whether a state has power, and whether it can operate effectively, depends on its authority and legitimacy. **Authority** is the state's power to get things done. **Legitimacy** is the state's ability to establish itself as a valid power over its citizens. If we put these two terms together, a state is legitimate in its operations if it has the authority to make decisions and carry out its policy goals.

A state's leaders (i.e., its government) can garner legitimacy through multiple means. **Traditional legitimacy** occurs when states have the authority to lead based on historical precedent. For example, the legitimacy of a king may stem from the passing down of the throne through one family over time. **Charismatic legitimacy** occurs when citizens follow the rules of a state based on the charisma and personality of the current leader. **Rational-legal legitimacy** occurs when states derive their authority through firmly established laws, rules, regulations, and procedures. This type of legitimacy often derives from a state's **constitution**, which is a written document describing the basic principles and laws of the state.

Each of these forms of legitimacy, especially when taken together, can enhance a state's ability to function. If, for instance, there is a written and adopted constitution, and that document has been transparently drafted and considered by representatives of a state, individuals will know what the rules are within their state (rational-legal legitimacy). In time, as laws and norms are followed

and accepted, this process establishes a historical precedent that individuals are more likely to accept (traditional legitimacy). Finally, if there happens to be an especially appealing or inspirational leader, that person may be able to garner further support from the people to deepen a state's legitimacy (charismatic legitimacy).

Keeping in mind the differences in the terms government, state, country, and nation, the next section will provide two further distinctions. First, we will consider how to differentiate "weak" versus "strong" states. Second, we will start to consider one additional foundational term, political regime, which we will expand on in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.

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## 2.2: The Modern State and Regime Types

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### Introduction

The rise of the so-called "modern state" is usually attributed to the end of the European Middle Ages, wherein states were critical to the organization and survival of certain societies. Being a member of a state brought benefits to those included. Having a recognized state meant there was a recognized authority by which states could trade and do business with each other. Trade prompted economic development, which further solidified trading relationships. With economic development, states were able to pursue technological innovations. The advent of trade enabled states to improve the way day-to-day activities were run, and it enabled states to build further military power. Advances in technology helped European states improve engineering, map-making, mathematics, and weapons development. All of these advances contributed to some semblance of political stability for a state's inhabitants. When protected by a recognized, and at least partially unified, state, ordinary people had greater chances for survival.

As described in the previous section, not all social contracts and state authority are created equal; in fact, there is great variation in the way states manifest in different regions and under different ideological perspectives. This section considers several key factors that comparativists use to compare states.

### State Strength

The first key factor on which to compare states is state strength. All states grapple with the balance between how much freedom the state will grant its citizens and how much authority the state will wield. This contributes to a variety of political outcomes. Some states are powerful, strong, effective, and stable. Other states are disorganized, chaotic, weak, and unstable. How can we tell the difference between strong and weak states?

**Strong states** are those which are able to work their political agendas effectively and to make sure basic political tasks are completed. Strong states are able to defend their territory and interests, collect taxes from their citizens, enforce laws, manage their economies, and promote civil and political stability within their domain. Regardless of where authority is derived, the state has legitimacy to act because the citizens have accepted the terms of the social contract.

**Weak states** are those which are unable to perform basic political tasks or complete their political agendas effectively. Weak states are typically unable to defend their territories and interests. They do not have enough legitimacy, or are not institutionalized well enough, to collect taxes, enforce their laws, and/or manage their economies effectively. Weak states may also struggle to ensure domestic stability, likely because they lack the legitimacy and authority to act on their constituents.

**Failed states** are those in which the structures of the state are so weak that the state breaks down. A failed, or failing, state does not necessarily imply a situation of anarchy. While a central authority may be unable to effectively control its territory in a failed state, there may remain some semblance of government intact and other societal structures, such as markets, may still function.

These definitions of varying state strength rely on the concept of state capacity. **Capacity** is the ability of a state to use its power, as derived through authority and legitimacy, to get things done and promote its own interests. A state's strength therefore also implicitly relies on our previously-defined term of **sovereignty**, fundamental governmental power and authority in decision-making within a given territory. A state with low capacity or impediments to its sovereignty is weak; a state with high capacity and no impediments to its sovereignty is strong.

### Political Regime

The second key factor on which to compare states is political regime. A **political regime** is the set of rules that structures access to political power within a state, which is usually institutionalized through a state's constitution. A state's political regime has implications for the ways in which a state chooses to wield its power to enforce laws, rules, and norms of political life.

We typically separate political regimes into two broad types: democracies and non-democracies. A **democracy** is a political regime in which the supreme power of government is vested in the people. We will discuss democratic institutions, systems of democracy, and democratic consolidation in Chapter 4. A **non-democracy** is a political regime that denies citizens meaningful institutional channels for making choices about their collective well-being. Non-democracies are often referred to as

"dictatorships" or "authoritarian regimes" or "autocracies." We will discuss non-democratic strategies for staying in power, types of non-democracies, and democratic backsliding (toward a non-democratic regime) in Chapter 5.

As a brief preview and to clarify the differences between democratic and non-democratic regimes, we can compare the ways in which the rules structure access to political power within a state. In a democracy, rulers come to power through free and fair elections; in a non-democracy, rulers do not come to power through free and fair elections.

As one example of a non-democracy, we can consider a **personalist regime**, a type of political regime in which power lies with a single, charismatic, and all powerful person who drives all actions of the state (typically referred to as a "dictator"). While non-democracies can range in the extent to which the state intervenes in the private lives of citizens, most non-democracies do not permit independent media or protect civil liberties like freedom of speech and association. A current example of a personalist regime is North Korea.

The current Supreme Leader of North Korea is Kim Jong-Un, who has served since 2011. Kim Jong-Un took over the title of Supreme Leader after the death of his father, Kim Jong-Il. Similarly, Kim Jong-Il took over the title of Supreme Leader in 1994 after the death of his father, Kim Il-Sung. The people of North Korea do not elect their Supreme Leader; rather, the method to access political power is through dynastic succession (i.e., power is passed down within the Kim family). The state's legitimacy therefore relies on charismatic legitimacy stemming from the Kim family, which enjoys a cult of personality. A **cult of personality** occurs when a state leverages all aspects of a leader's real and exaggerated traits to solidify the leader's power. In North Korea, the media promotes propaganda to endow its leader with divine-like status.



Figure 2.2.1: Image of Kim Jong-Un, Supreme Leader of North Korea, in 2019. (Source: [Kim Jong-un](#), by Alexei Nikolsky is licensed under [CC-BY 4.0](#))

As a second example of a non-democracy, we can consider a **military regime**, a type of political regime characterized by military elites, rather than civilians, running the government. This small group of military leaders is called a **junta**. Similar to the personalist regime example, within a military regime led by a junta, the leaders do not come to power through elections. In many cases, rather, a junta initially forms as resistance to or rebellion against an existing government, then gains power through a military-led coup d'état. A **coup d'état** (often simply called "coup") is an attempt to abruptly, unlawfully, and sometimes violently seize power from an existing government. In Myanmar in 2021, for instance, the military (Tatmadaw) seized control, overthrowing a democratically-elected government. After a parliamentary election in November 2020 that resulted in a decrease in the number of military-aligned political party seats, Myanmar's military alleged election fraud and requested that the government delay the opening session of parliament. The government rejected this request and, in response, the military seized power, detained those who had won the election, declared a state of emergency, and handed control of all branches of government to Senior General Min Aung Hlaing as junta leader (with the official title of Chairman of the State Administration Council).

In each of the two examples above, the commonality that distinguishes non-democratic from democratic regimes is that rulers come to power through means other than free and fair elections.

It is important to note that political regimes are not fixed. A **political regime transition** occurs when there is a change in

political regime (e.g., from democracy to non-democracy, from non-democracy to democracy, or from one type of non-democracy to another).

Consider the example of the rise of Adolf Hitler in Germany during the 1920s. Following World War I, a weak democracy was installed in Germany called the Weimar Republic, but the state suffered from a number of problems. The terms of the Treaty of Versailles, the peace treaty that formally ended World War I, put Germany into dire social and economic straits. Germany was forced to pay high reparations, which left the German people impoverished. High unemployment, high inflation, and general discontent made it difficult for the Weimar Republic to enforce its political agenda. In the midst of these circumstances, Hitler crafted a cult of personality to rally many Germans against the Weimar Republic. Through his use of manipulation and incendiary speech, Hitler was appointed as Chancellor of Germany in 1933. He (and the Nazi Party) effectively abolished the Weimar Constitution through decrees and laws that consolidated his power while eroding the rights and liberties of the German people, turning Germany into a non-democratic regime. At the end of World War II, and after Hitler's death, Germany experienced another regime transition, but this time from non-democracy to democracy.

While comparativists study regime transitions, regime types, and state strength, they also study states by considering many aspects of political institutions, political and cultural identity, political economy, and political violence. We will discuss these topics in detail in subsequent chapters.

## Two Ways to Compare States

Comparativists compare states along two separate dimensions: how **strong** the state is, and what kind of **regime** governs it. A state's strength and its regime are different questions, so each is shown separately below.

### A. State Strength: Can the State Get Things Done?

More capacity ← → Less capacity

|                                                                                        | Strong State                                                           | Weak State                                               | Failed State                                                                               |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>What it means</b>                                                                   | Carries out its political agenda and completes basic tasks effectively | Struggles to perform basic tasks or carry out its agenda | State structures have broken down, and the central government cannot control its territory |
| <b>Basic tasks (defend territory, collect taxes, enforce laws, manage the economy)</b> | Performs them reliably                                                 | Performs some, but inconsistently                        | Cannot perform most of them, though some government and markets may still function         |
| <b>Legitimacy</b>                                                                      | Citizens generally accept the state's authority                        | Limited legitimacy or poorly developed institutions      | State authority is largely absent, and other groups may fill the gap                       |
| <b>Commonly cited example</b>                                                          | Germany, South Korea                                                   | Haiti                                                    | Somalia in the 1990s and 2000s                                                             |

**Key idea:** State strength depends on **capacity**, the state's ability to get things done, and **sovereignty**, its authority to make decisions within its territory.

### B. Political Regime: Who Holds Power, and How Do They Get It?

|                                  | Democracy                                                          | Non-Democracies                                                             |                                                                |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                  |                                                                    | Personalist Regime                                                          | Military Regime                                                |
| <b>How rulers gain power</b>     | Free and fair elections                                            | Not through free and fair elections; power may be inherited within a family | Usually a coup d'état, an abrupt and unlawful seizure of power |
| <b>Who holds power</b>           | The people, through elected leaders                                | A single, all-powerful leader, often supported by a cult of personality     | A junta, a small group of military leaders                     |
| <b>Civil liberties and media</b> | Free speech, free association, and independent media are protected | Usually restricted; media promotes the leader                               | Usually restricted                                             |
| <b>Example</b>                   | Germany today                                                      | North Korea                                                                 | Myanmar after the 2021 coup                                    |

**Regimes can change:** A **political regime transition** occurs when a state moves from one regime type to another. Germany shifted from democracy (the Weimar Republic) to non-democracy after Hitler took power in 1933, then returned to democracy after World War II.

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## 2.3: Case Study - North and South Korea

### Case Study Learning Objectives

This case study applies the chapter's concepts to the Korean peninsula, where two states with shared historical and cultural roots developed opposing political systems. It uses the distinctions between nation, state, country, and government to make sense of a divided peninsula, then compares North and South Korea on state capacity, national wealth, regime type, and sources of legitimacy.

By the end of this case study, you will be able to:

- Apply the distinction between nation, state, country, and government to a divided peninsula.
- Explain how two states with a shared history developed opposing political regimes.
- Distinguish state capacity from national wealth and from regime type.
- Identify the sources of legitimacy each Korean state relies on.

### Introduction

Why compare North and South Korea when discussing the state? Few comparisons in political science offer a cleaner illustration of a Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD). As described in Chapter 1, an MSSD requires cases that are alike on most underlying conditions but differ on the outcome of interest. Before 1945, the Korean Peninsula was a single country with one language, one written history stretching back more than a thousand years, a shared Confucian tradition, and a common experience of Japanese colonial rule. Then it was divided. Two states formed in 1948, and over the following decades they produced almost opposite political and economic outcomes.

This case therefore lets us hold constant many of the factors that comparativists usually worry about, such as culture, language, ethnicity, religion, and colonial history, and focus on what changed after the division. Economists Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson (2012) open their book *Why Nations Fail* with this very comparison, arguing that the divergence between the two Koreas points to political institutions rather than geography or culture as the driver of long-run outcomes.

### One Nation, Two States

The Korean Peninsula is the clearest illustration of a distinction introduced earlier in this chapter. Koreans on both sides of the border generally understand themselves as belonging to a single **nation**, a population joined by common culture, history, language, and ancestry. Yet that nation is divided between two **states**, each with its own institutions, its own territory, and its own claim to sovereignty.

That claim is not a shared one. For decades, each state's constitution claimed authority over the entire peninsula, and neither formally recognized the other as legitimate. The Korean War ended in 1953 with an armistice rather than a peace treaty, which means the two states remain technically at war more than seventy years later. Both joined the United Nations in 1991, and in recent years North Korea has moved away from reunification language, with Kim Jong-un describing South Korea in 2024 as a separate and hostile state rather than part of one Korean nation. Even so, the peninsula remains a case in which the boundaries of the nation and the boundaries of the state do not align, a mismatch we will return to when discussing nationalism in Chapter 5.

### North Korea

- Full Country Name: Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)
- Head(s) of State: Supreme Leader
- Government: Single-party dictatorship
- Official Languages: Korean
- Economic System: Centrally planned economy
- Location: East Asia

- Capital: Pyongyang
- Total land size: 46,540 sq. miles
- Population: 26,402,841 (2025 est.)
- GDP: approximately \$34 billion (2025 est.)
- GDP per capita: approximately \$1,300 (2025 est.)
- Currency: North Korean won

## South Korea

- Full Country Name: Republic of Korea (ROK)
- Head(s) of State: President
- Government: Presidential republic
- Official Languages: Korean
- Economic System: Developed market economy
- Location: East Asia
- Capital: Seoul
- Total land size: 38,690 sq. miles
- Population: 51,500,000 (2025 est.)
- GDP: approximately \$1.87 trillion (2025 est.)
- GDP per capita: approximately \$37,500 (2025 est.)
- Currency: South Korean won

## Common Origins

Korea was unified under a single dynasty for centuries, most recently the Joseon dynasty from 1392 until 1910. In that year, Japan formally annexed the peninsula and ruled it as a colony for thirty-five years. Colonial rule was harsh and extractive, but it also left the peninsula with railways, mines, and factories, most of them concentrated in the north, where the coal, minerals, and hydroelectric power were located. The south was more agricultural.

When Japan surrendered in August 1945, Korea did not become independent. The United States and the Soviet Union agreed to divide the peninsula temporarily at the 38th parallel, with Soviet forces accepting the Japanese surrender in the north and American forces doing so in the south. The line was drawn quickly and without consulting Koreans, and it was meant to be provisional. Instead, as the Cold War hardened, each occupying power installed a government aligned with its own system. In 1948, the Republic of Korea was founded in the south and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the north.

In June 1950, North Korean forces invaded the south, beginning a war that drew in the United States and a United Nations coalition on one side and China and the Soviet Union on the other. The fighting killed millions, devastated both halves of the peninsula, and ended in 1953 roughly where it had started. This shared devastation matters for the comparison. Both states began the postwar period poor and in ruins.

## Divergent Paths: North Korea

North Korea built a state organized around a single party and, increasingly, a single family. Kim Il-sung consolidated power in the 1950s, eliminating rival factions within the Korean Workers' Party. He promoted *Juche*, an ideology of national self-reliance, and the state took control of all industry, agriculture, media, and social organization.

What distinguishes North Korea from most other single-party states is dynastic succession. Power passed from Kim Il-sung to his son Kim Jong-il in 1994, and from Kim Jong-il to his son Kim Jong-un in 2011. As discussed earlier in this chapter, this method of accessing political power has nothing to do with elections. It rests instead on a cult of personality that presents the ruling family as uniquely suited to lead, reinforced through state media, monuments, textbooks, and public ritual.

Economically, North Korea grew reasonably well in the 1950s and 1960s, drawing on its inherited industrial base and Soviet and Chinese support. Estimates suggest the two Koreas had broadly comparable income levels into the 1970s. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 removed North Korea's main source of subsidized fuel and trade, and a famine in the mid-1990s killed somewhere between several hundred thousand and one million people (Haggard and Noland 2007). The state survived. Informal markets emerged to fill gaps the planning system could not, and the government has alternated between tolerating and

suppressing them.

## Divergent Paths: South Korea

South Korea's path was not a straight line to democracy. Its first president, Syngman Rhee, ruled increasingly autocratically until student protests forced him from office in 1960. A military coup led by Park Chung-hee followed in 1961, and Park governed for eighteen years, first as a general and then as a president who rewrote the constitution in 1972 to allow himself indefinite rule. After Park's assassination in 1979, another general, Chun Doo-hwan, seized power and violently suppressed an uprising in the city of Gwangju in 1980.

The turning point came in 1987. Sustained protests, drawing in students, workers, and a growing urban middle class, forced the government to accept direct presidential elections and constitutional reform (Kim 2000). South Korea has held regular competitive elections ever since, and power has transferred peacefully between opposing parties multiple times. By the measures introduced earlier in this chapter, it passes the transfer-of-power test for democratic consolidation.

Economically, the state played an active role. Under Park and his successors, the government directed credit, protected selected industries, and worked closely with large family-owned conglomerates known as *chaebol*, among them Samsung, Hyundai, and LG. The strategy prioritized exports. South Korea joined the OECD in 1996 and is now among the world's larger economies.

## Comparing State Capacity

It is tempting to assume that North Korea must be a weak state because it is poor. Applying the chapter's definitions carefully shows why that assumption is wrong.

Recall that a strong state is one able to defend its territory, collect revenue, enforce its laws, and maintain order across its domain. By these measures, North Korea is a strong state. It controls its borders tightly, maintains one of the world's largest standing militaries relative to its population, enforces an extensive internal surveillance system, and has sustained its political order through a famine, the loss of its principal patron, and decades of international sanctions. Few states facing comparable pressure have held together as long.

South Korea is also a strong state, but it exercises capacity differently. It delivers public services at a high level, raises revenue through a functioning tax system, and enforces laws through independent courts. Its capacity is bounded by constitutional limits that the North Korean state does not face.

The lesson for comparative politics is that state capacity, national wealth, and regime type are three separate things. A state can be strong and poor, as North Korea is. A state can be wealthy and democratic, as South Korea is. And as we saw with Somalia and other cases, a state can be weak regardless of what its constitution says.

## Comparing Legitimacy

The two states also draw on different sources of legitimacy, as described earlier in this chapter.

North Korea relies primarily on **charismatic legitimacy**, built around the personal qualities attributed to each Kim, layered with elements of **traditional legitimacy** through hereditary succession. The state does maintain formal legal institutions, including a constitution and a legislature called the Supreme People's Assembly, but these do not constrain the Supreme Leader.

South Korea relies primarily on **rational-legal legitimacy**. Authority flows from a written constitution and from procedures that apply to officeholders regardless of who they are. A recent episode tested this directly. On December 3, 2024, President Yoon Suk-yeol declared emergency martial law and deployed troops to the National Assembly. Lawmakers pushed past the blockade, convened, and voted unanimously to invalidate the declaration within roughly six hours. The Assembly impeached Yoon on December 14, suspending his powers, and on April 4, 2025, the Constitutional Court unanimously removed him from office, finding that no national emergency existed and that he had violated both the substance and the procedure required for declaring martial law. A new election was held on June 3, 2025.

The Court's reasoning is worth noting for a comparative politics course. It observed that emergency powers had been used repeatedly by South Korea's authoritarian leaders between the 1950s and 1980, and that the long absence of martial law since then reflected democracy taking root. In other words, the institutions built after 1987 were tested and held. This was also not the

first such test. President Park Geun-hye was impeached and removed through the same process in 2016 and 2017.

## A Note on Measurement

Chapter 1 discussed how difficult it can be to measure political and economic concepts accurately. North Korea illustrates the problem vividly. The government does not publish reliable economic statistics, so nearly all figures cited for North Korean GDP, income, or population are estimates produced by outside institutions such as South Korea's central bank, the CIA, or the United Nations. These estimates rely on indirect indicators, including trade data reported by partner countries, satellite imagery, and interviews with defectors. They vary considerably depending on the method used, and per capita income estimates for North Korea range from a few hundred dollars to well over a thousand depending on the source and the calculation.

When comparing states, a researcher should always ask where the numbers come from and how confident anyone can be in them. Comparing a closed state with an open one means comparing data of very different quality.

## Think Comparatively

1. What variables does this comparison hold constant, and what does that allow a researcher to rule out as an explanation for the divergence between the two Koreas?
2. Why can North Korea be described as a strong state despite being one of the world's poorer countries? What would have to be true for it to qualify as a weak state instead?
3. The two Koreas share a nation but not a state. What problems does this create for defining sovereignty on the peninsula?
4. In December 2024, South Korea's legislature and courts reversed a president's declaration of martial law. What does this episode reveal about rational-legal legitimacy, and what might have happened in a state relying mainly on charismatic legitimacy?
5. South Korea was governed by authoritarian leaders for nearly forty years before democratizing in 1987. Does this history strengthen or weaken the argument that institutions, rather than culture, explain the divergence between the two Koreas?

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## 2.4: Chapter Review Questions

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### Study Questions

Use these questions to review the chapter. Try answering each one in your own words. If a question stops you, that is the section worth rereading.

1. Distinguish state, nation, country, and government. Identify a place in the news today where the boundaries of a nation and the boundaries of a state do not match.
2. Can a state be strong and poor at the same time? Explain using a case from this chapter.
3. Name the three sources of legitimacy and give an example of each. Which source does the government where you live rely on most, and how can you tell?
4. How does a weak state differ from a failed state? Find a country currently described in the news as failing, and assess whether the term fits by the chapter's definition.
5. In December 2024 a South Korean president declared martial law, and within months the legislature and the courts had removed him from office. What does this episode reveal about state capacity and legitimacy?
6. What is a political regime transition, and must it move toward democracy? Identify a country that has experienced one in the last five years.

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## 3: POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

- 3.1: Institutions within Democracy
- 3.2: Systems of Democracy
- 3.3: Legislatures
- 3.4: Executives
- 3.5: Courts
- 3.6: Sub-National Governments
- 3.7: Bureaucracy
- 3.8: Case Study - UK, France, and Germany
- 3.9: Chapter Review Questions
- 3.10: Bibliography

## 3.1: Institutions within Democracy

### Chapter Learning Objectives

Political institutions shape how governments make decisions, distribute authority, and respond to the public. This chapter examines the major institutions found within democratic systems, including legislatures, executives, courts, sub-national governments, and bureaucracies. It then compares different systems of democracy and applies these concepts to the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, showing how institutional arrangements can produce different approaches to governing even among democratic states.

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Explain the roles of legislatures, executives, courts, bureaucracies, and sub-national governments within democratic political systems.
- Compare how different democratic institutions and governing systems operate across the United Kingdom, France, and Germany.

### Introduction

Aside from considering the varying conceptualizations and operationalizations (measurements) of democracy, we can examine institutions that are common within democracies. Democracies, for example, typically have three branches of government: the legislative, the executive, and the judicial. These branches are akin to building blocks; each block has a distinct function, wields a distinct form of power, and operates within a system of separation of powers with checks and balances. **Separation of powers** is a system that divides government functions into three branches: the legislative branch, tasked with making laws; the executive branch, tasked with carrying out or enforcing laws; and the judicial branch, tasked with interpreting the constitutionality of laws. These three branches generally operate under a system of **checks and balances**, which provides the different branches with powers to limit one another in an effort to ensure that no branch becomes too powerful (e.g., the executive may have the power to veto, or reject, a law passed by the legislative branch).

Other hallmark institutions of democracies are their electoral systems and political parties. **Electoral systems**, simply put, are voting systems; an electoral system provides a set of rules that dictates how elections are conducted and how results are determined and communicated. **Political parties** are organized groups of people who unite under shared values to get their preferred candidates elected to political office.

This section provides a brief overview of these institutions. When taken together, variations within these institutions allow us to assess the many unique democracies that exist in the world today.

### Executive, Legislative, and Judicial Branches

While some elements and characteristics of democracy vary, one commonality is the separation of powers among the branches of government.

The **legislative branch** generally performs three main functions: (1) it makes and revises laws; (2) it provides administrative oversight to ensure laws are properly executed; and (3), it represents members' constituents in the government, ideally enacting laws related to citizens' interests. There are three main types of legislatures. The first is a **consultative legislature**, which is a type of legislative body that advises the leader, or group of leaders, on issues relating to laws and their applications. In the consultative legislature, members may be elected or appointed. The second is the **parliamentary legislature**, which is a type of legislative body in which members are elected by the people, enact laws, and choose and hold accountable the head of government (typically, a prime minister). We will expand on the parliamentary system in the next section of this chapter. The third type of legislature is the **congressional legislature**, which is a type of legislative body in which groups of legislators, elected by the people, make laws and share powers with other branches within the government. In comparison to a parliamentary legislature, a congressional legislature does not have the ability to choose the head of government.

Interestingly, while most of the legislatures in North and South America are congressional legislatures (with the exception of Canada), European legislatures tend to be parliamentary. As an example of a congressional legislature, we can consider the United States. The U.S. Congress, a bicameral legislature composed of the House of Representatives and the Senate, enjoys substantial powers through its constitutional mandate; it can levy taxes, borrow money, spend money, regulate interstate commerce, establish a national currency, establish a post office, declare war, raise and support an army and navy, establish courts, and pass all laws "necessary and proper" to complete its work. Congress can also propose amendments to the constitution, call for a constitutional convention, and admit new states to the country. What it cannot do, however, is choose the U.S. President, and each of the other two branches of government has the ability to "check" the legislature's power.

The U.S. President is an example of an official who falls within the executive branch of government. The **executive branch** is responsible for implementing and enforcing the laws made by the legislature. It is typically led by a president or a prime minister, though many systems include a second-ranking position beneath the chief executive (e.g., a vice president); a small group of leaders who have institutional powers (e.g., a cabinet); and numerous agencies, sometimes referred to as "departments" or "ministries" (e.g., Department/Ministry of Defense, Department/Ministry of Education, Department/Ministry of State). The chief executive may serve the role of the head of government and/or the head of state. The **head of government** runs and manages the day-to-day business of the state. The **head of state** is the symbolic representative of the state; for example, the head of state may represent the state internationally by attending ceremonial gatherings.

The final branch is the **judicial branch**, which refers to the part of government that resolves disputes (through courts) and interprets, applies, and determines the constitutionality of laws. Many states provide the courts with the power of judicial review as a "check" on the other branches of government. **Judicial review** is the ability of courts to interpret the constitutionality of laws and government actions. A state may allow for judicial review within its existing court system, or a state may create a special "Constitutional Court" for this purpose.

## Electoral Systems and Political Parties

As defined in the introduction, an electoral system provides a set of rules that dictates how elections are conducted and how results are determined and communicated. In a democracy, an **election** is the mechanism by which leaders are chosen for political office and, as discussed in 4.1, the election must be conducted in a free and fair manner. An electoral system may include rules about when elections occur, who can vote, who can run as a candidate, how and where voting takes place, how to collect and count ballots, and what constitutes an electoral victory. Voting rules may be enshrined in constitutions, election laws, and/or other legal mandates.

There are *many* different types of electoral systems, and we will only introduce three here. First, the **plurality voting system** is one in which the winning candidate simply earns the most votes. In this system, there is no requirement that a candidate attain a majority of votes, and this system is sometimes called the "first-past-the-post" system. Second, the **majoritarian voting system** is one in which a candidate must win a majority (at least one-half of the votes) in order to win the election. If no candidate wins a majority, there will be a subsequent "runoff election" between the top two vote-earners from the first round. Third, the **proportional voting system** is one in which the distribution of seats (e.g., in a legislature) reflects the overall distribution of votes by the population. For instance, if 20 percent of the population votes for Political Party A, then the state's legislature will provide Political Party A with (approximately) 20 percent of its seats.

These three systems are common, but they do not represent the entire spectrum of electoral systems. As only a few examples of electoral system complications, some states employ mixed voting systems, in which they utilize different systems in different types of elections (e.g., presidential vs. legislative); some states employ quotas, rules that aim to guarantee a certain amount of representation for historically underrepresented groups (e.g., they allocate specific percentages of seats to women, religious minorities, and/or ethnic minorities); and some states employ election thresholds, rules that require a minimum percentage of votes before a political party can gain any seats in a legislature.

Political parties are therefore another crucial institution within democracies. Political parties are organized groups of people who unite under shared values to get their preferred candidates elected to political office, and political parties also play integral roles in accomplishing their political agendas once in office. In relation to electoral systems, a plurality voting system ("first-past-the-post") generally results in two powerful political parties that vie to control power (e.g., the Democratic Party and the Republican Party in the United States). A proportional representation system, alternatively, generally yields a larger number of political parties. Israel, as one example, often has at least 10 political parties represented in its legislature (the Knesset).

This discussion of branches of government, electoral systems, and political parties leads logically to our next section, in which we combine the information above to identify the three major systems of democratic government: presidential, parliamentary, and

semi-presidential.

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## 3.2: Systems of Democracy

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### Introduction

Depending on the relative distribution of power between the legislative and executive branches within a democracy, there are three potential systems of government: the presidential system, the parliamentary system, and the semi-presidential system. Each of these systems was designed to fit the context and culture of its democracy, and each has its share of advantages and disadvantages.

### Systems of Government

The **presidential system**, sometimes called the "single executive system," is one in which an elected president leads the executive branch, acting *both* as the head of government *and* as the head of state. There is a clear separation of powers in this system, with the executive branch and the legislative branch distinct, and with the president elected independently from the legislature. Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and the United States are all examples of states with presidential systems. In each state, the president serves a fixed term. In Colombia, as one example, the president can serve a single term of four years; in Mexico, as another example, the president can serve a single term of six years.

The **parliamentary system** is one in which the chief executive, usually a prime minister, is not directly elected and is instead chosen by the legislature (parliament). The prime minister typically serves as the head of government, but *not* the head of state. In the United Kingdom, for example, the British monarch serves as the head of state in a largely ceremonial role while the prime minister serves as the head of government who directs day-to-day political activities. Prime ministers must have the support of the legislature in order to take office and, should the legislature desire a change in executive leadership, it can remove the prime minister through a "vote of no confidence."

The **semi-presidential system**, sometimes called "the dual executive system," is one in which a state has both a president and a prime minister, and the dual executives share power. The president is typically directly elected and serves as the head of state. The Prime Minister is typically appointed by the president and serves as the head of government. In France, for instance, the president is directly elected and then appoints the prime minister, but the French legislature retains the ability to dismiss the prime minister through a vote of no confidence. In this way, the semi-presidential system combines elements from the presidential and parliamentary systems.

### Advantages and Disadvantages

Each of the three systems of government has potential advantages and disadvantages.

The executive's popular election and fixed term within the presidential system is sometimes considered ideal, as it can ensure democratic legitimacy, produce stability, and provide voters with a clear understanding of the leadership timeline. Yet, at the same time, the direct election of the president can sometimes lead to a problem with personalization of power, where too much power centers on one person, which can lead to cronyism or the erosion of democratic institutions. It can also lead to gridlock, the inability to pass legislation, when different political parties control the executive and legislative branches. Finally, the fixed term can be a disadvantage if there is an unpopular president and no easy way to remove the executive (i.e., as there would be with a vote of no confidence). In the United States, for example, removal of a president requires either (1) impeachment and a trial conviction through the legislature or (2) the following of a process described in the 25th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. In either case, removing a president from office is exceedingly difficult.

The executive removal process in a presidential system is far more cumbersome than in a parliamentary system. One advantage of a parliamentary system, therefore, is that the legislature can remove a prime minister from power at any time, and for any reason, by simply getting a majority consensus among the legislators. This is a dynamic and flexible model that has the ability to respond quickly when a lack of consensus arises. Yet while perhaps an advantage when a prime minister is unpopular and/or not completing their political agenda, the possibility for frequent changes in leadership can cause instability and uncertainty. Additional concerns related to instability exist because, in order to form a majority, parliamentary systems sometimes require political parties to form coalitions. **Coalitions** are temporary groupings between two or more political parties. These coalitions

often contain fragmented political parties with widely divergent interests, which requires ongoing negotiations to please all sides.

The semi-presidential system may at first appear as if, by combining aspects of the presidential and parliamentary systems, it can avoid the flaws inherent in each. For instance, while the president (head of state) gains democratic legitimacy through elections, the prime minister (head of government) also faces accountability through the threat of a legislative vote of no confidence. In addition, it may seem to be an advantage to have a division of labor between a president and a prime minister. Yet a disadvantage of semi-presidential systems is that these roles can sometimes blur, causing confusion surrounding the responsibilities of the dual executives. This can also lead to power struggles between the dual executives, especially because the president's fixed term provides the head of state with an advantage over a prime minister who can be removed.

Table 4.3.1 summarizes a few of the advantages and disadvantages of the three systems of government identified above.

**Table 4.3.1:** Advantages and Disadvantages of Presidential, Parliamentary, and Semi-Presidential Systems

|                      | Presidential System                                                                                                                                                                 | Parliamentary System                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Semi-Presidential System                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Advantages</b>    | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. clear separation of powers</li> <li>2. president gains legitimacy through elections</li> <li>3. president has a fixed term</li> </ol>     | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. head of government (prime minister) depends on legislative approval, providing accountability</li> <li>2. legislature can remove the head of government through a vote of no confidence</li> <li>3. collective leadership is present, reducing the risk of personalization of power</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. president gains legitimacy through elections</li> <li>2. head of government (prime minister) depends on legislative approval, providing accountability</li> <li>3. division of work between the dual executives can decrease the amount of bureaucracy</li> </ol> |
| <b>Disadvantages</b> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. potential for gridlock</li> <li>2. difficult to remove president from power</li> <li>3. potential for personalization of power</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. lack of separation of powers between head of government and legislature</li> <li>2. head of government is not elected directly by the people</li> <li>3. potential for instability in the head of government and/or governing coalitions</li> </ol>                                            | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. fixed terms tend to favor the president in the dual executive relationship</li> <li>2. responsibilities for the dual executives can blur, leading to confusion</li> <li>3. potential for power struggles between the dual executives</li> </ol>                   |

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## 3.3: Legislatures

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Let's start with a puzzle. In the fall of 2025, the U.S. Senate voted on a bill to keep the federal government funded. It got 51 votes in favor and 47 against. In a student election, a city council race, or just about any vote you have ever taken part in, that is a win. In the Senate, it was a loss. The bill failed, the government shut down on October 1, and it stayed shut for 43 days, the longest full shutdown in American history.

Here is a second puzzle. In a Gallup poll taken in September 2026, only 16 percent of Americans said they approve of the job Congress is doing. And yet on November 3, voters will choose all 435 members of the House and 35 senators, and history says most of the incumbents who run will win again.

How does a bill with more votes for than against lose? Why does an institution so many people dislike keep getting the same people back? I don't think either one means Congress is simply broken. Both come from design choices, some made in 1787 and some made much more recently, and once you can see the design, a lot of confusing headlines start to make sense. In this section, we will look at what legislatures do, how different countries organize them, and why Congress works the way it does.

### Three Kinds of Legislatures

Around the world, legislatures come in three basic types. A **consultative** legislature advises the ruler or rulers on law and policy but does not have the final say. Its members may be elected, appointed, or both. In a **parliamentary** system, an elected legislature makes the laws and, through its leaders, also serves as the executive branch of government. In a **congressional** system, which political scientists often call a presidential system, one or more elected groups of legislators make law and share power with other branches of government. The United States is the example you probably know best, so it gets the most attention below.

Whatever the type, legislatures tend to do three jobs. First, they **make and revise laws**. That usually includes the main authority over the budget, meaning the power to approve taxes and decide how public money is spent. Second, they carry out **administrative oversight**, checking that government agencies are applying the laws properly. In a congressional system, this can also include "advice and consent," which means the legislature can reject a president's appointment or block a treaty with another country. Third, they **represent constituents** to the government. When legislators are elected from geographic districts, they spend real time helping individual people untangle problems with government agencies, such as a delayed Social Security check or a veterans' benefit.

Of the three, lawmaking is the big one. When legislatures make the laws, power moves toward the people, at least in a working republic where voters elect the legislature. Voters can also fire legislators by electing somebody else next time. Terms of office are usually between two and six years. In parliamentary systems, a term may last only until the next election, and elections can come fast. In 1746, the Earl of Bath was the British prime minister for two days before his government collapsed because nobody would serve in it. More recently, Liz Truss lasted just 49 days in 2022. At the other extreme, Sir Robert Walpole held the job for about 20 years, from 1721 to 1742. As we covered in the previous chapter, legislators may be elected to represent districts, states, or provinces within a country, or they may be elected in proportion to the votes their party receives. Many countries use a mix of the two.

### Consultative Assemblies

A handful of countries have consultative assemblies, which lack the lawmaking power of a traditional legislature. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are examples. Kuwait is a different and more fragile case. It has an elected National Assembly, but in May 2024 that body was suspended for up to four years, so it is not currently doing the work of a legislature. Several communist and formerly communist states, including China, Vietnam, Cuba, and Laos, have national assemblies that on paper do have lawmaking power. In practice, they meet briefly and have very limited ability to make law on their own. What these assemblies have in common is that they give the appearance of a public voice without providing a real check on the people who hold power.

China's legislature is worth a closer look, if only because it is so different from what you find in most of the world. The National People's Congress has 2,977 members, which makes it the largest legislature on the planet. Even so, that works out to roughly one member for every 470,000 people. For comparison, the New Hampshire House of Representatives, the largest state legislative

chamber in the United States, has 400 members who each represent about 3,300 people. A member of the U.S. House represents about 761,000.

The full National People's Congress meets for only about a week or two each spring, at the same time as the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, which is supposed to represent various groups across the country. A smaller Standing Committee handles most of the lawmaking in between. Supporters say the system helps mediate disputes among different factions. Critics say it is mostly a rubber stamp for the Chinese Communist Party, which holds the real power. On paper, delegates are chosen by lower-level assemblies, which are in turn elected by the people. In reality, the Party largely decides who serves. Most delegates are Party members, and the eight other political parties that exist in China all operate with the Party's approval.

## Legislatures in Congressional Systems

Most legislatures do not look like that. They tend to be messy, loud, and full of arguing and bargaining. There is an old line about laws and sausages: people respect both less once they see how they are made. I think that is a fair warning before we dig in. If watching Congress feels frustrating, that is a normal reaction, and it tells us something about how the institution was built.

The U.S. Congress has some quirks, but it is a good model for how the legislative process works in general. All federal laws start in Congress. Neither the courts nor the president can make a law on their own. Congress is also, like most legislatures, an arena for conflict. That is a feature. It means the people's business can be argued out without real violence, although that was not always true. In the decades before the Civil War, members of Congress sometimes attacked one another physically.

While making law is its main job, Congress has to balance policy-making against the needs of the voters back home. That tension drives much of what happens in Washington. How do you balance what your state or district needs against what the nation needs? The two don't always line up, and members of Congress often lean toward the local. Many have criticized government spending in speeches while steering federal money to their home states. A member might say she supports a balanced budget and still vote for funding a local project or a defense contractor in her district. Both things can be sincere, and that is what makes the conflict so hard to resolve.

## What Congress Can Do

Congress has a substantial constitutional mandate. It can levy taxes, borrow money, spend money, regulate interstate commerce, establish a national currency and a post office, declare war, raise and support an army and navy, and create federal courts. It can also pass any laws "necessary and proper" to carry out these powers. Beyond that, Congress can propose constitutional amendments, call a constitutional convention, and admit new states. The House can impeach federal officials, the Senate can try them, and if no presidential candidate wins a majority in the Electoral College, the House chooses the president. The Senate gives advice and consent on treaties and on appointments such as federal judges. Congress can investigate nearly anything it likes, and it can discipline its own members.

The U.S. Congress has 535 voting members. There are 100 senators, two from each state, and 435 representatives, divided among the states by population. After the 2020 census, the average House district included about 761,000 people. The size of the House has been fixed at 435 since a federal law passed in 1929. The House also includes non-voting delegates from the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands.

The fact that D.C. residents don't have a voting member of Congress comes from history. The nation's capital was placed outside the boundaries of any state, back when the states were suspicious of one another. That worry has faded, but another has taken its place. At different points in American history, each major party has feared that giving the district representation would hand seats to the other side. A seemingly simple fix, letting D.C. residents vote in Maryland's congressional elections, has not cleared that hurdle either.

### *The U.S. House and Senate Compared*

| Feature                   | House of Representatives                     | Senate                                           |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Voting members</b>     | 435                                          | 100                                              |
| <b>Who is represented</b> | Districts of about 761,000 people on average | Two senators per state, regardless of population |

| Feature               | House of Representatives                                                                                        | Senate                                                                        |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Term length</b>    | 2 years                                                                                                         | 6 years, staggered so about a third are up every two years                    |
| <b>Minimum age</b>    | 25                                                                                                              | 30                                                                            |
| <b>Special powers</b> | Starts revenue bills, impeaches officials, and picks the president if no one wins an Electoral College majority | Gives advice and consent on appointments and treaties, and tries impeachments |
| <b>Debate</b>         | Limited, with terms set by the Rules Committee                                                                  | Unlimited unless 60 senators vote to end it                                   |

## Why Two Chambers Slow Everything Down

Having two chambers, with the House and Senate as coequal parts of Congress, slows the legislative process on purpose. For a bill to become law, both chambers have to pass it in exactly the same version. The nature of the Senate adds to the slowdown. Because the Senate is based on states and not population, it tilts power toward less populous states. The 26 least populous states hold only about 18 percent of the U.S. population, yet they elect 52 senators, a majority of the chamber.

Blocking something in the Senate can mean stopping nearly everything, because the Senate allows unlimited debate. Even the threat of a filibuster, which means talking on the floor without end, can derail a bill. To end debate, the Senate needs 60 votes, a step called cloture, and it is rare for either party to hold 60 seats. This is how the puzzle at the top of this page works. In 2025, the funding bill got a majority in the Senate, 51 to 47, but it fell short of the 60 needed to cut off debate. The shutdown ended on November 12, after a deal passed the Senate 60 to 40 with eight Democrats joining the Republicans. The fight was over expiring health care subsidies. Whichever side you took, the vote count tells you the story: in the Senate, 51 is often not enough.

If the Senate's structure was not written into the Constitution, it probably would not survive a court challenge. In decisions in the 1950s and 1960s, federal courts ruled that legislative districts have to be roughly equal in population. Before that, districts were often wildly uneven. In Arizona, for example, the state House was based on population while the state Senate was divided by county. Most of the state's residents lived in only two counties, around Phoenix and Tucson, so rural interests dominated the legislature. That was not necessarily wrong, but it was not fair to the majority of Arizonans.

## Who Draws the Lines?

Today, after every U.S. Census, states have to redraw their districts, both for state legislatures and for the U.S. House. Some states let the majority party in the legislature draw the new map, which is usually bad news for whichever party is not in the majority. Others use commissions that are supposed to be nonpartisan, as California does. Even then, partisan appointees often try to get an edge for their side. This process is called redistricting, and when it is done to help one party it is called gerrymandering.

Redistricting used to happen once a decade, and in 2025 that changed. Texas redrew its congressional map in the summer, aiming to win more seats for Republicans. California voters responded that November by approving Proposition 50, which put in place new House districts that favor Democrats. Other states followed in 2025 and 2026, with court fights over many of the new maps. When you hear that a state "redrew its map," what is really happening is a decision about whose votes will count for the most. Your district is not a natural feature of the landscape. Somebody drew it.

## Leaders and Majority Power

House members serve two-year terms. The House was meant from the start to be the chamber closest to the people, even though many state legislatures already held annual elections before the Constitution. Senators serve six-year terms. The idea was to build a more deliberative body that could put a check on the temporary passions of the masses. With six years to work with, senators can take a longer view of issues without facing re-election quite so soon.

For the same reason, senators were originally chosen by state legislatures rather than by voters. By the late 1800s, this had run into problems. State legislatures often could not agree on whom to send, and seats sometimes sat vacant. Without popular control, the Senate also tended to be dominated by powerful interest groups like the railroads, which did not make voters happy. The 17th Amendment, passed in 1913, provided for direct election of senators.

The vice president serves as president of the Senate and can vote to break a tie. The Speaker of the House leads the House, and the Senate majority leader runs the Senate. In each case, the majority party typically chooses the leader. The majority party also controls the committee system, which is where most of the work in Congress gets done. By the time something reaches the floor, the outcome is usually decided. Political scientists sometimes call this McCrone's rule, after Don McCrone: nothing comes to a vote that has not already been settled. If you don't have the votes, you don't bring the bill up, unless you want to make a statement. Statements are fine, but they don't pass bills.

The Speaker has some control over floor debate, committee assignments, and which committee gets a bill. That power can tell you whether a bill has a future or just a past. Committee chairs have similar power over their own committees. Congress convenes in early January and, with occasional recesses, meets well into the fall.

## The Committee System

The House has 20 standing committees and the Senate has 16 in the current Congress, though the numbers can change. They cover everything from budgets and taxes to agriculture to science. Members of Congress compete for choice assignments. If you represent a farming area, you do not need a guidebook to know you should be on the agriculture committee. If your district has military bases, the armed services committee is a smart choice. A successful member finds a specialty and becomes the expert. That gives a representative or senator some power, something to trade with other members, and something to point to back home.

Committees divide up the labor. No member of Congress can be an expert on everything, so committees let each one be good at something and, hopefully, share that knowledge with colleagues. Committees are broken down further into subcommittees, which is where the nuts-and-bolts work of lawmaking usually happens.

Here is how a bill makes the trip. A member of Congress has to sponsor it. Most bills can start in either chamber, where they are assigned to at least one committee, and sometimes more if they affect revenue or spending. The bill may get a hearing and perhaps a vote in subcommittee. If it survives, the full committee has to vote it out, and then it goes to the House or Senate floor. If it passes there, it goes to the other chamber and has to survive the same process again. If the two chambers pass different versions, they can appoint a conference committee with members of both parties to hammer out a compromise. Then the president has to sign it.

Given that gauntlet, most bills die long before they become law. In the 118th Congress, which covered 2023 and 2024, members introduced more than 19,000 bills and resolutions. About 1 percent became law directly, and about 3 percent if you count bills that were folded into other legislation. But like the villains in a zombie movie, a bill is never quite dead. A minority party member whose bill is stuck can find a friend across the aisle to sponsor it instead. Or a dead bill can rise from the grave as an amendment to a bill that is still alive. The House requires amendments to be germane, meaning related to the topic of the bill. The Senate is much looser, so senators can hang amendments on almost anything. Some bills collect so many amendments that people call them "Christmas tree bills," because everyone has hung an ornament on them.

## Oversight and Advice and Consent

One of Congress's most important jobs is also one of the least glamorous: administrative oversight. Committees spend a lot of time questioning executive branch officials to find out whether the law is being carried out the way Congress intended. There are few quick rewards for this work. An incumbent can't get much mileage on the campaign trail from "Vote for me, I oversaw the routine handling of road repair and bridge building." But in many cases that is a more important job than the high-profile fights that get all the attention.

The House Rules Committee is one of the most important committees in the chamber. It is usually led by a close ally of the Speaker, and it sets the terms and conditions of debate and the path a bill has to take. Compare that with the Senate and its unlimited debate, where the threat of a filibuster can hold up even routine legislation. A single senator can also hold up a judicial or executive appointment, sometimes for reasons that have nothing to do with the nominee. Some people argue the Senate needs reform. Whether you like its ability to put on the brakes may depend on which party the brakes are being applied to. The Senate writes its own rules, so changing them takes either a lot of votes or something dramatic.

The Senate "advises and consents" on presidential appointments, including top administration officials and federal judges, and on treaties with other countries. That means the Senate holds hearings and then approves or rejects. McCrone's rule applies here too. The Senate usually signals to the president that a nominee or treaty isn't going to make it long before a vote is held. And

unlike members of Congress, presidents are not very interested in making a statement. If the Senate just says no, the president looks bad.

Members of Congress also do not work alone. Committee staff focus on policy and personal staff focus on constituent concerns, and together they number in the thousands. Constituent service is a big part of the job, from meeting people back home to helping them get through problems with federal agencies. Members who seem too remote from their states or districts tend to have a harder time getting re-elected, so they maintain offices both at home and in Washington. A rank-and-file member earns \$174,000 a year, a figure that has not changed since 2009. That is a comfortable salary until you realize many members keep two residences, one in their home district and one in D.C. Members from the West Coast face the longest commutes of anyone.

## Congress and the President

The president has to sign a bill for it to become law, and the president can veto it. Congress can override a veto with a two-thirds vote in both chambers, but that is rare. Presidents have issued 2,599 vetoes since 1789, and Congress has overridden only 112 of them, about 4 percent. Presidents also don't use the veto as often as you might think. Because the two branches have to work together, there is a lot of give and take, and Congress usually avoids sending the president bills he is likely to veto unless the goal is to embarrass him. Congress also has its own tools to challenge the president, including the Congressional Budget Office, the Government Accountability Office, and the Congressional Research Service. Information is power in government, and it is often worth more than money.

Congress tends to have more power over domestic policy than foreign affairs. Foreign policy often needs fast, decisive action, and Congress is not built for that. Domestic policy can be more careful and deliberative, and that is where Congress is at its best.

Members of Congress often form caucuses around shared concerns, from economic interests to ethnic identity to ideology. The Congressional Black Caucus, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, and the House Freedom Caucus are all examples. When the majority in the House is narrow, a bloc like this can have real leverage over what leaders can pass.

## Who Serves in Congress

Congress doesn't look like the rest of the country. As of the 119th Congress, which began in January 2025, 139 voting members, or 26 percent, were Black, Hispanic, Asian American, or Native American. That makes this one of the most diverse Congresses in U.S. history, but it is still well short of the country as a whole, where about four in ten Americans are people of color. Women hold 28 percent of the voting seats, or 150 members, which is still far from half. Congress is also much older than the public. The median age in the House is 57.5 and in the Senate it is 64.7, while the median American is in their late thirties. Roughly 87 percent of members identify as Christian, compared with about six in ten American adults. Nearly all members have college degrees, and the most common backgrounds are public service, business, and law. Congress is not a mirror of the country. Whether it should be one is a good debate to have.

## Congress' Lack of Popularity

Here is the conundrum. Congress, the symbol of American democracy, is and has long been wildly unpopular. Gallup's September 2026 poll found that 16 percent of Americans approve of the job it is doing. Its record low was 9 percent in November 2013, and its high was 84 percent in October 2001, just weeks after the September 11 attacks. And yet people don't like it. Why? Congress is a handy place to put blame and regret, and in some ways that is at the heart of the American system. Here are four possible reasons.

**People think Congress wastes money.** Congress is famous for pork barrel spending, a phrase with roots in the 1800s that became political slang for local projects around 1910. Legislators at every level try to grab as much money for their districts as they can. But one person's pork is another person's paradise, and where do you draw the line? Earmarks, which are provisions that direct money to specific projects in a member's home state or district, were banned in 2011 and returned in 2021 under new names like "congressionally directed spending" and "community project funding." In fiscal year 2024, earmarks cost about \$14.6 billion across more than 8,000 projects. That was 0.8 percent of discretionary spending and about 0.2 percent of everything the federal government spent. You could make every earmark disappear and the budget would not be much closer to balanced.

Some earmarks do look silly, such as nearly \$1 million in 2010 to get more poetry in zoos. Consider a famous example from the 2000s. Alaska Senator Ted Stevens, a conservative Republican who still managed to bring home billions in federal money for his

state, helped win funding for a \$398 million bridge in Ketchikan, in Southeast Alaska. The bridge would have connected the town to Gravina Island, which has about 50 residents and the airport that serves Ketchikan, which handles over 200,000 passengers a year. Ketchikan sits at the foot of steep mountains with no road out, so the only way in or out is by boat or plane, and to get to the airport you have to take a short ferry ride. Supporters said the bridge would solve that problem and open more of the island to development. Critics said it was a monument to wasteful spending. The project became a national symbol of pork, nicknamed "the bridge to nowhere."

Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, who had backed the bridge, canceled it in September 2007 after Congress dropped the earmark. Palin later became the Republican nominee for vice president and talked about having stopped the project. Alaska still went on to spend more than \$25 million in federal highway funds on the Gravina Island Highway, which was supposed to connect to the bridge. It's there today, appropriately nicknamed "the road to nowhere." Whether the bridge was a good idea or a bad one, it shows how people feel about federal spending: one person's boondoggle is another person's vital improvement. If you had to take a ferry to the airport, and if you have ever waited in a ferry line the question gets sharper, would you want a bridge?

**Congress versus itself.** Part of the problem is that candidates have been running against Congress for decades. Even incumbents run against the institution while asking voters to send them back. If you keep telling people the system is broken, eventually they believe you. Yet incumbents typically win more than 90 percent of the time. Voters seem to like their own members of Congress and blame everyone else's. Part of the explanation is what political scientists call the vanishing marginals: Why have so many races become less competitive? In part, redistricting has created districts that are heavily Republican or Democratic, which leaves the other party with little chance of winning. Parties respond by not investing in those races. The evidence on why incumbents win so often is not fully conclusive, but it raises a question worth asking. If you are unhappy with Congress, why keep sending the same people back?

**Misinformation.** Social media has made this worse. You don't have to scroll long to find a viral post claiming that members of Congress exempt themselves from the laws they pass, or that they don't pay into Social Security. Neither is true. Members are covered by many of the same laws as everyone else, and they have paid into Social Security since 1984. These posts spread because they are shareable and confirm what people already suspect. That doesn't make them accurate.

**Lack of understanding.** The fact that Congress was designed to deliberate and move slowly seems lost on a lot of people, especially in a world where feeds reward instant reactions. When the president and Congress look stuck, that is often the system working the way it was designed to. Congress was supposed to be a check on the presidency, on the courts, and above all on the momentary passions of the voters. When there is a national consensus, Congress acts. When there isn't, Congress deliberates. It is not very pretty, but that is what was supposed to happen.

## Legislatures in Other Countries

Countries in North and South America tend to have congressional-style governments, with a separately elected president who is not tied to the legislature's whims. The alternative is the parliamentary style, which is more common in Europe, Africa, and Asia. Canada is a good example of how parliamentary legislatures work.

The Canadian Parliament has two chambers, the House of Commons and the Senate. Most of the power rests in the House of Commons, which has 343 members following the April 2025 election. Members are elected in winner-take-all contests in districts called ridings. Each seat represents roughly 120,000 people, compared with about 761,000 for a U.S. House district. Terms last up to five years, but the prime minister can call an election whenever they want, and the House can force one with a no-confidence vote. That is a key difference from a congressional system.

The 2025 election shows how fast things can shift. The Liberals, led by Mark Carney, won 169 seats, just short of the 172 needed for a majority. In the months that followed, floor crossings from opposition parties and by-election wins moved the Liberals past that line, giving them a narrow majority in the House as of this writing. In a congressional system, that kind of change would require an election.

*Congressional and Parliamentary Systems Compared (United States and Canada)*

| Feature                  | Congressional (United States)                | Parliamentary (Canada)                                                                          |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Who leads the government | A president elected separately from Congress | A prime minister chosen by the party or coalition that holds a majority in the House of Commons |

| Feature                                   | Congressional (United States)                          | Parliamentary (Canada)                                                                                          |
|-------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Executive and legislative branches</b> | Separate, and they share power                         | Fused, because cabinet ministers are themselves members of Parliament                                           |
| <b>Cabinet</b>                            | Appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate | Appointed by the prime minister from among members of Parliament                                                |
| <b>When elections happen</b>              | On a fixed schedule                                    | No more than five years apart, but the prime minister can call one early, or a no-confidence vote can force one |
| <b>Speed of change</b>                    | Slower, with many places to block a bill               | Faster, because the only serious check on the majority is elections (and sometimes courts)                      |

The biggest difference between the two systems is how government is structured. In a congressional system, power is shared and divided among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. In a parliamentary system, the main legislative body serves as both the legislature and the executive. The head of government is the prime minister, who is chosen either by the majority party or by a coalition that can put together a majority. What would be cabinet secretaries in the United States are simply members of Parliament in Canada, appointed by the prime minister. So instead of a secretary of defense and committee chairs in the House and Senate who oversee defense, Canada has a defense minister who runs the department and can also vote on its budget and policies.

Canada's government also keeps some traces of its British roots. The governor general represents the Canadian monarch, who is currently King Charles III, and is appointed on the advice of the Canadian prime minister. The role is largely ceremonial. The 105-seat Senate is also appointed by the governor general on the prime minister's recommendation. It works somewhat like the British House of Lords. It can debate and amend legislation but can't start bills involving spending or taxes, and senators can stay until age 75. The Senate does occasionally block legislation from the House of Commons, and at various times it has held up or rejected bills involving trade, abortion, greenhouse gases, and taxes. The British House of Lords is similarly limited when it comes to money bills.

Like congressional systems, parliamentary systems divide up their work in committees. Unlike congressional systems, a change in government after an election can mean rapid change in policy. With most power in one chamber, the main check on the majority is elections, though courts also provide a check in some parliamentary states. In Canada, a win by the Liberals or the Conservatives usually means a definite turn toward that party's priorities. Compare that with the United States, where a new congressional majority may face a presidential veto, or where one party controlling a chamber while the other holds the White House can cause disagreement and stalemate. In the British House of Commons, debate is limited enough that the minority party has a harder time holding up legislation it dislikes than it would in the U.S. Senate. So in a parliamentary system, things can happen more quickly. Whether that is a good thing depends on whether you like what is happening.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Legislators everywhere have three basic jobs: making law, overseeing how government operates, and serving constituents.
- Congressional systems divide and share power among branches of government. Parliamentary systems combine executive and legislative power in one branch, which makes change faster and puts the main check on the majority in the next election.
- Most of the real work in legislatures happens in committees and subcommittees, where members and staff specialize in particular policy areas.
- Congress is slow and unpopular partly by design. Features like two chambers, unlimited Senate debate, and the 60-vote cloture threshold make it hard to pass bills, even ones that have majority support.

## EXERCISE

1. Look up your U.S. representative and your two senators at [house.gov](https://www.house.gov) and [senate.gov](https://www.senate.gov). Which committees do they serve on, and how long have they been in office? Contact one of their offices and ask a question about a policy issue you care about.

2. Go to [congress.gov](https://www.congress.gov) and pick a bill introduced in the current Congress that interests you. Follow it as far as you can. Where did it go, who sponsored it, and what happened to it? Based on this page, what do you think its chances are?
3. Gallup found that Congress is unpopular, but most incumbents still win re-election. In a short paragraph, offer your own explanation for this gap. Use at least two ideas from this page.

## 3.4: Executives

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The chief executive of a nation has two potential tasks: head of government and head of state. Head of government is in charge of the day-to-day affairs of the state, like the chief executive of a large corporation. The head of state represents the nation to the world, and may include any number of ceremonial duties. Some chief executives combine both functions; others perform one or the other.

### Types of Executives

In congressional systems, the chief executive, often called the president, is both head of government and head of state. Approximately 48 nations feature a separately elected president, who is in some way a check on the power of the chief legislative body. In some handful of states, the chief executive is a monarch—a king, a prince or a sultan, for example—who owes his or her job to heredity. The majority of nations have a parliamentary system. In parliamentary systems, the prime minister or premier is the head of government. Depending on the nation, the head of state may be a hereditary monarch such as Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain. It might also be a separately elected president, such as in Germany. The German presidency is a largely ceremonial post; the president has veto powers over the Bundestag, the main house of parliament, but has never used them. He or she serves a five-year term, elected the federal convention, which includes all the members of parliament plus members chosen by the state parliaments. Policy and power, however, rest with the chancellor, the equivalent of Canada's prime minister. And many more people around the world could probably tell you that Germany's chancellor in 2012 was Angela Merkel than could tell you that Germany's president was Joachim Gauck.

A **prime minister** or **chancellor** in a parliamentary system is also a member of the more powerful house of the legislature, and also typically the leader of that party. Assuming that the prime minister has an outright parliamentary majority, as opposed to heading a coalition of allied parties, he or she has some advantages and challenges with regard to governing. Since by definition the prime minister has a legislative majority, it should be easier to push through one's legislative agenda. You start every day with the votes you need. That's an oversimplification, of course. Members of parliament, even of your own party, will have their own take on things, and what the parliamentary majority wants may not be precisely what the majority of people want. So no parliamentary majority is completely immune from public pressure. On the other hand, unlike a separately elected president in a congressional system, a prime minister owes his or her power to his or her legislative majority. If the majority becomes unhappy with the prime minister's leadership, they can conduct a no-confidence vote and that executive's career at the top of the heap may be over.

### Presidents in Congressional Systems

Presidents in congressional systems are separately elected. Such a president may or may not have a working majority in the legislature. If she or he doesn't, it will be more difficult to get her or his policy agenda turned into law. The key point here is that a president in a congressional system does not have anywhere near complete power to change government and policy. Although such a president is both chief of state and head of government, she or he lacks full authority to dictate which way government is going to go. Nonetheless, citizens in countries with this kind of president tend to put all of their hopes and dreams and fears onto the presidency, and onto the particular president in office at any given time. Let us consider the presidency, using the U.S. presidency as an example.

### The U.S. President

The **U.S. presidency** is probably the single most powerful office on earth, and yet the president finds himself (and someday herself) in the middle of competing power centers. Presidents get far too much credit for what goes right in the country, and far too much blame for what goes wrong. A president is elected every four years in years divisible by four. U.S. presidents may serve no more than two terms or 10 years, in the case of a president assuming office mid-term. This came from the 22nd amendment, adopted 1947 after Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected and re-elected four times beginning in 1932.

The U.S. president has a number of formal powers. He or she can:

- **Carry out legislation.** The president directs the executive branch and the federal bureaucracy to carry out the laws as passed by Congress.

- **Provide information and advice to Congress**, including through the State of the Union address.
- **Negotiate treaties and executive agreements with foreign states.** Treaties must be approved by the Senate; executive agreements need not and are more easily contravened either by act of Congress or by the next president.
- **Make appointments to positions in the executive branch.** He has about 3,000 jobs to fill, including cabinet secretaries. The cabinet doesn't actually function like a cabinet, however; they don't all get together and have meetings. From the original four positions, the cabinet has grown to 14, and the president may designate other officials as cabinet level, such as UN ambassador.
- **Grant pardons.** The president can pardon criminals who have been convicted of crimes except in cases of impeachment.
- **Act as chief of state and commander in chief of the armed forces.**
- **Sign legislation to make it law and veto legislation to block it** (Congress can override vetoes by a two-thirds vote). The president has limited ability to impound federal funds, and can issue executive orders to the bureaucracy. Both of these actions can be easily overturned by Congress, simply by passing a new law.

The Founding Fathers didn't really envision the president having as much power as he does today, but this was probably inevitable. If nothing else, the nature of the situation suggests that one person—the president—can pull himself together and make a decision faster than can a group of 535 people—many of whom think they should be president—divided into two typically contentious groups. The organizational dynamics of the situation dictate that the president will be the dominant player in the political scene.

Consequently, although it is Congress' job to make law, 80–90 of legislation proposed in Congress comes from the executive branch, including all of the cabinet agencies under the president. As a consequence, at times Congress is more of an arbiter or gate-keeper of policy, as opposed to leading the way.

Nonetheless, the president has the power to persuade, not to command. He can't say jump and expect immediate action outside of the White House. This power is not inconsiderable. U.S. citizens may be acutely unhappy with a particular president, but on the whole, Americans have tended to have a great reverence for the office of the president, and this lends itself to substantial power if used properly. That's one reason why presidents go around and make speeches: It's usually to try to sway public opinion in the direction of policy goals, which can be very useful if you're butting heads with a recalcitrant Congress. This has been true since Franklin Delano Roosevelt first gave his famous "fireside chats" on the radio in the 1930s. Roosevelt spoke each week on the radio when that was the chief medium of mass communication. His comforting president gave people a little hope in otherwise difficult times. Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton also were very good at using the media to persuade the masses. To the extent that the news media still covers politics in any meaningful way, the U.S. House of Representatives gets fairly meager coverage, while the U.S. Senate gets a little more. What the president says, by definition, is news, so that the president's face and voice are ever-present.

This is important because presidents must succeed symbolically. They must be seen to be in charge, to care, to be trying to do something to make people's lives better. So Franklin Delano Roosevelt, under whose watch the Great Depression stretched on for nearly 10 more years, still remained popular with many voters because they believed that he cared about them. Ditto for Ronald Reagan, who, as George H.W. Bush once sneered during the 1980 primaries, had "that vision thing." The unfortunate Mr. Bush, who enjoyed record popularity at the successful conclusion of the first Gulf War, still failed to get re-elected in part because the economy was sagging and he seemed out of touch with what that meant to people. Ronald Reagan, in contrast, pursued policy that people said they disagreed with in reliable opinion polls. But they elected him twice because they liked him. So the president's actual performance and his popularity may diverge quite a bit. Voters who may not be paying close attention are often compelled by the form rather than the substance of the president's action.

Quick and decisive action usually helps the president's approval ratings, which is why presidents score big points on the foreign policy front but not many on the home front (unless the economy does well). The Founding Fathers actually imagined that Congress, in particular the Senate, would direct foreign policy, but this is not workable. The gang of 535 simply can't respond quickly enough. The president, meanwhile, can travel the world, meet with foreign leaders, negotiate treaties, open doors and be seen to be taking decisive action and solving problems. In the 1980s, as the Soviet Union collapsed from within, Ronald Reagan's stern anti-communist speeches and efforts to negotiate with the Soviets helped him look like the conquering hero of the Cold War. Some scholars do give Reagan credit, but one could argue that the Soviet Union was on its last legs when Reagan was first elected.

As commander-in-chief, the president can put the armed forces to work. As a consequence, U.S. troops have been sent overseas more than 150 times but Congress has declared war only six times, and not once since World War II. In the wake of the United States' involvement in Vietnam, which went from being a training mission to having half a million men and women serving there, Congress felt the need to assert itself. They passed the

**War Powers Act** in 1973, which requires the president to commit troops for more than six months before reporting to Congress and justifying her or his actions. It's not clear if this works, as it hasn't been tested, and the hammer is still with the president. Congress can't order the troops home. Its only recourse is to cut off funding for the mission. That would likely be seen as endangering the lives of the men and women who have been sent overseas, which is likely to be extremely unpopular back home.

Other presidents in other countries will have particular mixes of duties and authority, but this is the general model for what a president in a non-parliamentary system. One could argue, as the United States has one of the oldest governments in the world, that the American presidency was the model for what followed. It's probably no accident that this system of government is most common in North and South America.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Chief executives may have both ceremonial and practical responsibilities in government.
- A president in a congressional system is a separately elected official who represents the executive branch of government, which is usually co-equal with the other branches of government.
- A prime minister is the leader of the majority party or majority coalition in a parliamentary style of government. He or she serves as the head of government, but not usually head of state.

### EXERCISE

1. What would it mean if the United States had a parliamentary style of government? At this moment, who would be in charge and what would that mean for policy for the country?

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## 3.5: Courts

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Courts are typically the branch or part of government where laws are interpreted and enforced. Courts typically feature judges, either alone or in panels, who decided legal matters in cases brought before them according to the laws of that country. The court system may be separate from other branches of government, as in divided systems; or they may be subservient to the rest of the government, as in authoritarian systems; or they may be somewhere in between, as in some parliamentary system. Courts are often set up for specific purposes, such as tax, bankruptcy and military courts in the United States. Let's first consider courts in the United States, then see how they compare with court systems in other countries.

### U.S. Courts

U.S. courts are different in a couple of ways: First, because the United States is a federal system, there is a dual federal and state system of courts, each with its own powers and area of authority; second, because of the power of judicial review, by which U.S. courts can overturn acts of Congress or state legislatures because they are judged to run contrary to the U.S. or to a state constitution. Not every court in every country has this power; all U.S. courts of a certain level have this power.

In the United States, courts are the third branch of the government, and thereby serve as a check on the first two. The highest court, the U.S. Supreme Court, is one of the most powerful in the world because of its ability to overturn legislation. It cannot, however, consider things on a review basis; someone has to bring suit for it to consider anything.

The Supreme Court is the only court mentioned in the Constitution, but that document gives Congress the power to create courts inferior to the Supreme Court. They did. Beneath the Supreme Court are 13 Courts of Appeal, and beneath them 96 federal district courts. In addition, the federal court system includes the Court of Military Appeals, tax courts, bankruptcy courts, claims courts and international trade courts.

Federal judges are appointed for life, except for bankruptcy court judges, who are appointed for 14-year terms. Apparently, this is because the courts were created until Article I on the Constitution, not Article III, which says that federal judges are appointed for life. <http://www.bankruptcylawnetwork.com/here-comes-the-judge/> This insulates them from political pressure because they don't have to run for re-election. This sometimes leads people to complain about the court's insularity, most often when they disagree with the kinds of decisions the courts are making. Many state court judges are elected, and the evidence does not suggest any particular advantage or disadvantage for that system. Voters may find judicial elections particularly challenging, since judges are not supposed to campaign on how they would rule on a particular kind of case, as they are supposed to rule on cases based on the facts as presented in trial. The people who might know something about the quality of a judicial candidate are lawyers, but outside of bar association ratings, they're generally not talking, since every potential judge is somebody you might have to try a case before some day. Consequently, judicial elections sometimes feature little-known candidates with good names unseating experienced judges whose names don't sound as good. In some U.S. states, judges are chosen by commissions; in others, they are appointed by governors and confirmed by the state senate, much as with the U.S. federal courts.

In the case of federal courts, federal judicial nominations have become a serious political issue in the last 30 years. Presidents nominate federal judges, including Supreme Court justices, who must be confirmed by the U.S. Senate. Conservative presidents will want to appoint conservative judges, while more liberal presidents will do the opposite. So nominees, particularly for the Supreme Court, tend to undergo intense scrutiny in Senate hearings, with nearly every moment of the nominee's adult life up for inspection. Under the rules of the U.S. Senate, one senator can hold up the confirmation of any judge, even if that senator's party lacks a majority in the Senate. As a consequence, judicial vacancies have been filled rather slowly, especially during the presidency of Barack Obama, as conservative Republicans sought to prevent him from filling all the court openings below the U.S. Supreme Court.

Even with Supreme Court vacancies, the Senate can and sometimes does say no. In 1969, President Richard Nixon nominated Clement Haynesworth to the high court, despite the candidate's questionable record on civil rights. The U.S. Senate rejected his nomination. Nixon, apparently angered, responded with an even more conservative nominee, G. Harrold Carswell, and the Senate again voted no. Ronald Reagan sought to nominate Robert Bork to the high court, but he did not fare well in hearings and seemed too conservative for the time. His next nominee, Daniel Ginsberg, foundered on revelations that he had smoked some marijuana in college. George W. Bush sought to nominate his private White House attorney, Harriet Myers, whose relative lack of qualifications prompted Senate leadership to make clear to the president that his was a questionable choice, the nomination was withdrawn. So, most of the time, these rejections don't come to a vote, and a careful president tends to sound out Senate leaders on the

likelihood that a nominee will be looked upon favorably.

Although the 50 state court systems have great authority within their own borders, the U.S. Supreme Court has the final say in interpreting the Constitution. The court has subsequently made many important decisions that have had large impact on U.S. politics and government.

At various times in its history the court has validated slavery and sent people to jail for nothing more than peacefully protesting U.S. involvement in World War I. The 19th century High Court simultaneously prohibited the states and the national government from regulating railroads, saying that was reserved for the other level of government (depending on the suit). The court also struck down FDR's New Deal proposals that would have given the government sweeping powers over the economy. The court ended segregation in schools and greatly expanded civil rights protection in the 1950s and 1960s.

Not everybody will agree with every court decision. Modern courts are sometimes criticized for "judicial activism," which seems to flow one way or another depending on whether you happen to agree with the court's decision. Critics of judicial activism argue that the courts should strictly interpret the Constitution as written, as opposed to those who might argue that the Constitution's often vague and open language renders that idea both difficult and questionable. And one could argue that both ways. In the 2011 Citizens United decision, the court clearly made a decision that put freedom of speech in the form of spending money on politics ahead of ensuring equal access of all citizens to electoral office. The point is not whether that was a right or wrong decision—there's a rational argument to be made for both positions—the point is that the high court, in making that decision, had to interpret the law.

This is especially important in light of what is known as case law. Court decisions at all levels build and expand the body of law that guides the country. Other courts, in reaching verdicts in new cases, will make reference to other decisions in other courts. In particular, U.S. Supreme Court decisions trickle down to all lower courts, informing their decisions on subsequent cases. To that end, it makes a difference if the Supreme Court has ruled 9–0, leaving no doubt as to their opinion, or merely 5–4, which means that things might someday change. In light of the importance of case law, to argue that judges should only interpret law, not make it, is to misunderstand the U.S. court system. Every judicial decision makes law.

As we discussed earlier, U.S. Courts can only hear cases that are brought before them. The power of judicial review does not extend to issuing advisory opinions on proposed or existing laws. Somebody has to file suit, and a judge has to say that the case has enough merit to be heard. In the United States, court cases start at what are called trial courts. At this level, evidence is presented and arguments are made. The case may be heard by a jury of six to 12 people; in major cases, a grand jury may be convened, to determine whether a case should proceed to trial. In some cases, defendants may waive their right to a trial by jury and have their case decided solely by the presiding judge. There are basically two kinds of cases: civil cases, featuring disputes between two or more private parties; and criminal cases, in which someone stands accused of having broken the law. In criminal cases, the judge may also set the sentence if the defendant is convicted. The defendant is presumed innocent until proven guilty, so that the burden of proof lies with the plaintiff or with the state, in the form of the prosecution, to prove that the defendant has committed some wrong or otherwise broken the law. In criminal cases in particular, the prosecution must prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the defendant has committed a crime.

If either party in a civil case is dissatisfied with the verdict, or if the defendant feels he or she has been wrongly convicted, they may appeal the decision to a higher court. At the federal level, this is the U.S. Court of Appeals. Every U.S. state court system has a similar court, although it may have a different name. Appeals courts accept no new evidence; the parties making the appeal are arguing, in effect, that mistakes were made in the original trial, such as overlooking evidence or misapplying the law. Appeals courts are under no obligation to hear appeals. They can let the verdict stand; they can overturn the verdict in whole or in part; or they can send the case back to the trial judge with instructions.

It is possible to appeal all the way to a state supreme court or to the U.S. Supreme Court, but the highest courts usually only hear cases in which substantial constitutional questions are at stake. So while 5,000 cases may get appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court in a single year, it may hear no more than 150–200 in that same time frame. Decisions by state Supreme Courts may sometimes be appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which is the court of original jurisdiction—the trial court—in cases involving top federal officials.

You probably can't appeal your traffic ticket all the way to the Supreme Court; there's no constitutional question involved there. But sometimes an ordinary citizen can succeed in seeking justice at the highest level. For example, in 1961, a sometime, small-time criminal named Clarence Gideon was arrested for knocking over a pool hall in Florida. Mr. Gideon was actually innocent of this crime, but as he couldn't afford legal representation, he was forced to represent himself and was quickly convicted of this crime. Gideon didn't give up, however, and eventually his letters reached the U.S. Supreme Court, which was looking for a case that involved this issue of legal representation—the right to attorney. The court took on the case, ruled that in all felony cases,

the defendant has the right to an attorney, and sent the case back to the trial court for a rehearing. A lawyer was appointed to represent Gideon, and he quickly demolished the prosecution's apparently flimsy case, and Gideon was set free. The public defender system, which grew out of that Supreme Court decision, is often overworked and underfunded, but sometimes, it works. It worked for Clarence Gideon, who remains a shining example that sometimes, you can make a difference.

Courts in other countries may vary from U.S. courts. In France and other countries influenced by France, under the Napoleonic code, a defendant is guilty until proven innocent. French courts also do not consider case law in making decisions. Many courts in other nations lack the power of judicial review, although the United Kingdom adopted a Supreme Court in 2009. Some countries do have a special constitutional court, which does have the power of judicial review.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- In congressional systems, courts are the third branch of government.
- U.S. courts have the power of judicial review, which means they can overturn acts of government as unconstitutional. But this requires somebody to have filed suit over the law.
- U.S. federal judges are appointed for life, to help insulate them from political pressure in making judicial rulings.

### EXERCISE

1. How does your state choose judges? What are the advantages of this system, compared to the federal system of presidential appointments with Senate confirmation? Are there also disadvantages?

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## 3.6: Sub-National Governments

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In the United States and other countries with federal systems of government, another important piece of the political pie are state and local governments, also sometimes called sub-national governments. In most countries, these are governments in some way below the national government, whatever form it takes. In all systems, to some extent, but especially in federal systems, state and local governments are closest to the citizens, and frequently are the parts of government that deliver services and enforce laws in your city, town or neighborhood. In the U.S., voter turnout for elections for this level of government tends to be the lowest among all elections, which is probably unfortunate. This is the level of government closest to citizens, and the one most likely to have an immediate impact on your life.

Remember that the status of sub-national or local depends on whether the nation operates under a federal or under a unitary system. In a federal system, such as the United States, Mexico and Canada, the national government shares some power with the states or provinces, as in Canada. While particularly in the area of foreign affairs, states are subservient to the national government, they may have quite a bit of leeway to set their own laws within the boundaries established by a national constitution. In unitary governments, all power comes from the national government, which delegates some of that power to local governments to carry out the local business of governing.

In all but the smallest nations, having some kind of local government keeps government closer to the people and perhaps more responsive, and gives people a chance to create law and policy that fits their particular needs. State and local governments therefore are often responsible for things such as local transportation needs, law enforcement, and public schools, and sometimes have a role in broader issues such as environmental protection and health care.

### U.S. State and Local Governments

The 50 U.S. states are in some ways like 50 mini-republics, each with its own executive, legislative and judicial branches. The governor is the chief executive, although states often have separately elected statewide officials such as the state attorney general or the state treasurer. In 49 states, voters choose a two-chambered legislature, such as a house and a Senate. Only Nebraska has a unicameral legislature, with one non-partisan chamber to do the state's legislative business.

States have substantial leeway to order their own affairs—to create and maintain laws particular to the people of that state. So, for example, self-service gasoline remains illegal in Oregon, while the drinking age in Louisiana is 19.

In addition to creating policies that might fit more with the desires and conditions of local citizens, states deliver services directly to citizens. So, federally funded programs such as welfare and Medicare/Medicaid will be funneled through state offices, with the states and the federal government sharing funding responsibility. Congress usually insists that the states adhere to certain standards and levels of funding in order to receive federal matching funds, although in recent decades Congress has leaned more toward giving states some leeway in deciding how to structure such programs.

U.S. states typically have much more authority over education than does the federal government. There is a U.S. Department of Education, and the federal government provides some funding for both K-12 and for higher education, but the great majority of funding for education, and hence the standards to be applied, the level of tuition, and the location of schools, colleges and universities, is the work of state and sometimes local governments. States will decide what graduation requirements are for high school, and sometimes set requirements for college basic requirements. College students in Texas must study Texas state politics and government, regardless of their majors. That was a decision of the state government.

States have a major say in transportation issues, aside from the interstate freeway system, which was created by the federal government. States will often set speed limits on state highways. Wyoming once had no speed limit on freeways outside of urban areas, a nod to the travel time between its somewhat far-flung towns and cities. Congress, which was concerned about energy issues, wanted states to set lower speed limits to encourage fuel conservation, and threatened to take away Wyoming's federal highway funds if it did not comply. Wyoming got to the letter if not the spirit of the law by having state troopers issue tickets for wasting resources for drivers who treated state highways like the German Autobahn (where there often is no speed limit). States and provinces, and the local governments inside of them, often find themselves dependent on the governments above them for revenues. Nations and states have broader revenue bases, which allows them to collect more money than any state or city can. So even as they try to create law and policy that appeals to local residents, they find themselves under pressure from governments above them to spend the money in a particular way, as dictated by state or national governments.

States manage park systems, regional economic development efforts, and state legislatures set tax rates and create budgets that direct state spending. States may create more or less stringent environmental laws; expand or contract marriage rights; and regulate business and commerce within their own borders.

## Local Governments: Cities

States are unitary governments—for the most part, they lend power to local governments. In some states, large cities and counties have received what's called a limited home-rule charter, by which they have a little more authority to decide their own affairs. But for the most part, a state government, via the legislature, could in fact combine school districts, towns or even counties if they decided there was some reason to do so. When this happens, it's usually because one of these local governments is too small to support itself.

There are more than 87,000 local governments in the United States. These range from counties to cities to special purpose districts, local governments designed to provide and manage a particular kind of service.

Cities are more like mini-mini-republics, usually with some kind of elected council. In a strong-mayor form of government, the city council and the mayor are elected separately, and relate to each other in a way similar to how the president and Congress, or a governor and a state legislature, deal with each other. The council makes law; the mayor is the chief executive of city government. This system is more common in large cities. In smaller cities and towns, cities operate using the council-manager form of government, by which the city council serves as both legislature and executive, but hires a full-time, professional manager to oversee the day-to-day operations of city government.

Cities may provide police and fire protection, local transportation planning and improvement, and laws relating to the conduct of life within city limits. It is city government that sets local speed limits, puts in a stoplight, or takes out a traffic camera from your neighborhood. Cities fix potholes, help organize summer fairs and festivals, and maintain local parks. Many cities engage in zoning, laws by which rules are set about what can be built where. So, if an area is zoned retail, a developer can put in a store. If an area is zoned residential, the only thing that can be built there is housing. Like anything government does, zoning helps some people and hurts others. It can protect homeowners' home values, because you're going to have a harder time selling your home if somebody builds a Wal-Mart or other large store around the corner. On the other hand, zoning, by limiting the supply of available land, can make housing and other construction more expensive. Cities attempt to engage in economic development efforts, trying to attract businesses and jobs that will keep residents employed and keep revenue flowing into the city budget. In large cities in particular, city governments often face a balancing act in promoting economic development while trying to maintain quality of life for existing residents.

## Counties

Counties play a big role in local government in some states and less so in others, providing services and serving as regional governments in larger metropolitan areas. There are more than 3,000 counties in the United States, ranging from the 25 square miles of Arlington County, Virginia to the 330,000 square miles of the Unorganized Borough of Alaska. They range in population from around 10 million in Los Angeles County to less than 100 in Loving County, Texas. In Connecticut and Rhode Island, there are counties, but no county governments. In Louisiana, counties are called parishes, and in Alaska they are boroughs. Like cities, county governments may have either an executive and a council, separately elected, or, in the case of smaller counties, an elected board of 3–5 commissioners who have both executive and legislative power. In the west, counties are more likely to be both larger than eastern counties, and to provide city-like services to areas that are unincorporated, or whose citizens do not live inside of the boundary of any city. In Maryland, counties run school systems; in North Carolina, counties do not maintain local roads as they do elsewhere. Counties often maintain vital statistics records, such as marriages, births and deaths. Counties also often are responsible for local election and voter registration. In the northeastern U.S., counties may be divided into townships, establishing local governments which then have responsibility for a particular area within a county.

## Special Purpose Districts

Special purpose districts, as we noted earlier, are created to provide one kind of service. The most common special purpose district are school districts, which manage K-12 school systems in most parts of the country. While much of the money for schools comes from state governments, school districts manage how the money is spent. School districts usually have regularly elected boards of directors and a hired superintendent to manage the everyday operations of the district. Special purpose districts may also manage fire service, utilities such as sewer, water and electricity, and everything from local parks to public hospitals and

cemeteries. In rural areas, special purpose districts may be created to manage pest control and irrigation, allowing local farmers to pool their resources and provide common service to a wider number of people. In some states, port districts are charged with encouraging economic development and managing sea and airports to encourage commerce and foster job creation.

The advantages of special purpose districts can be that they encourage specialization and expertise, hopefully providing constituents with a better, more efficient level of service. In theory, with elected boards in charge, they are not immune to popular control. If citizens are unhappy, they can throw the rascals out and elect a new board. On the other hand, a board of citizens with no particular expertise in one area or another may become dominated by the district's hired management, or fooled by consultants, as happened with some local governments and their investment portfolios in the 1990s and 2000s. So, like all levels of government, they are by no means perfect. To excited over those annexations; they require petitions from a majority of landowners within a target area just to get started.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Sub-national governments manage local affairs on behalf of national governments.
- U.S. states often delegate local responsibility and authority to cities, counties, townships and special purpose districts.
- The autonomy of states or provinces will depend if the overall system of government is federal or unitary.

### EXERCISE

1. Look up the local government where you live. What services does it provide? What is the structure of its government? How does it fund those operations—what are its sources of revenue? How much of that money comes from the state government? Contact a local elected official and ask how much they are required to adhere to state guidelines on spending the money.

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## 3.7: Bureaucracy

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The last piece of government we will consider in this chapter are the agencies of government that are assigned with turning all that law into practice. Often, this part of government is called “the bureaucracy,” usually not meant as a compliment. Bureaucracy is often used as a dirty word to describe a government out of control. This is unfortunate, because it is actually only a form of organization. Bureaucracy refers to organization with a defined chain of hierarchical command; defined tasks for people within that chain; division of labor; clear lines of authority; goal-oriented approach to problems; and adherence to established rules. In fact, this describes most modern human institutions, from the college where you study to the place where you work.

Why do we have a bureaucratic form of organization? Because people have demanded a high degree of accountability and predictability in government, and this is one way to get it. Bureaucracy delegates and handles the details. It provides governance and oversight of the government. Generally speaking, people working in government agencies try to adhere to the laws as written, and sometimes one of the challenges is figuring out just what the legislative body intended.

In the United States, this form of organization grew in part from unhappiness with the often-corrupt spoils system that was common in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Many if not most government jobs were handed out to party loyalists as opposed to who might do the job best; as a consequence, contracting and various government jobs often went to the highest bidder—the one who promised to kick back the most of the money made from the job. The civil service system, which was created by Congress following the assassination of newly elected President James Garfield by a disappointed office seeker in 1881, insists that government hire people based on their ability to do whatever job they’re being hired for. This is sometimes called the merit system.

This kind of system is not new. The long-term success of both the Chinese and British empires were based on their civil service systems, which required substantial learning and rigorous testing before admission into government service. Although the Chinese system, which was heavily based on knowledge of Confucian classic texts, eventually failed to keep up with a changing world, as it helped maintain the empire for 2,000 years, it can hardly be called a failure.

This gets at the heart of the important trade-off in bureaucratic systems. Because they are rule-based systems, they provide some consistency, predictability and accountability. The goal is that everybody who has to deal with a government agency is treated equally and fairly—treated the same. The trade-off is that this kind of system makes it more difficult for agency officials—bureaucrats, in the term used by people who may be unhappy with the results—to apply judgment to particular circumstances. So a city building inspector is supposed to ensure that every construction project meets particular demands for safety and durability, and isn’t supposed to give anybody a little leeway if circumstances warrant. For a contractor or a homeowner doing a remodel, this can be frustrating, but for the next buyer, she or he can be assured that the project was done “up to code” when it was first built. And while we might like our bureaucrats to be more flexible when dealing with the public, too much flexibility can lead to favoritism and looking the other way at the wrong time.

This kind of system is common now in more developed countries. Agencies, staffed with experienced experts, attempt to administer the law, provide services to people, keep an eye on the public purse, and provide feedback to lawmakers about how everything is working. As agency heads often are political appointees, this can create problems for agencies. For example, in 2003, President George W. Bush appointed Mike Brown as head of the *Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)*, which attempts to help states and communities plan for and respond to both natural and man-made disasters. Brown, an attorney, had a fair amount of legal and government experience, but not necessarily crisis management or managing a large organization. FEMA appeared to be slow to respond to the disaster wrought by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005, and Brown was forced to resign. Whether he was responsible for FEMA’s slow response, or merely the fall guy for the Bush administration is by no means clear, but someone better suited to the job might have been appointed in the first place.

You have probably had good and bad experiences with government agencies—welfare offices, the Postal Service, even your college if it’s a public school and hence an agency of the state government. Either way, one should be careful in generalizing from those experiences. For the most part, however, the people who work in government agencies are just people, trying to balance the needs of their constituents and the demands of policymakers above them. So, for example, people complain about both the expense of welfare programs and object to paying people who aren’t working. That pressure leads policymakers to push agencies to keep a close eye on the books, so that agency employees try harder to ensure that no one gets on welfare illegally (and the incidence of welfare fraud is, in fact, very low in the United States). As pressure mounted to get people off welfare rolls, can it be surprising that getting on them became so much more difficult? In the end, then, the agency and its people become unpopular with both the people they serve and with the people who foot the bill.

How big is the bureaucracy? The U.S. federal government employs about 1.8 million people, plus 515,000 in the U.S. Postal Service, plus about 2.6 million in the armed forces, 1.4 million of whom are classified as active duty. That's actually not greatly different than 40 years ago. You can check the *Bureau of Labor Statistics* for the most current numbers. In the United States, most of the growth in government over the last 50 years has occurred at the state and local level.

The federal government also spends about \$2.8 trillion a year, versus the total U.S. economy of \$13.1 trillion. The U.S. government's size relative to the size of the national economy actually is smaller than that of most other industrialized countries. Government spending was 38.9 percent of GDP in 2011, a down year for the economy. Internationally, the range runs from 8 percent in Burma to 97 percent in Zimbabwe. In terms of tax burden, globally the U.S. is in the middle of the pack, which ranges from 0.9 percent of GDP in Equatorial Guinea to 63.1 percent in Lesotho (both nations in Africa).

The largest U.S. agency is the *Department of Defense* in terms of bodies, with 1 million civilian employees. Social spending, including health care and *Social Security*, is the largest budget category, at about 40 percent of the total federal budget. What you may think of as traditional welfare actually is about 3 percent of the whole budget. Foreign aid, another target of internet outrage, is also around 1 percent. Defense spending is 15 percent.

The federal government, through its agencies, plays a huge role in the economy. And while it hasn't grown that much, some people argue that it should still be smaller. One ongoing suggestion is to privatize certain public services, with the argument that the private sector will do a better job at less price. This might be true, but in the case of transit and postal service, for example, it would mean less and more expensive service for rural areas. In some states, private contractors have used their private status to avoid dealing with legally elected unions or to comply with rules on workplace safety. So, as with most things, there are significant tradeoffs to be made when choosing between public and private service providers. As for efficiency, both Social Security and Medicare have lower expense ratios (overhead) than do their private-sector counterparts. So while not every government agency is a picture of perfect efficiency, not every agency is burning piles of public cash in bonfires.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Bureaucratic forms of organization are common in governments and other organizations throughout the world.
- Bureaucracies trade flexibility for predictability and fairness.

### EXERCISES

1. Think about where you do or have worked. Was it organized bureaucratically? What would it mean for that place to be organized differently?
2. What public agencies have you dealt with on a personal level? What kind of service did you receive?

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## 3.8: Case Study - UK, France, and Germany

### Case Study Learning Objectives

This case study compares the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, three consolidated democracies in Western Europe that are broadly similar in wealth, civil liberties, and regional ties but differ sharply in their institutions. It places their systems of government, electoral rules, judicial power, territorial organization, and government stability side by side to show that democracy is a family of arrangements rather than a single blueprint.

By the end of this case study, you will be able to:

- Identify presidential, parliamentary, and semi-presidential systems in practice.
- Compare how electoral systems translate votes into legislative seats.
- Explain how judicial review varies across democracies, including where it barely exists.
- Distinguish unitary, devolved, and federal arrangements of territorial power.
- Evaluate how institutional design shapes government stability.

## Introduction

Not every comparison tests a causal hypothesis. As discussed in Chapter 1, a descriptive case study seeks to describe what a researcher observes rather than to explain why one outcome occurred instead of another. That is the approach here.

The United Kingdom, France, and Germany are all consolidated democracies in Western Europe. All three are wealthy, hold free and fair elections, protect civil liberties, and belong to the same regional organizations. Yet they have arrived at strikingly different institutional arrangements. The United Kingdom has a parliamentary system; France has a semi-presidential system; Germany has a parliamentary system built on entirely different foundations. They differ in how they elect legislators, how much power their courts hold over legislation, how they divide authority between national and subnational governments, and how easily a government can be removed from office.

Comparing them lets us see the full range of institutional designs introduced in this chapter operating side by side in societies that are otherwise broadly similar. It also demonstrates something important for the study of comparative politics: "democracy" is not one institutional blueprint. It is a family of arrangements, and the differences between them matter a great deal for how politics actually works.

## United Kingdom

- Full Country Name: United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
- System of Democracy: Parliamentary
- Head of State: Monarch (hereditary, ceremonial)
- Head of Government: Prime Minister
- Legislature: Bicameral (House of Commons, 650 elected members; House of Lords, appointed)
- Electoral System: Plurality ("first-past-the-post")
- Constitution: Uncodified
- Judicial Review: Limited; courts cannot strike down Acts of Parliament
- Territorial Organization: Unitary with asymmetric devolution
- Capital: London
- Population: approximately 69 million

## France

- Full Country Name: French Republic
- System of Democracy: Semi-presidential

- Head of State: President (directly elected, five-year term)
- Head of Government: Prime Minister (appointed by the President)
- Legislature: Bicameral (National Assembly, 577 directly elected members; Senate, indirectly elected)
- Electoral System: Two-round majoritarian
- Constitution: Written (Fifth Republic, 1958)
- Judicial Review: Constitutional Council reviews legislation
- Territorial Organization: Unitary, partially decentralized
- Capital: Paris
- Population: approximately 68 million

## Germany

- Full Country Name: Federal Republic of Germany
- System of Democracy: Parliamentary
- Head of State: Federal President (indirectly elected, ceremonial)
- Head of Government: Chancellor
- Legislature: Bicameral (Bundestag, 630 members; Bundesrat, representing state governments)
- Electoral System: Mixed-member proportional with a five percent threshold
- Constitution: Written (Basic Law, 1949)
- Judicial Review: Strong; Federal Constitutional Court can strike down laws
- Territorial Organization: Federal (16 states, or *Länder*)
- Capital: Berlin
- Population: approximately 84 million

## Executives and Their Relationship to the Legislature

Section 3.2 described three systems of democratic government. All three appear here.

The **United Kingdom** is the classic parliamentary system. The monarch serves as head of state in a role that is almost entirely ceremonial. The prime minister, who serves as head of government, is not directly elected to that office by voters. Instead, the leader of the party commanding a majority in the House of Commons becomes prime minister. Because the prime minister sits in the legislature and depends on its confidence, there is no separation of powers between executive and legislature in the way a presidential system would produce. A prime minister who loses a vote of no confidence must resign or call an election.

**France** operates the semi-presidential system introduced in 1958 under the Fifth Republic. Power is genuinely divided between two executives. The president is directly elected for a five-year term, appoints the prime minister, chairs the cabinet, and holds substantial authority over foreign policy and defense. The prime minister directs domestic policy and government administration, but depends on the confidence of the National Assembly. When the president's party controls the Assembly, the president dominates. When it does not, France enters what is called **cohabitation**, and the prime minister becomes far more powerful.

**Germany** is also parliamentary, but designed with one crucial difference. The Bundestag elects the chancellor, and it can remove a chancellor only through a **constructive vote of no confidence**, meaning it must elect a successor in the same vote. This rule was written into the Basic Law deliberately. The framers of postwar German institutions studied the collapse of the Weimar Republic, where opposing extremist parties could combine to bring down governments without agreeing on any alternative. Requiring a positive majority for a replacement makes that impossible. The mechanism has been used successfully only once, in 1982.

## Electoral Systems and Their Consequences

As Section 3.1 explained, electoral systems translate votes into seats, and the method chosen shapes the party system.

The United Kingdom uses plurality voting. Each constituency elects one member, and the candidate with the most votes wins. The 2024 general election showed how much this can distort the relationship between votes and seats. The Labour Party won 33.7 percent of the national vote and 411 of 650 seats, or roughly 63 percent of the House of Commons. Reform UK won 14.3 percent of the vote and five seats. By the measure of the gap between vote share and seat share, it was the most disproportionate result in modern British history. The system converted a modest plurality into a commanding governing majority.

France uses a two-round majoritarian system for the National Assembly. If no candidate wins a majority in the first round, qualifying candidates advance to a second round a week later. This encourages strategic withdrawal and alliance-building between rounds, and it has historically kept certain parties out of power even when they perform well in first-round voting.

Germany uses mixed-member proportional representation. Voters cast two ballots, one for a local candidate and one for a party list, and the overall distribution of Bundestag seats reflects the party-list vote. A party must clear a five percent threshold to receive seats, a rule intended to keep very small parties out of the legislature. The predictable consequence is that no German party has won an outright parliamentary majority since 1949. Every German government is a coalition.

## Courts and Judicial Review

The three cases differ most sharply on judicial review, the power introduced in Section 3.1 and discussed at length in Section 3.5.

The United Kingdom rests on the principle of **parliamentary sovereignty**. Parliament is the supreme lawmaking authority, and no court can invalidate an Act of Parliament. The United Kingdom did create a Supreme Court in 2009, moving the highest appeals function out of the House of Lords, but the new court's powers did not include striking down legislation. Under the Human Rights Act of 1998, courts may issue a "declaration of incompatibility" when a statute conflicts with protected rights, yet the statute remains in force unless Parliament chooses to change it. This is a notable finding for students: a long-established democracy can function without the kind of judicial review that many Americans assume is essential.

France created a Constitutional Council under the 1958 constitution, originally to review legislation before it took effect and at the request of political officials rather than ordinary citizens. A 2008 constitutional reform expanded this considerably by allowing individuals involved in litigation to challenge laws already in force.

Germany established the most powerful of the three. The Federal Constitutional Court, seated in Karlsruhe rather than in the political capital, can strike down federal and state legislation, and individuals can bring constitutional complaints directly to it after exhausting other remedies. Like the constructive vote of no confidence, the court's strength reflects a postwar judgment that democratic institutions need robust protection against majorities that might turn against democracy itself.

## Territorial Organization

Section 3.6 distinguished unitary from federal systems. These three cases occupy different positions along that spectrum.

The United Kingdom remains formally unitary, but since 1998 it has devolved substantial powers to a Scottish Parliament, a Welsh Senedd, and a Northern Ireland Assembly. The arrangement is asymmetric, meaning each region holds a different set of powers, and England has no separate legislature of its own. Because Parliament remains sovereign, devolved powers were granted by Westminster and could in principle be withdrawn by it, which is what distinguishes devolution from federalism.

France is unitary and historically among the most centralized states in Europe, with authority concentrated in Paris. Reforms since the 1980s have transferred meaningful responsibilities to regions, departments, and communes, but these units exercise delegated authority rather than constitutionally guaranteed sovereignty.

Germany is genuinely federal. The sixteen *Länder* hold constitutionally protected powers, and they do most of the actual administering of federal law, a pattern scholars call administrative federalism. The Bundesrat, composed of delegates from state governments rather than directly elected members, can block federal legislation affecting state interests. German federalism therefore builds state influence directly into national lawmaking.

## Bureaucracy

Section 3.7 described bureaucracy as a form of organization that trades flexibility for predictability. All three states maintain professional, merit-based civil services, but with distinct traditions.

The British civil service is permanent and formally politically neutral, a model established by reforms in the nineteenth century. Senior officials serve successive governments of different parties. France trains much of its senior administrative elite through specialized institutions, producing a distinctive cadre of career officials who move between ministries and, frequently, into elected politics. Germany's federal structure means that the bulk of implementation happens at the state level, so the federal bureaucracy is comparatively small relative to the total administrative workforce.

# Comparing the Three Systems

*Institutional design in three European democracies*

| Feature                         | United Kingdom          | France                        | Germany                            |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| System of democracy             | Parliamentary           | Semi-presidential             | Parliamentary                      |
| Head of state                   | Monarch                 | President                     | Federal President                  |
| Head of government              | Prime Minister          | Prime Minister                | Chancellor                         |
| Removing the head of government | Vote of no confidence   | Vote of no confidence         | Constructive vote of no confidence |
| Lower house electoral system    | Plurality               | Two-round majoritarian        | Mixed-member proportional          |
| Typical government type         | Single-party majority   | Varies with Assembly majority | Coalition                          |
| Judicial review                 | Limited                 | Moderate                      | Strong                             |
| Territorial organization        | Unitary with devolution | Unitary, decentralized        | Federal                            |

## Recent Stress Tests

Institutional design is easiest to see when systems come under strain, and all three cases have been tested recently.

In **France**, President Macron dissolved the National Assembly and called a snap election in 2024. The result was a fragmented Assembly in which no bloc held a majority, and the consequences have been severe. Three governments fell or resigned in roughly a year. Prime Minister Michel Barnier was removed by a no-confidence vote in December 2024. Prime Minister François Bayrou lost a confidence vote in September 2025. Prime Minister Sébastien Lecornu resigned less than a day after naming his first cabinet in October 2025, the shortest-lived government in French history, and was immediately reappointed. His second government survived no-confidence motions in October 2025 and again in January 2026, and passed the 2026 budget using Article 49.3, a constitutional provision that allows a government to enact legislation without a vote unless a no-confidence motion succeeds. Meanwhile the president, whose term runs to 2027, remains in office throughout. This is the semi-presidential system's central tension on display: one executive is fixed and the other is not.

In **Germany**, Chancellor Olaf Scholz's coalition collapsed in late 2024. Notably, he was not removed by a constructive vote of no confidence. Instead he deliberately called and lost a confidence vote in December 2024 in order to trigger an early election, which was held in February 2025. Friedrich Merz then failed to win the required majority on the first ballot in May 2025, a first in German history, and was elected chancellor only on a second ballot the same day, leading a coalition between the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats. Germany experienced real political turbulence, but the constructive vote of no confidence meant no government fell without a replacement ready to take office.

In the **United Kingdom**, the 2024 election transferred power decisively in a single day. There were no coalition negotiations and no ambiguity about who would govern. The price, as the vote totals show, was a government with a large majority built on roughly a third of the votes cast.

Each system produced a different kind of outcome under pressure: fragmentation and repeated government collapse in France, turbulence contained by institutional design in Germany, and a clear but disproportionate result in the United Kingdom.

## Think Comparatively

1. Germany's constructive vote of no confidence makes it harder to remove a chancellor than to remove a French prime minister. What are the advantages and disadvantages of making a government difficult to bring down?
2. In 2024, a British party won 63 percent of parliamentary seats with 34 percent of the vote. Is this a flaw in the electoral system or an acceptable trade-off for decisive government? What would defenders of each position argue?
3. British courts cannot strike down Acts of Parliament. Does this make the United Kingdom less democratic than Germany, more democratic, or neither? Explain your reasoning using the concepts from Section 3.5.
4. Both Germany and the United Kingdom give subnational units real authority, but only Germany is federal. Why does the distinction matter?

5. France's president remains in office while prime ministers fall around him. How does this illustrate the disadvantages of semi-presidential systems identified in Section 3.2?
6. If you were designing institutions for a new democracy, which features from these three cases would you adopt, and what would you be trading away?

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## 3.9: Chapter Review Questions

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### Study Questions

Use these questions to review the chapter. Try answering each one in your own words. If a question stops you, that is the section worth rereading.

1. Describe how the executive relates to the legislature in each of the three systems of democracy.
2. France has seen several governments fall in rapid succession since its 2024 snap election, while the president has remained in office throughout. What does this reveal about the design of semi-presidential systems?
3. How does an electoral system shape the party system? Find a recent election in which a party's share of seats differed sharply from its share of votes, and explain what produced the gap.
4. Why is judicial review weak in the United Kingdom but strong in Germany? What does this suggest about whether strong courts are necessary for democracy?
5. How does devolution differ from federalism? Identify a current dispute between a national government and a subnational one, and explain which arrangement is in play.
6. How do separation of powers and checks and balances differ? Find a recent example of one branch of government blocking another, and identify which mechanism was used.

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## 4: DEMOCRACY, AUTHORITARIANISM, AND REGIME CHANGE

- 4.1: What is Democracy?
- 4.2: Democratic Consolidation
- 4.3: What are Non-Democracies?
- 4.4: Strategies for Staying in Power
- 4.5: Varieties of Non-Democracy
- 4.6: Democratic Backsliding
- 4.7: Case Study - Hungary and Poland
- 4.8: Chapter Review Questions
- 4.9: Bibliography

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## 4.1: What is Democracy?

### Chapter Learning Objectives

Political regimes differ in how leaders gain power, how authority is exercised, and how citizens participate in political life. This chapter examines the defining features of democracy and non-democracy, along with the institutions and strategies that help regimes remain stable or maintain control. It also explores democratic consolidation, authoritarian rule, and democratic backsliding, then applies these concepts to Hungary and Poland to show how political institutions and democratic practices can change over time.

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Distinguish between democratic and non-democratic regimes and explain how different political systems organize and maintain political power.
- Analyze processes of democratic consolidation, authoritarian persistence, and democratic backsliding using Hungary and Poland as comparative cases.

### Introduction

“Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”

— Winston Churchill, November 11, 1947

More than half of the governments currently in existence operate under some variation of democracy. The global trend toward democratization worldwide during the 20th century prompted some to conclude that democracy is simply the best, or most ideal, form of government. Indeed, near the end of the 20th century, political scientist Francis Fukuyama wrote a book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, in which he argued humanity had reached the end of history because many states had adopted forms of liberal democracy. His book was a best-seller that energized many about the prospects of a world that, by embracing democracy, would not again suffer the likes of major world wars. More than two decades after this publication, however, and in light of events like the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the rise of China, the backsliding toward authoritarianism in Russia, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the eventual fall of Afghanistan back to authoritarian rule, Fukuyama mostly retracted his conclusion that the world had accepted democracy as the standard. Instead, he now asserts that issues related to political identity threaten the security of geopolitical stability. The many challenges facing democracy, democratization, and democratic backsliding (discussed in Chapter 5), prompts us to take a hard look at democracy, its types, its institutions and models, and various manifestations throughout the world. Is democracy the best form of government? What are its advantages and disadvantages?

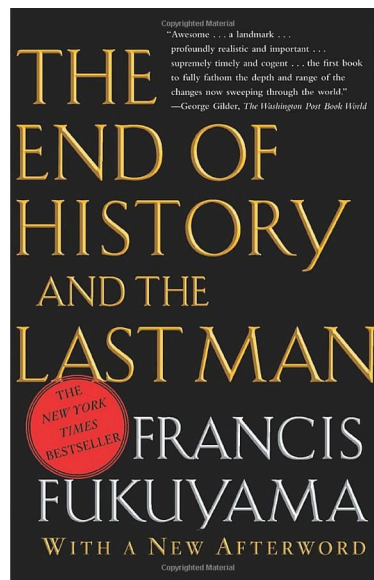


Figure 4.1.1: Cover of Fukuyama's (1992) book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, which prompted discussion over whether the world had reached the end of history because so many states had adopted liberal democracy as their form of government.

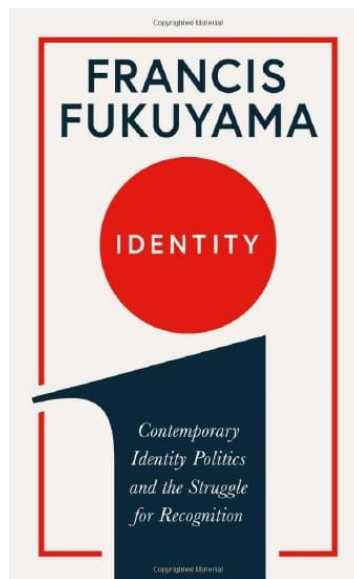


Figure 4.1.1: Cover of Fukuyama's (2018) book, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*, which veered away from the belief that the world had accepted liberal democracy. Instead, Fukuyama argued that political identity and the weight of historical disputes may impede the potential for long-term peace.

## Origins, Definitions, and Characteristics of Democracy

There is evidence of what anthropologists designate "primitive democracy," wherein small communities have face-to-face discussions to make decisions, as far back as 2,500 years ago. However, the first formal application of democratic institutions and processes is generally attributed to Ancient Greece, with the city of Athens often credited as "the birthplace of democracy." In its simplest terms, **democracy** is a political regime in which the supreme power of government is vested in the people. Democracy comes from the Greek word, *dēmokratīā*, where "demos" means "people" and "kratos" means "power" or "rule." Prior to the formation of legal reforms, Athens operated as an aristocracy.

An **aristocracy** is a form of government where power is held by nobility or those considered to be of the highest class within a society. Aristocracy proved troublesome for Athens, and the people eventually rallied under an Athenian leader named Solon (circa 640 - 560 B.C.E.). In trying to meet the demands of the people, Solon attempted to satisfy all classes of the Athenian population, rich and poor alike, to devise a form of government that satisfied all. To this end, in 594 B.C.E., Solon created legal

reforms and a constitution, which provided the foundations for citizen participation in government affairs and abolished slavery of Athenian citizens. Under this construct, adult males who had completed their military training were given the right to vote, and as much as 20 percent of the population was active in making laws. Eventually, democracy in Athens failed due to both internal and external factors. Internally, there was heavy criticism that the aristocracy was still in force and able to pervert and manipulate legal outcomes to its benefit. Further, the works of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle--all of whom criticized the merits and feasibility of democracy due to a desire for political stability and a worry of the consequences from "rule of the mob"--led to the erosion of trust in democracy in Athens. Externally, and tied to the prospect of political stability, Athens faced frequent challenges to its democracy from the outside. The Peloponnesian War, the changes in leadership from King Phillip II of Macedon and Alexander the Great, and the rise of the Roman Empire all contributed to the eventual decline of democracy in Greece. After the fall of democracy in Greece, the prospect of democracy did not reemerge as a feasible, or even desired, option until the Early Modern Era in the 1600s.

Ancient manifestations of democracy differ greatly from modern conceptualizations and applications. One of the key differences is in the way power from the people is channeled, which becomes apparent when comparing a direct democracy with an indirect democracy. A **direct democracy** enables citizens to vote directly, or participate directly, in the formation of laws, public policy, and government decisions. In this system, citizens personally become involved in all aspects of politics; they are able to change constitutions, recommend referendums and make suggestions for laws, and mandate the activities and actions of government officials. To some extent, Athens exercised a direct democracy in that adult male citizens, who had completed their military training, could participate directly in the making of laws. It was not a perfect democracy in that not all citizens--male and female, rich and poor--could participate, but it did have a mechanism for participation from a subset of citizens. In contrast, **indirect democracy**, also called "representative democracy," channels the power of the people through representation, where citizens elect representatives to craft laws and make government decisions for them. In this scenario, citizens are granted **suffrage**, which is the right to vote in political elections. In a healthy democracy, elections occur on a regular basis, and elections are free and fair. **Free elections** are those in which all citizens are able to vote for the candidates of their choice. The election is free if all citizens who meet the requirements to vote (e.g., a minimum age requirement) are allowed to participate. **Fair elections** are those in which all votes carry equal weight, the vote totals are counted accurately, and the election results are accepted by all parties. Ideally, a free and fair election meets the following standards:

#### Before the Election

- Eligible citizens can register to vote
- Voters are given access to reliable information about the ballot and the elections
- Citizens can run for office

#### During the Election

- All voters have access to a polling station or some method of casting their vote
- Voters can vote free from intimidation
- The voting process is free of fraud and tampering

#### After the Election

- Ballots are accurately counted
- Election results are publicly announced
- The results of the election are accepted, respected, and honored

The integrity of elections is of paramount importance in democracies. If the election process is not free and fair, it violates the core definition of a democracy: the supreme power of government must be vested in the people.

Indirect democracy is the system that most democratic states use today. This is partly due to logistical considerations. In the United States, for example, how would every adult citizen directly participate in the making of laws? Requiring a vote for every decision would not be time efficient or logistically feasible. The choice of indirect democracy is also partly due to worries over whether voting is always the best option to determine just, equitable, or ideal outcomes. In a representative democracy, citizens outsource the power of lawmaking to those who, ideally, have more expertise in crafting legislation and who have access to a greater depth of information on policy issues.

Although most democratic states practice indirect democracy, there are sometimes mechanisms that align with direct democracy. For instance, the United States has a representative democracy, but voters in some states can put forth initiatives and referendums, also referred to as ballot propositions, for citizens to vote on directly.



Figure 4.1.2: A voter filling in their ballot at a polling place on Election Day in the United States. (Source: [Voters in Des Moines](#) by Phil Roeder, via [Flickr](#), is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#))

## Conceptualizing and Operationalizing (Measuring) Democracy

Beyond the necessity of free and fair elections that occur on a regular basis, scholars point to additional requirements for what they term "liberal democracies." A **liberal democracy** not only facilitates free, fair, and regular elections, but ensures protections of civil liberties (e.g., freedom of speech) and civil rights (i.e., freedom from discrimination). As political scientists Robert Dahl, Ian Shapiro, and Jose Antonio Cheibub (2003) assert, every vote in a representative democracy must carry equal weight, and the rights of citizens must be equally protected by a well-defined and clear "law of the land" (typically, a constitution).

In a similar vein, Larry Diamond (2004), a political sociologist and scholar of democracy, details that a democracy must include the following four characteristics:

1. A system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections
2. Active participation of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life
3. The protection of human rights of all citizens
4. A rule of law in which the laws and procedures apply equally to all citizens

Yet others disagree with such rigid definitions. Karl Popper (2002), for instance, provides a blunter definition of democracy: "I personally call the type of government which can be removed without violence 'democracy,' and the other, 'tyranny.'" Here, Popper emphasizes the importance of citizens having access, availability, and opportunity to control their leaders without violence, retribution, or revolution.

There are hundreds of critiques and frameworks for defining and categorizing democracies, and scholars are generally not in full agreement on what constitutes a perfect democracy. This disagreement also manifests when comparing organizations or indicators that measure levels of democracy across states. There are at least eight major attempts to quantify the existence and health of democracies worldwide: the Democracy Barometer, the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, Freedom House's Freedom in the World Index, the Human Freedom Index, the Polity Project (Polity5), Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), the Polyarchy Index, and the World Governance Indicators. In Table 4.1.1, we highlight some of the indicators that three of these organizations use when assessing democracy, illustrating how organizations operationalize (measure) the concept of democracy in slightly different ways.

**Table 4.1.1:** Operationalizing (Measuring) Democracy

| Component Measured | Economist Intelligence Unit | Freedom House | Varieties of Democracy |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|---------------|------------------------|
| Elections          | ✓                           | ✓             | ✓                      |

| Component Measured               | Economist Intelligence Unit | Freedom House | Varieties of Democracy |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------|------------------------|
| Participation                    | ✓                           | ✓             | ✓                      |
| Functioning of government        | ✓                           | ✓             | —                      |
| Individual rights                | —                           | ✓             | ✓                      |
| Civil liberties                  | ✓                           | —             | —                      |
| Political culture                | ✓                           | —             | —                      |
| Organizational rights            | —                           | ✓             | —                      |
| Free expression                  | —                           | ✓             | —                      |
| Rule of law                      | —                           | ✓             | —                      |
| Deliberation                     | —                           | —             | ✓                      |
| Egalitarianism                   | —                           | —             | ✓                      |
| <b>Total components measured</b> | <b>5</b>                    | <b>7</b>      | <b>5</b>               |

*Note: A check mark (✓) indicates the index measures that component; a dash (—) indicates it does not. Components are ordered by how many of the three indices measure them.*

The different operationalizations yield different outcomes across these three organizations. For instance, as of 2018, Freedom House identifies 86 democracies and 109 non-democracies while Varieties of Democracy identifies 99 democracies and 80 non-democracies. In chapter 4, we also learn a **non-democracy** is a political regime that denies citizens meaningful institutional channels for making choices about their collective well-being.

Given that both scholars and these organizations acknowledge different conceptualizations and operationalizations of democracy, the next section will discuss how institutions vary within democracies.

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## 4.2: Democratic Consolidation

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### Introduction

As a reminder from Chapter 3, a political regime transition occurs when a state experiences a change in its political regime, the set of rules that structures access to political power. **Democratization** is a political regime transition in which a state moves from a non-democratic regime to a democratic regime. After democratization occurs, states embark on **democratic consolidation**, a process in which new democracies evolve from fledgling democratic regimes to established, stable, and secure democratic regimes. Through this process, democracy becomes recognized as "the only game in town," with the state exhibiting strong and high-quality democratic institutions. These strong institutions reduce the state's risk of reverting to a non-democratic regime.

Scholars expect consolidated democracies to endure, but how can they tell when a democracy moves from fledgling to established status? What are the indicators of a consolidated democracy?

Two potential indicators of democratic consolidation are the "two-election test" and the "longevity test." The **two-election test**, also known as the "transfer of power test," asserts that a democracy becomes consolidated when a government that was elected through free and fair elections (election #1) is subsequently defeated (election #2), and all sides accept the election outcome. This test judges democratic consolidation by the peaceful transfer of power. One problem with using this test as an indicator of democratic consolidation is that some states have dominant party systems in which the same political party is elected to office repeatedly. Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), for example, has been in power almost continuously since its founding in 1955, and it was in power continuously for nearly four decades, from 1955-1993. Yet even in 1992, Freedom House ranked Japan as a "free" regime. It is difficult to imagine arguing that Japan was not a consolidated democracy prior to the 1993 election.

The second potential indicator of democratic consolidation is the **longevity test**, which asserts that a democracy becomes consolidated after it holds free, fair, and regular elections for an extended period of time (e.g., for more than two decades). Yet this test also has problems. If elections are held over time, yet those elections benefit only one party, the longevity test may not be a good indicator of democratic consolidation. Persistent elections do not necessarily indicate a high quality of democracy.

The problems with these two tests demonstrate that it can be difficult to identify indicators for consolidated democracy. Below, we briefly consider three theories related to the likelihood of democratic consolidation (note that this is an incomplete list; scholars have proposed *many* more than three theories on this topic).

### Theories of Democratic Consolidation

**Theory 1:** *The regime type that existed prior to the democracy will affect whether a state reaches consolidated democracy status.*

This theory posits that some types of non-democratic regimes are, following a regime transition, more likely to lead to consolidated democracies than others. If a non-democratic regime, for example, held partially free or fair elections, or if that regime allowed for any institutions that were representative of the people, these pre-existing conditions may increase the likelihood of democratic consolidation following democratization. Alternatively, if the prior non-democratic regime centered leadership in a military junta, this may decrease the likelihood of democratic consolidation following democratization due to an increased likelihood of military interference in the new regime.

**Theory 2:** *The type of political regime transition will affect whether a state reaches consolidated democracy status.*

This theory questions whether the circumstances under which democratization occurs within a state matter. According to Huntington and Linz (1991), who (or what group) initiates the transition toward democracy helps to determine the likelihood of democratic consolidation. If external forces impose a transition to democracy (e.g., by overthrowing an existing dictator), the outsider-led rupture may make democratic consolidation less likely; if groups within the society initiate a transition to democracy (e.g., by protesting against the existing regime), this insider-led rupture may make democratic consolidation more likely.

**Theory 3:** *The likelihood of democratic consolidation increases with economic development.*

This theory argues that a state with a free market system is more likely to experience democratic consolidation, and economic growth acts as a catalyst for democratic consolidation. As Beethem (1994, pp. 164-165) describes:

"... a market economy disperses decisional and other forms of power from the state. This serves the cause of democracy in a number of ways: it facilitates the development of an autonomous sphere of 'civil society' which is not beholden to the state for resources, information or organisational capacities; it restricts the power and scope of a bureaucratic apparatus; and it reduces what is at stake in the electoral process by separating the competition for economic and political power into different spheres."

If a state shows a willingness to promote a free market with fair competition, it also shows that it is willing to loosen its grasp on an institution that it could otherwise control. By choosing not to control all market outcomes, the state is more likely to experience economic growth. And, the more that the economy improves, the more citizens within a state can experience prosperity and engage in political life, promoting democratic consolidation.

While these three theories give broad insight into factors that may promote or hinder democratic consolidation, in the following section, we compare the process of democratization and evaluate democratic consolidation across two specific cases: Iraq and South Africa. These two cases will elucidate a number of other factors that we must consider in studying the likelihood of democratic consolidation, such as historical context, political culture, identity politics, class structures, economic structures, and political institutions.

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## 4.3: What are Non-Democracies?

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### Introduction

There exists a rich vocabulary for referring to non-democracies, past and present. Scholars employ terms such as personalist dictatorship, monarchy, oligarchy, and totalitarian regime, among others, to describe this kind of political system. All of these, and many more, fall under a broad umbrella of regimes that we describe as non-democratic. As a reminder from Chapter 3, a **non-democracy** is a political regime that denies citizens meaningful institutional channels for making choices about their collective well-being. This can range from limited to no ability for public input in the selection of political leaders and limited to no decision-making power over the allocation of public resources. Non-democracies are often referred to as "dictatorships" or "authoritarian regimes" or "autocracies."

Non-democracies are quite diverse, even more so than democracies, and this variety extends across time and space. While there are varieties of democracy with different institutional configurations, such as the differences between presidential, parliamentary, and semi-presidential systems discussed in Chapter 4, across democracies there exist common principles such as divided government and accountability to the people. All democracies have electoral systems, an executive, a legislature, and a judiciary. Non-democracies, in contrast, do not have such common organizational features; instead, they run the gamut from rule by a single person with minimal institutionalization to complex bureaucratic systems under collective leadership. In this sense, non-democracies are a much broader and confounding collection of states to study.

Empirically, non-democracies are distinct from democracies in important ways. Non-democratic regimes are much more variable in their economic performance (Gandhi, 2008). Many have swung from enduring extreme levels of nationwide poverty to becoming economic dynamos, presenting sustained economic growth rates unseen in recorded human history. This is, for instance, the example set by China from 1978 to 2020. In a reversal of this pattern, the kingdom of Chad and the post-independence state of Chad (1960-present) made the dramatic turn from being a major trading empire during the ninth through the 19th centuries to becoming one of the poorest sub-Saharan states in Africa today. Non-democracies appear to experience deeper economic troughs and higher economic highs than their democratic counterparts.

While there exist many varieties of non-democracy, which we will describe later in this chapter, all non-democracies share several overriding characteristics. These relate to accountability, competition, and freedom.

### Accountability

**Political accountability** refers to institutional channels for holding political leaders responsible for their decisions and actions, and it has many dimensions. Most critically in democracies, it exists between officials and the public via the institution of free and fair elections. Accountability exists via other channels, such as through the free flow of information about political decisions and developments in a society. A free and independent media can ensure this flow of information, and it can provide a monitoring function to act as a government watchdog. Accountability also exists when different branches of government have check and balances, such as being able to check one another through presidential vetoes, court rulings, and divided authority.

In a non-democracy, some or all of these forms of accountability are compromised. For example, elections are rigged or do not exist, the media is muzzled or state-owned, or government exists to carry out the will of an unchecked political elite. All non-democracies restrict channels for accountability of political authority. Take the example of Saudi Arabia. This kingdom is one of the few remaining absolutist monarchies in existence today, and all political authority lays with the Al Saud royal family. The Saudi king is the leader of this family, and he is also head of state and head of government of Saudi Arabia. There is no legislature to pass laws in Saudi Arabia (though the Saudi Consultative Assembly can *propose* laws to the king and his cabinet), and Saudi citizens do not elect representatives or otherwise have institutional channels for providing input in the national policy-making process. In this state, the ruling Al Saud family is not accountable to the Saudi people.



Figure 4.3.1: The Royal Standard of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is an absolutist monarchy led by a king who is head of the royal family, Al Saud. The king is the head of government and the head of state. (Source: [Flag of Saudi Arabia](#) by [Saudi Arabia Royal Decree No. M/3](#), via [Wikipedia](#), is licensed under [Public Domain](#))

## Competition

Separate, but related, non-democracies have limited political competition. **Political competition** is the presence of multiple options in political life, such as the existence of more than one political party, more than one candidate for office, or more than one policy position. A lack of political competition may mean the absence of political parties, as in the case of Saudi Arabia. Some non-democracies, however, allow *limited* competition for public office. This was the case in Mexico under the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, PRI), which controlled Mexican political life for 71 years. Novelist Mario Vargas Llosa famously described the PRI as "the perfect dictatorship" because it managed to remain the ruling party of Mexico for decades despite the existence of opposition parties. These opposition parties began to win elections in the 1980s and, in 2000, the presidential candidate from the National Action Party (Partido Acción Nacional, PAN) won national elections. The PAN victory overturned decades of single-party rule in modern Mexico. Political parties are one way to observe the degree of competition in a political system, and they are a proxy for a deeper and more meaningful competition of policy ideas. Whether this competition of ideas exists--and therefore whether a government tolerates debate, dissent, and diversity--provides a critical differentiation between democratic and non-democratic systems.



Figure 4.3.2: Protests against election manipulation in Mexico in 2012 after presidential elections were won by PRI candidate Enrique Peña Nieto. Protesters claimed widespread election fraud. In 2000, many decades of single-party rule by PRI ended, but PRI reclaimed the presidency in 2012. (Source: [Protesting against PRI](#) by [Gabriel Saldaña](#) via [flickr creative commons](#) is licensed under [CC BY-SA 2.0](#))

## Freedom

Non-democracies lack a commitment to individual freedom. While democracies have many institutional channels for individual voice, such as the examples of elections and independent media noted above, these institutional channels are often manipulated or censored in a non-democracy. To justify the abrogation of individual freedoms, non-democracies may promote alternative values, such as the importance of order and hierarchy over individual will or the need to subsume the individual to the larger collective will (as mediated by those in power).

The next section will describe how non-democratic regimes remain in power. Considering their lack of political accountability, lack of political competition, and lack of freedom, what strategies do leaders within these regimes utilize to ensure their survival?

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## 4.4: Strategies for Staying in Power

### Introduction

Those in charge within all political regimes possess a variety of means for staying in power. One common heuristic for thinking about these tools is through a simple "carrots" versus "sticks" breakdown of regime strategies. Carrots take the form of inducements or benefits that a government doles out to gain the loyalty of constituents. Sticks focus on meting out punishments as negative reinforcement of the rules.

One additional tool to add to the mix of carrots and sticks is propaganda. **Propaganda** is biased information meant to convince an audience of a particular perspective or narrative. Governments may expend resources to shore up their legitimacy in the minds of citizens by utilizing sophisticated propaganda bureaucracies to control information flows to the people. Deploying propaganda is neither a carrot nor a stick, but rather a powerful means to control citizens' perceptions and thoughts. Propaganda, as an ideational strategy, is in a category of its own, and it is especially powerful when it draws on existing cultural foundations in a society.



Figure 4.4.1: The leadership of a non-democratic regime may control media, such as television, radio, and the internet, to transmit pro-regime messaging. (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0; banlon1964 via [flickr creative commons](#))

Leaders in all types of regimes utilize a mix of carrots, sticks, and ideas to stay in power. These strategies, though the exact manifestations differ, appear in both democracies and non-democracies. For example, internal investigative bureaucracies, such as the Ministry of State Security in China, have counterparts in democracies, such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in the United States. Similarly, virtually all countries in the world, regardless of regime type, have police for maintaining domestic order. It is not the case that non-democracies are repressive while democracies are not. But compared to democracies, non-democracies are relatively unconstrained in their ability to use force or to manipulate information in order to ensure compliance with their rule. The lack of robust accountability mechanisms in non-democracies is a crucial difference in how public institutions are managed.

### Institutional Channels

Political regimes are most likely to endure when their leaders build and maintain institutions. **Institutions** are shared rules, practices, norms, and organizations within a political system. One way to think about institutions is that they make up the "rules of the game," formal and informal, for all political and social life. Institutions structure the way those within a state complete tasks politically, and institutions constrain and organize citizens' interactions with the government and with other citizens. They are the source of a great deal of social and political power.

Because of the power of institutions, leaders in all political regimes have an interest in institutionalizing their rule. Non-democratic regimes may use institutional carrots by co-opting opposition, developing patronage networks, and promoting clientelism. Each of these institutions provides positive inducements for supporting the political regime. Non-democratic regimes may also use institutional sticks, such as the creation of domestic security bureaucracies and paramilitary groups. These sticks are strategies of repression that aim to extract obedience from the population. We will discuss each of these institutional channels in turn.

## Institutions for Co-opting Opposition

All non-democracies face the problem of an opposition that might oust them from power. To blunt the force of an opposition, or even vocal critics with a following, a regime might invest in institutions that have the appearance of democratic representation. These include rigged elections, legislatures, courts, and the like. These institutions are actually "window dressing," or façades, for a tightly controlled political system. Judiciaries in these systems are not independent, nor do they provide a meaningful check on the authority of rulers. Many nondemocratic regimes have in place legislatures, but these legislatures lack authority to veto measures passed by those in power. Examples abound in the highly authoritarian Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), or North Korea. North Korea has been ruled since the 1950s by a single Supreme Leader, yet formally it has a unicameral legislature. This Supreme People's Assembly includes nearly 700 deputies and, in theory, confers authority on the Supreme Leader. However, DPRK's Supreme Leader makes all governance decisions for the country and does not face any threat of veto by the legislature.



Figure 4.4.2: North Korea's legislature meets at Mansudae Assembling Hall, which is located in the North Korean capital city Pyongyang. (Source: [Mansudae Assembling Hall in Pyongyang, Parliament of North Korea](#) by Nicor via [Wikimedia Commons](#) in licensed under [CC BY-SA 3.0](#))

Opposition parties or critics of the regime might agree to sit on such bodies as a means to have access to political leaders. They may also benefit materially from legislative or judicial seats. For example, they may draw a salary or receive other perks, such as a chauffeured car or a swanky office. Co-opting the opposition through such institutions can serve the ruling regime in multiple ways. Co-optation can boost the legitimacy of the rulers in the eyes of the public while simultaneously allowing rulers to closely monitor the positions and ideas of the opposition. This provides the ruling group with information that they can then choose to either counter or incorporate into their political agenda.

## Patronage Networks

All politics hinge on relationships and the flow of resources. **Patronage networks** are relationships within political systems in which a leader, or a group of leaders, with access to resources distributes those resources to those within their network in exchange for loyalty. Within a patronage network are reciprocal bonds that unite members of the network. A leader might take a portion of oil revenues and distribute those monies to their deputies scattered throughout the provinces; in return, those deputies might make sure that the leader's posters are prominently displayed in every local government office.

Patronage networks may be organized via many different kinds of organizations or social groups. Political parties are one way to distribute public resources in exchange for political obedience. Other major state organizations, such as the military or state-owned businesses, are also sites for building patronage networks. Non-state organizations may be part of patronage networks, such as private businesses or business associations. Identity groups, including those bound by ethnicity or tribe, may be the basis of patronage networks. The latter was evident in Syria under the al-Assad family, which ruled the state from 1971 to 2024. Major institutions of the state were controlled by the Alawite minority, a Shia Muslim group that makes up less than one-fifth of Sunni Muslim-dominated Syria. In return for political power, Alawite networks supported the ruling al-Assad family.

## Broad-Based Clientelism

Related to, but separate from, patronage networks are institutions that promote clientelism on a broad scale. Clients are those who rely on a patron for resources; **clientelism** is a strategy whereby rulers seek to buy off the loyalties of broad swaths of the population. To do so, rulers may invest in social programs in which they mark clearly their sponsorship of these programs to the masses. Such broad-based distribution of resources has the effect of turning significant parts of a state's population into clients, or dependents, of the ruling regime.

One example of broad-based clientelism was in Mexico under the rule of the PRI from 1929 to 2000. Under President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994), social programs were consolidated under a new government initiative called the National Solidarity Program (Programa Nacional de Solidaridad, commonly referred to as "Pronasol"). Pronasol distributed government funds to poor communities to build public works, such as schools, health clinics, water treatment facilities, and electric grids. This initiative reflected the national ambitions and reach of the PRI: At its height, there were nearly 250,000 Pronasol committees at the grassroots level to carry out community projects in collaboration with community leaders. The results were impressive. They included the renovations of 130,000 schools, the creation of 1,000 rural medical units, and plumbing access for 16 million Mexican residents (Merrill and Miró, eds., 1996). Looking back on this ambitious program, it represented a broad-based means to build support for PRI rule throughout the state, especially in the countryside.



Figure 4.4.3: A rural school in Mexico. Schools such as this were sponsored by the ruling PRI in Mexico as a means to build loyalty among rural citizens. (Source: [Rural School in Mexico](#) by Heather Paul via [flickr creative commons](#) is licensed under [CC BY-ND 2.0](#))

## Domestic Security Apparatuses

Moving away from institutions that provide positive inducements for supporting the political regime, non-democratic regimes also employ strategies of repression to extract obedience from the population and to ensure the ruling elite remains in power. Non-democracies are the creators of the modern secret police, beginning with the creation of the Cheka in 1917 during the Russian Revolution under Lenin, which aimed to combat counter-revolution and used strategies of violence and terror. The Cheka became the NKVD--the internal secret police, another highly repressive group--under Stalin from 1934-1946 in the Soviet Union. Later, in 1954, the secret police organization became the KGB, which lasted until the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991. Though often exceedingly violent, from the ruling elite's perspective, these institutions can serve critical purposes by collecting intelligence on potential dissent within a state and ensuring compliance by instilling fear among citizens through campaigns of terror.

One non-democracy that has developed sophisticated means for surveilling its population is China. Since 2010, the ruling Chinese Communist Party has spent more on domestic security than external defense. A vast network of surveillance programs exists throughout the country, including "Sharp Eyes" (xueliang), a project announced in 2015 that mandated video surveillance of all public spaces by 2020. Sharp Eyes included nonstop video feed of public squares, intersections of major roads, public areas in residential neighborhoods, and transit stations (among other areas). It also included the monitoring of select buildings, such as the entry points of radio, television, and newspaper offices, and combined video surveillance with facial recognition technology.

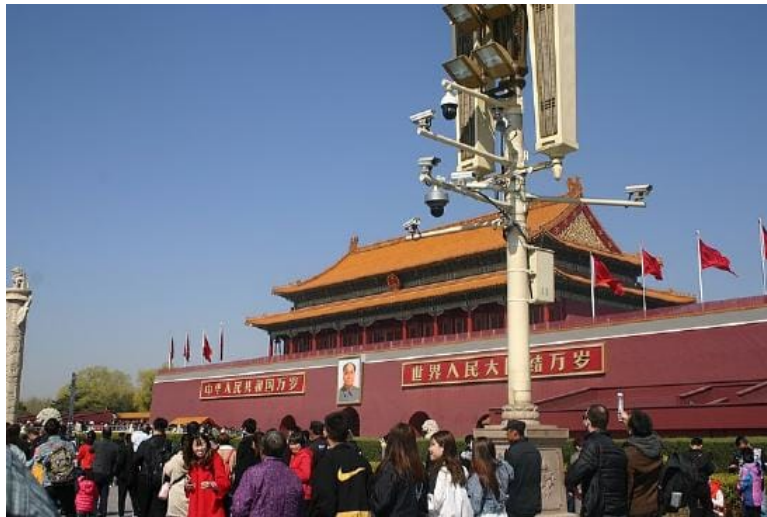


Figure 4.4.4: Pedestrians in a public square in Beijing are surveilled as part of a national system to record all public spaces. (Source: [Tiananmen Gate with surveillance cameras](#) by hmchang via [wikimedia](#) is licensed under [CC BY-SA 2.0](#))

## Paramilitaries

Another powerful instrument of repression is the creation of paramilitaries. **Paramilitaries** are groups with access to military-grade weapons and training, yet not part of the national military, that carry out violence on behalf of the state. They are "irregular armed organizations that carry out acts of violence against civilians on behalf of a state" (Üngör, 2020). Paramilitaries have been deployed by governments around the world, and they are an additional institutional layer of terror over citizens. Death squads are one kind of paramilitary organization employed by governments to carry out extrajudicial murders, usually of political enemies of the state. One tragic example of mass killing carried out by death squads occurred in Indonesia. During the height of the Cold War in the mid-1960s, Indonesian death squads were responsible for the murder of hundreds of thousands of Indonesians believed to have leftist sympathies.

Taken together, non-democratic leaders possess a variety of means, both persuasive and coercive, to enforce their rule. These include positive inducements that can be narrow or broad in scope. Coercive institutions, such as secret police and paramilitaries, additionally offer an institutionalized means for non-democratic leaders to maintain their monopoly on the use of violence.

## Cultural and Ideological Controls

Another powerful way to maintain authority is to convince people to believe in the legitimacy of non-democratic rule. This is in some ways the most efficient way to stay in power because it preempts resistance. Non-democratic leaders thus invest in creating strong ideational foundations for their rule. These ideas may derive selectively from deeper cultural traditions in a society, including those linked to faith traditions, or they may stem from the dissemination of non-democratic ideologies to the masses.

Undemocratic concepts such as hierarchy and unaccountable authority are embedded in many cultural traditions. Monarchies of Europe and empires of the Americas were supported by ideas focused on the divine right of rulers. Virtually all major religions of the world promote authoritarian and undemocratic systems of governance and social order, from the rigid patriarchy of the Roman Catholic Church to the castes of Hinduism. Several East Asian societies--China, South Korea, and Japan, to name a few--have strong Confucian influences. Confucius, a scholar of antiquity, argued that the hierarchical relationship between ruler and ruled was one of several hierarchical relationships that constitutes an orderly society. This supplemented the idea that Chinese emperors possessed the mandate to rule "all under heaven" (tian xia). To this day, Chinese leaders draw from Confucius' writings to argue for a "harmonious society" and legitimate a culture that frowns upon dissent.



Figure 4.4.5: Confucius (551-479 BCE) argued that several hierarchical relationships, such as between ruler and ruled, formed the foundation for an orderly society. Some have suggested that the influence of Confucius' undemocratic ideas supported persistent authoritarianism in East Asia. (Source: [The teaching Confucius](#). Portrait by Wu Daoz via [Wikipedia](#) is licensed under [CC01 - Universal Public Domain](#))

One ongoing debate is whether "persistent authoritarianism" is an inevitable consequence of certain cultural traditions. The evidence on this count is that undemocratic cultural elements are not necessarily barriers to eventual democratization. While arguments have been proffered for the incompatibility of democracy and Islam and democracy and Confucianism, there are many examples of modern democracies that have emerged out of these anti-democratic cultural traditions. Indonesia is an example of a Muslim-majority democracy, while South Korea demonstrates that a society with Confucian influences can become a robust democracy.

Beyond cultural traditions, certain powerful political ideologies support non-democratic rule. Two of these are communism and fascism. Countries organized according to these ideologies have been uniformly non-democratic. They lack mechanisms of accountability between ruler and ruled, and they lack basic freedoms for citizens. Fascist states, for instance, are characterized by extreme social hierarchies, with the ruling party controlling all aspects of society.

A narrower tool employed by non-democratic leaders to remain in power is the creation of a cult of personality. As described in Chapter 3, a cult of personality occurs when a state leverages all aspects of a leader's real and exaggerated traits to solidify the leader's power. Drawing on institutions like propaganda bureaus and state-controlled media, a cult of personality creates the illusion of mass support for, and even adulation of, the ruler. Soviet leader Joseph Stalin was famous for creating such a cult around his personal rule, and this was taken to new heights by other 20th century rulers, such as China's Mao Zedong and Romania's Nicolae Ceaușescu. Fanning a cult of personality is a powerful way to create emotional links between citizens and ruler. A cult of personality also creates the appearance of invincibility on the part of the ruler, which can serve to stave off challenges to their rule.

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## 4.5: Varieties of Non-Democracy

### Introduction

Given the diversity of non-democratic political regimes, a first attempt at achieving analytical clarity is to devise a typology to categorize non-democracies according to their essential defining features. A **typology** is a descriptive means to divide a category into sub-categories based on underlying characteristics of items in the category. This section will discuss the benefits and drawbacks of using typologies, provide a typology of non-democratic regimes, and introduce examples that correspond with each type of non-democratic regime.

### Typologies

Creating a typology is an important descriptive exercise. It helps to establish the "lay of the land" and distinguish key characteristics of items within a category. Typologies can be a helpful first step for further analysis. After dividing non-democracies into types A, B, C, and D, for example, a researcher can then ask deeper questions. Which type of non-democratic regime lasts longest, on average? Which type of non-democratic regime tends to fall into conflict or remain at peace for the longest stretch of time? Which type of non-democratic regime enjoys the most economic stability? Do certain types of non-democratic regimes tend to cluster in certain regions of the world?

When creating a typology to categorize non-democratic regimes, as in Table 5.3.1, the typology is an example of a nominal measure. That is, the items in this typology are not ranked, or ordinal, in relationship to one another. Rather, non-democratic regimes are divided into sub-groups based on certain characteristics, and there is not a hierarchy between the sub-groups.

In Table 5.3.1, the type of non-democracy depends on two factors: (1) leadership characteristics and (2) common source(s) of legitimacy. The first factor, leadership characteristics, focuses on whether the core leadership within the political regime comprises one or several people and whether all leaders come from a particular institution (e.g., the military, a political party, or a religious group). The second factor, common source(s) of legitimacy, identifies the animating ideas that tend to lend legitimacy to the regime, whether those are traditional, charismatic, or rational-legal forms of legitimacy. As a reminder from Chapter 3.1, traditional legitimacy occurs when states have the authority to lead based on historical precedent; charismatic legitimacy occurs when citizens follow the rules of a state based on the charisma and personality of the current leader; and rational-legal legitimacy occurs when states derive their authority through firmly established laws, rules, regulations, and procedures.

Table 5.3.1: Typology of Non-Democracies

| Type of Non-Democracy      | Leadership Characteristics                                          | Common Source(s) of Legitimacy |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <b>theocracy</b>           | single leader or collective rule (all from a given religious group) | traditional                    |
| <b>personalist regime</b>  | single leader                                                       | charismatic                    |
| <b>monarchy</b>            | single leader                                                       | traditional, rational-legal    |
| <b>single-party regime</b> | collective rule (all from one political party)                      | traditional, rational-legal    |
| <b>oligarchy</b>           | collective rule                                                     | traditional, rational-legal    |
| <b>military regime</b>     | single leader or collective rule (all from the military)            | charismatic, rational-legal    |
| <b>illiberal regime</b>    | single leader or collective rule                                    | rational-legal                 |

All typologies present challenges. A first challenge is that, while a typology may work for a certain period of time, it may fail to capture changes over time, such as the emergence of a new political regime type or the expiration of old political regime types. The rise of modern fascist and communist regimes in the 20th century prompted some scholars to argue that a new type of non-democracy, a "totalitarian regime," had arisen. A **totalitarian regime** is a non-democratic regime that seeks total control over society by a single ruler or group of political elites. To this day, scholars debate whether totalitarianism is a useful term.

A second challenge is one of fit. Some observations may not slot neatly into the types offered by a given typology. Rather, they may combine characteristics of two or even more types. This kind of combination is observable in the real world of non-democratic

regimes, cases that we sometimes label as "hybrids." **Hybrid regimes** are non-democratic regimes that combine features of more than one type of non-democracy. North Korea, for example, is a "triple hybrid" that has a single-party system led by a personalist leader (from the Kim dynasty) with a politically powerful military. As another example, China under President Xi Jinping may be moving toward a hybrid of personalist and single-party rule. These cases highlight how types within the typology above are not mutually exclusive. A state may fit several types or change types over time.

Below, we discuss each of the types of non-democracies identified in Table 5.3.1.

## Theocracy

Theocracies are as old as organized religion. A **theocracy** is a non-democratic regime in which the authority of political leaders is grounded in a sacred text, a form of traditional legitimacy. These texts provide divine legitimacy to political leaders, and those leaders are not accountable to the public. Within theocracies, political institutions are organized in accordance with prescriptions in a sacred text, such as the executive office, the legal code, and the legal system. Saudi Arabia and Iran are two examples of current theocracies organized around Islam. The Vatican, another theocracy, is organized around Roman Catholicism.



Figure 4.5.1: The Holy See, or Vatican City, is a contemporary example of a theocracy. It is governed by Roman Catholic texts and led by a pope. Consecrated in 1626, St. Peter's Basilica (pictured here) is the largest Christian church in the world. (Source: [Facade of St. Peter's Basilica](#) in Vatican City by [CIA World Factbook](#) is licensed under [Public Domain](#))

## Personalist Regime and Monarchy

A **personalist regime** is a non-democratic regime ruled by a single leader. That leader may derive their legitimacy from a variety of sources. These include the personal charisma of that leader or their ability to serve as a convincing interpreter of a political ideology for all of society (charismatic legitimacy). An example of the former is Idi Amin of Uganda (in power from 1971-1979), and an example of the latter is Fidel Castro of Cuba (in power from 1959-2008). Some personalist leaders come to power through family dynasties, such as the al-Assad family in Syria. In all cases, personalist leaders are not subject to formal mechanisms of accountability.

Personalist rule often relies on strong institutions to maintain a leader's power. For example, a charismatic leader may rely on the organizational heft of a ruling political party or the military to remain in power. Idi Amin was a commander in the Ugandan Army; Fidel Castro led the formidable organizational apparatus of the Communist Party of Cuba and the Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces.

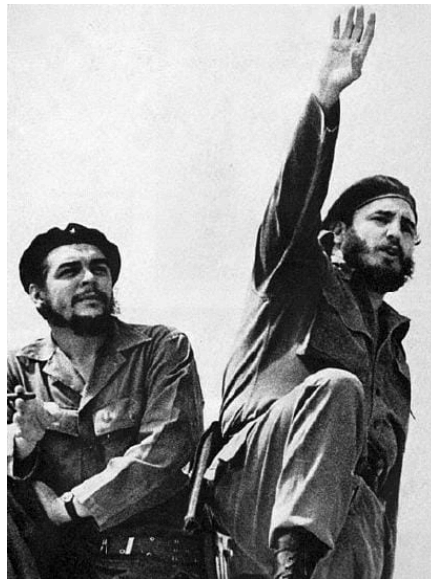


Figure 4.5.2: Fidel Castro was a charismatic leader of Cuba. He is pictured here (right) next to fellow revolutionary Che Guevara. (Source: [Che Guevara & Fidel Castro](#) by Alberto Korda [Wikipedia](#) is licensed under [Public Domain](#))

A personalist regime can be more unstable than other types of non-democratic regimes due to problems of succession. A personalist ruler might be hesitant to designate a successor because that successor would then have incentives to depose them from power. At the same time, if a successor is not designated, a leader's death may lead to instability as those remaining vie for political power.

A **monarchy** is similar to a personalist regime in that there is a single leader, but the basis of legitimacy tends to be grounded in sacred texts (traditional legitimacy). The Vatican, introduced previously as a theocracy, is also self-described as an "absolute monarchy" because it is led by a pope. The Kingdom of Bahrain is an example of a constitutional monarchy (a combination of traditional and rational-legal legitimacy) that has been led by the Al-Khalifa family since 1783.



Figure 4.5.3: High-rise buildings and shopping malls surround a mosque in the capital city of the Kingdom of Bahrain, Manama. (Source: [Mosque east of Bab-al-Bahrain](#) via [CIA World Factbook](#) is [Public Domain](#))

## Single-Party Regime and Oligarchy

In contrast to personalist regimes and monarchies, single-party regimes and oligarchies are shaped by collective leadership. **Oligarchies** are an older form of non-democratic regime. In these systems, elites control political office and national resources and are not accountable to the public for their actions. The Roman Republic was a kind of oligarchy in that only the very wealthy could hold high political office. Political scientist Jeffrey Winters (2011) theorizes that there are two key dimensions to oligarchies: First, the wealth of oligarchs is difficult to seize and disperse and, second, their power extends systemically across the entire regime. In the contemporary world, some point to Russia as subject to a great deal of political influence by oligarchs, though it is not formally an oligarchy.

The overriding characteristic of a **single-party regime** is leadership by members of one political party. Prominent examples include the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1917-1991) and the PRI of Mexico (1929-2000). As described earlier in this chapter, the PRI is especially interesting because PRI rule took place in an environment of multi-party competition, but the competition was so skewed in favor of the PRI that Mexico was subject to single-party rule for decades.

Single-party regimes can be quite stable. For this reason, single-party regimes have been on the rise worldwide since the 1970s. As illustrated in Figure 5.1, over the period 1972 to 2005, non-democracies led by a ruling party increased from 60 percent of all non-democracies to 85 percent.

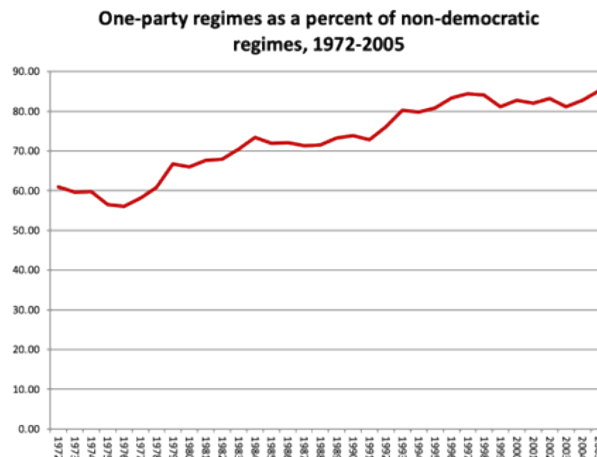


Figure 4.5.4: Single-party regimes as a percent of non-democratic regimes over the period 1972-2005 (Data source: Hadenius and Teorell, 2007) (Source: One-Party regimes as a percent of non-democratic regimes, 1972-2005, by Charlotte Lee is licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#))

Today one of the most powerful countries in the world, the People's Republic of China, is an example of a single-party regime. Political leadership over the billion-plus people of China resides in the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party, a body comprising around 20 individuals. Within the Politburo is the Politburo Standing Committee, a body typically comprising between seven and 12 high officials; from this inner group emanate all major decisions guiding contemporary China.

## Military Regime

A **military regime** is a non-democratic regime characterized by military elites, rather than civilians, running the government. There are various reasons why militaries rise to political power in a society. One is that they possess the material means--the weapons and organizational capacity--to seize control over a society. On the demand side, a population might support military rule because of popular perceptions of the competence of the military, especially if there are charismatic or well-known generals leading the military. In some cases, the military might appear to be a particularly stable and orderly institution during a time of political turmoil. This in turn may appeal to certain segments of society (such as economic elites, who especially value stability) or entire war-weary societies. The military may therefore enjoy a combination of charismatic and rational-legal legitimacy.

There exists a continuum for thinking about the role of militaries within a polity. On one end of this continuum, developed democracies are grounded in civilian control of the military. In the example of Canada, the commander-in-chief of the Canadian military is the Canadian monarch. The reverse, total military control over the civilian population, falls on the opposite end of this continuum, and in these non-democratic situations the military is not accountable to the public, even for gross human rights violations. Burma is a prominent example of a country that has been subject to repressive military rule for significant chunks of its post-colonial independence since 1948. The Burmese military, known as the Tatmadaw, appeared to allow some liberalization and turn toward civilian leadership during the 2010s, but in the 2020s it again asserted control over the country and its political apparatus.



Figure 4.5.5: Burmese Defense Services personnel (Air Force) meeting a Thai delegation.(Source: [Burmese Defence Services personnel \(Air Force\)](#) by Thai government via [Wikipedia](#) is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#))

The number of military regimes rose and fell in frequency during the 20th century. In the post-World War II period, military regimes peaked at 40 percent of all non-democracies, then fell to approximately 15 percent of non-democracies by the turn of the 21st century (Gandhi, 2008).

## Illiberal Regime

The idea of an **illiberal regime**, one that exhibits some characteristics of a liberal democracy but is decidedly illiberal in other respects, emerged in the 20th century when it became clear that many aspiring democracies born immediately after the end of the Cold War (between approximately 1989-1991), from Romania to Kazakhstan, were sliding into non-democratic habits. Even more, this seemed to be a trend affecting many young democracies that had emerged earlier in the 20th century.

An illiberal regime might have multiple political parties, a partially free media, and partially free and fair elections. Institutions that are central to a liberal democracy are, in an illiberal context, weak and subject to manipulation by those with economic power and political influence. In an article exploring the rise of this form of government, Fareed Zakaria (1997, p. 24) observes that, "Far from being a temporary or transitional stage, it appears that many countries are settling into a form of government that mixes a substantial degree of democracy with a substantial degree of illiberalism." In short, illiberal democracies exist in an in-between zone where there are non-democratic institutions or practices in place, yet also some of the common markers of democracy.

Russia since 1991 is an example of an illiberal democracy, and we will return to this case later in this chapter. To provide a basis for that discussion, we will first discuss democratic backsliding.

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## 4.6: Democratic Backsliding

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### Introduction

The 21st century has been marked by a weakening of democratic institutions in many once-robust democracies. This is not a new trend. The history of modern democracy is littered with examples of countries that adopted representative (indirect) democracy, only to later return to a non-democratic form of government. **Democratic backsliding** occurs when a democracy degrades and the state becomes more illiberal and autocratic over time. This process can take the form of weakening electoral systems and attenuation of the rule of law, repression or infringement of civil and political liberties, and corrupt governance that enjoys weakening accountability. Importantly, democratic backsliding is often gradual and protracted, which makes it difficult to identify. This presents challenges for those who might wish to stop the backsliding because there are sometimes only small or subtle shifts that might not be an immediate cause for alarm by a critical mass of democrats within a society. While political regime change from democracy to non-democracy can happen via spectacular and sudden events, such as a coup d'état or a popular revolution, democratic backsliding is more insidious and stymies those who might want to organize to combat it.

There are many reasons for democratic backsliding, and in this section we will explore three major explanations: institutional, cultural, and international factors.

### Institutional Explanations

Certain institutions render a country more vulnerable to non-democratic rule. Presidential systems are famously unstable (Linz, 1990). They tend to centralize power in a single individual, and there are fewer mechanisms in place to check that individual from abuse of office. Compared to a parliamentary system, where executives are appointed by the legislature and subject to votes of no confidence, presidents are relatively difficult to dismiss before they complete their term of office. During this time, they may opt to abuse their power or degrade the democracy in significant ways.

States that lack strong institutions of accountability, such as independent judiciaries and independent anti-corruption bureaus, are also more susceptible to democratic backsliding. When courts do not check those in power, and when there is only weak rule of law, serious and flagrant abuse of public office is more likely. Significant and pervasive **corruption**, the misuse of public resources for private gain, can also degrade a democracy, both in practice and in the legitimacy of that regime. Well-resourced, robust anti-corruption bureaus or inspectors general are an important bulwark against this kind of internal decay.

Another major institution that can threaten a democracy is a politically-motivated military. When a military is subject to weak or inadequate civilian oversight, it can become a politicized actor and even seize control, culminating in non-democratic military rule. Building a professional military that is focused on its security responsibilities and ability to prevail in complex military operations, rather than be tempted by political power, is a deep and ongoing challenge for many governments.

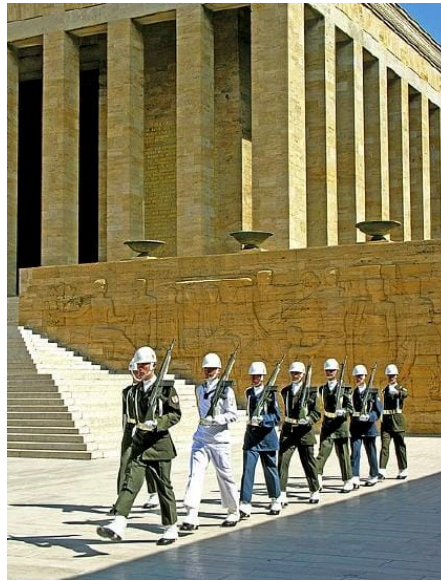


Figure 4.6.1: Turkish soldiers guarding the mausoleum of Turkish President Kemal Atatürk (in office 1923–38), who was a proponent of a secular Turkey shaped by a powerful military. A professional military subject to civilian oversight is a bulwark against democratic backsliding by a too-powerful military. (Source: [Turkey-1658](#) by Dennis Jarvis via [Wikipedia](#) is licensed under [CC BY-SA 2.0](#))

## Cultural Explanations

Popular and elite beliefs in the appropriateness of democratic rule can shape political outcomes. When there are strong democratic norms in place, this takes on a self-perpetuating quality in which a society supports and reinforces democratic practices and institutions. Yet democratic "habits of the heart" can take long periods of time to mature and gain a taken-for-granted status in a society. Civic education can play a role in this endeavor, especially education that addresses liberal values such as liberty, fairness, representativeness, and accountability. When people in a society think critically about where authority and power should rest, and when they believe that they are empowered to challenge non-democratic rule, there exists a societal buffer against democratic backsliding.

Charismatic, autocratic leaders can gain a national following and move a democracy toward non-democracy. Such leaders may call upon a variety of tactics to gain a mass following. Many of these strategies might appeal to cultural fault lines or vulnerabilities within a society. An aspiring autocrat might make populist appeals to in-group grievances and label an out-group as the culprit. They might appeal to nationalist ambitions or exploit ethnic divisions. They might present themselves as messengers with a holy message. They might offer promises of a return to a golden past or a golden future. Such autocratic leaders take a variety of forms, but one common goal is a degrading of democratic institutions in order to consolidate power in non-democratic forms of governance.

One chilling example of this interplay between culture and political leadership can be found in the breakup of the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s. In the early years of the republics that formed after the collapse of communist Yugoslavia, one fiery Serb nationalist named Slobodan Milošević argued that a newly independent Serbia should reclaim territories once occupied by the Serb nation. His calls fell on fertile nationalist ground, which intersected with religious and ethnic fault lines in these Slavic territories. Milošević, who was elected President of Serbia during the 1990s, was a major political leader and instigator during a brutal civil war that ensued between former republics of Yugoslavia. He was eventually indicted for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

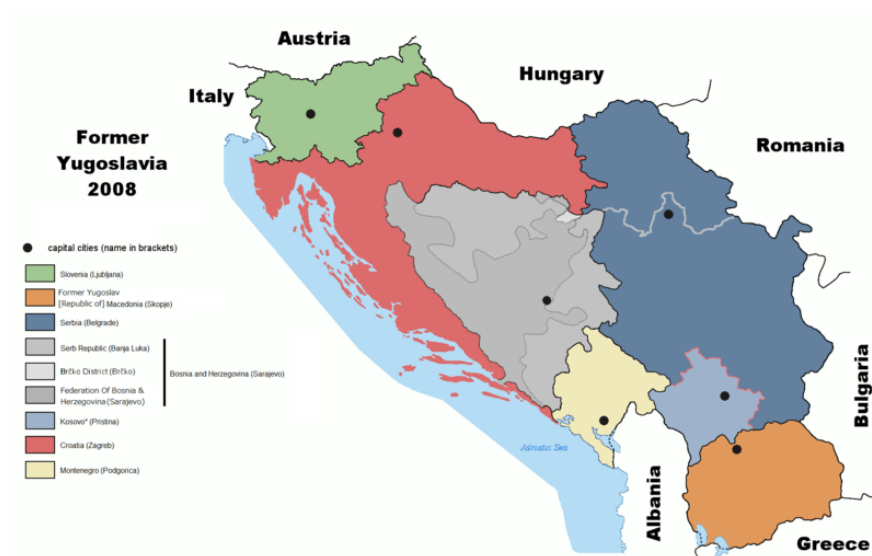


Figure 4.6.2:

This color-coded political map, titled “Former Yugoslavia 2008,” shows the seven states that emerged from Yugoslavia’s dissolution, each shaded a different color with its capital marked by a black dot: Slovenia (Ljubljana) in green to the northwest, Croatia (Zagreb) in red along the Adriatic coast, Bosnia and Herzegovina (Sarajevo) in gray at the center, Serbia (Belgrade) in dark blue to the east, Montenegro (Podgorica) in pale yellow on the southern coast, Kosovo (Pristina) in light blue-purple with a dashed red border, and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (Skopje) in orange to the south. Bosnia and Herzegovina is further subdivided in the legend into the Serb Republic (Banja Luka), the Brčko District, and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Neighboring countries—Italy, Austria, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, and Albania—are labeled in unshaded white around the edges, with the Adriatic Sea in light blue to the west.

(Source: [Map of former Yugoslavia including Kosovo independence](#) by ljdanderson977 via [Wikipedia](#) is licensed under [CC BY-SA 3.0](#))

## International Factors

A state may be susceptible to democratic backsliding as a result of international factors. These can include the “neighborhood effect” (also referred to as “diffusion” or the “demonstration effect”). If a state resides in a region where states are trending non-democratic, or if there is a high regional concentration of non-democratic regimes, that state is more likely to become a non-democracy. Conversely, a neighborhood which is pro-democracy, such as the European Union, can pull countries in the direction of embracing democracy.

International pressures for a democracy to backslide can be carried out via technological means. New information and communication technologies encourage countries to defy geographical constraints and reach into target countries to wage influence campaigns. These influence campaigns serve to undermine democratic governments around the world through the dissemination of misinformation via social media platforms and the internet. This kind of **sharp power** tactic is a means to destabilize democracies by sowing division within populations and undermining democratic institutions, such as the free flow of information and electoral integrity.

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## 4.7: Case Study - Hungary and Poland

### Case Study Learning Objectives

Hungary and Poland offer one of the closest approximations to a controlled comparison in contemporary politics. Both emerged from communist rule in 1989, joined NATO and the European Union, and were long treated as post-communist success stories before electing nationalist governments that reshaped courts, media, and electoral rules. This case study uses a Most Similar Systems Design to trace their parallel backsliding and examine why the two cases diverged after voters turned against those governments.

By the end of this case study, you will be able to:

- Trace how two consolidated democracies backslid toward illiberal rule.
- Identify the specific institutional strategies used to entrench incumbent power.
- Evaluate whether democratic backsliding can be reversed, and what reversal requires.
- Apply the tests of democratic consolidation discussed in Section 4.2 to contested cases.

### Introduction

Hungary and Poland offer one of the closest approximations to a controlled comparison available in contemporary politics. Both emerged from communist rule in 1989. Both held founding elections in the early 1990s, joined NATO in 1999, and entered the European Union in 2004. Both were, for roughly two decades, treated as success stories of post-communist democratization. Both then elected nationalist governments that used their legislative majorities to reshape courts, media, and electoral rules in ways that made their own removal less likely.

This is a Most Similar Systems Design, as described in Chapter 1. The cases share region, timing of transition, membership in the same international organizations, comparable levels of economic development, and strikingly similar trajectories of backsliding. The question is what happened after voters turned against those governments, and here the two cases diverge in an instructive way.

### Hungary

- Full Country Name: Hungary
- Regime Type: Democracy; classified as a hybrid regime by some observers between roughly 2019 and 2026
- System of Democracy: Parliamentary
- Head of State: President (indirectly elected, largely ceremonial)
- Head of Government: Prime Minister
- Legislature: Unicameral National Assembly (199 seats)
- Constitutional Amendment Threshold: Two-thirds of the National Assembly
- Transition from Communism: 1989–1990, negotiated
- EU Accession: 2004
- Capital: Budapest
- Population: approximately 9.5 million

### Poland

- Full Country Name: Republic of Poland
- Regime Type: Democracy
- System of Democracy: Semi-presidential in practice; a directly elected president with veto power alongside a prime minister accountable to parliament
- Head of State: President (directly elected, five-year term)
- Head of Government: Prime Minister

- Legislature: Bicameral (Sejm, 460 seats; Senate, 100 seats)
- Presidential Veto Override: Three-fifths of the Sejm
- Transition from Communism: 1989, negotiated (Round Table)
- EU Accession: 2004
- Capital: Warsaw
- Population: approximately 37 million

## Shared Starting Points

Both transitions were negotiated rather than revolutionary. Poland's Round Table talks in early 1989 produced partially free elections that June, in which Solidarity candidates won nearly every seat they were permitted to contest. Hungary's opposition negotiated with the ruling party through 1989, and the country held fully free elections in 1990. Neither transition involved significant violence, and in both cases substantial elements of the old order were accommodated rather than removed.

Recall the tests of democratic consolidation from Section 4.2. Both countries passed the two-election test repeatedly during the 1990s and 2000s, with power transferring peacefully between opposing parties. Both passed the longevity test. By the standard measures available at the time, both looked consolidated. This is worth pausing on, because what followed suggests those tests capture something real but incomplete.

## Hungary's Illiberal Turn

In 2010, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party won just over half the vote and, because of how Hungary's electoral system converted votes to seats, a two-thirds supermajority in the National Assembly. That supermajority is the threshold required to amend Hungary's constitution.

What followed illustrates what legal scholars call **autocratic legalism**, the use of formally lawful procedures to dismantle the constraints on power (Scheppelle 2018). Fidesz did not stage a coup or suspend elections. It legislated.

- **Courts.** The government altered the size and appointment rules of the Constitutional Court and restricted its jurisdiction over fiscal legislation, reducing its capacity to check the governing majority (Bánkuti, Halmai, and Scheppelle 2012).
- **Constitution.** In 2011, Fidesz enacted an entirely new constitution, the Fundamental Law, effective January 2012, written and passed without meaningful opposition participation.
- **Electoral rules.** Parliament was reduced from 386 to 199 seats, district boundaries were redrawn, and the system was restructured in ways that amplified the governing party's seat share relative to its vote share.
- **Media.** Public broadcasting was consolidated under government control, and in 2018 hundreds of private outlets were transferred into a single foundation aligned with the government, sharply narrowing the independent press.

Orbán described the project openly. In a 2014 speech he argued that Hungary was building an "illiberal state," rejecting the idea that liberal democracy was the only legitimate model. This candor matters analytically: backsliding here was not concealed, it was a stated program.

International bodies responded. The European Parliament triggered Article 7 proceedings against Hungary in 2018, and EU funds were subsequently withheld over rule-of-law and corruption concerns. In 2020, Freedom House's *Nations in Transit* report ceased classifying Hungary as a democracy, categorizing it instead as a hybrid regime, the first EU member state to receive that designation.

By the framework in Section 4.5, Hungary during these years fit the profile of an **illiberal regime**: multiple parties, real elections, and a partially free press, combined with institutions so tilted toward the incumbent that competition was meaningfully unfair. Scholars use the term **competitive authoritarianism** for systems of this kind, where elections genuinely matter but the playing field does not resemble a level one (Levitsky and Way 2010).

## Poland's Constitutional Breakdown

Poland's Law and Justice party (PiS) won a parliamentary majority in 2015 and followed a broadly similar course, though without the two-thirds majority that would have allowed constitutional amendment (Sadurski 2019).

The conflict began with the Constitutional Tribunal. Beginning in late 2015, the new government refused to seat judges elected by the previous parliament and installed its own appointees, producing a dispute over the Tribunal's legitimate composition that has never been resolved. In 2017, further legislation gave parliament the power to appoint most members of the National Council of the Judiciary (KRS), the body responsible for nominating judges, placing judicial appointments under political influence. A new disciplinary chamber was created within the Supreme Court with authority over judges. Public broadcasting was converted into a government messaging platform.

The European Commission triggered Article 7 proceedings against Poland in December 2017. The Court of Justice of the European Union issued rulings against elements of the judicial reforms, and Poland faced financial penalties and withheld recovery funds.

The crucial institutional difference from Hungary is that PiS never held a constitutional majority. It worked within and around an existing constitution rather than replacing it. As we will see, this has shaped everything that came afterward.

## Two Reversals, Two Outcomes

In both countries, voters eventually removed the governing party. The aftermaths have looked very different.

### Poland, 2023 to the Present

Poland's October 2023 parliamentary election drew the highest turnout since 1989. PiS won the largest share of votes but lost its governing majority, and a broad coalition led by Donald Tusk took office in December 2023, pledging to restore the rule of law.

Restoration has largely stalled. The Polish constitution gives the president a veto that requires a three-fifths majority in the Sejm to override, and the Tusk coalition does not command that margin. President Andrzej Duda, aligned with PiS, declined to sign judicial reform legislation and referred it to the contested Constitutional Tribunal. In 2024, parliament passed three acts intended to restore constitutional standards; none entered into force.

The June 2025 presidential election offered an opportunity to break the deadlock and did not. Karol Nawrocki, backed by PiS, defeated the government-aligned candidate by roughly 370,000 votes, taking 50.89 percent in the runoff, and assumed office in August 2025. He has since refused to approve dozens of judicial nominations, and in February 2026 he vetoed the government's bill overhauling the National Council of the Judiciary. Nearly three years after the election that removed PiS from government, the institutional changes made between 2015 and 2023 remain substantially in place.

### Hungary, 2026

Hungary's April 12, 2026 election produced an outcome few expected. Turnout reached 79 percent, up more than nine points from the previous election. The Tisza Party, founded only in 2024 and led by Péter Magyar, a former Fidesz insider, won 53.2 percent of the party-list vote and 141 of 199 seats. Fidesz fell to 52 seats. Orbán conceded on election night, congratulated Magyar, and stated that Fidesz would serve in opposition. Magyar's government took office on May 9, 2026, ending sixteen consecutive years of Fidesz rule.

Two features of this result deserve attention. First, the opposition won despite an electoral system and media environment built to advantage the incumbent. This is a reminder that in competitive authoritarian systems, elections are unfair but not meaningless. Second, Tisza won a two-thirds supermajority, which is to say it now holds precisely the constitutional amendment power that Fidesz used in 2010 to reshape Hungarian institutions in the first place.

## What the Comparison Shows

Placing these outcomes side by side yields several observations relevant to the concepts in this chapter.

**Removing a government is easier than repairing institutions.** Poland demonstrates this starkly. An election changed who governs; it did not change who sits on the Constitutional Tribunal, how judges are nominated, or which appointments are considered valid. Institutional capture, once accomplished, tends to outlast the government that accomplished it.

**Checks on power do not discriminate between good and bad actors.** The Polish presidency's veto power is a genuine

constitutional check, part of the separation of powers described in Chapter 3. It constrained the Tusk government's reform agenda exactly as it would constrain any government. Institutions designed to slow majorities slow all majorities, including those attempting restoration.

**Constitutional thresholds shape what is possible in both directions.** Fidesz's two-thirds majority in 2010 made rapid constitutional change possible. Tisza's two-thirds majority in 2026 makes rapid constitutional change possible again. Whether a new government should use inherited supermajority power to reverse its predecessor's constitutional project, or whether doing so would normalize the practice, is a genuinely difficult question with no settled answer.

**Consolidation is not a finish line.** Both countries passed the two-election and longevity tests well before they backslid. Nancy Bermeo (2016) argues that contemporary backsliding rarely arrives through coups or election-day fraud. It arrives incrementally, through legal changes that each seem defensible in isolation. That is precisely what makes it difficult to identify while it is happening and difficult to undo once it has.

## Comparing the Two Cases

*Backsliding and reversal in Hungary and Poland*

| Feature                           | Hungary                                              | Poland                                 |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Transition from communism         | 1989–1990, negotiated                                | 1989, negotiated                       |
| EU accession                      | 2004                                                 | 2004                                   |
| Backsliding period                | 2010–2026                                            | 2015–2023                              |
| Constitutional majority held?     | Yes                                                  | No                                     |
| New constitution enacted?         | Yes (2011)                                           | No                                     |
| EU Article 7 proceedings          | 2018 (European Parliament)                           | 2017 (European Commission)             |
| Election removing the incumbent   | April 2026                                           | October 2023                           |
| Principal obstacle to restoration | Question of whether to use inherited amendment power | Presidential veto and contested courts |

## Think Comparatively

- Both countries passed the two-election test and the longevity test before backsliding began. What does this suggest about the usefulness of those tests, and what additional indicators might a researcher want?
- Fidesz enacted a new constitution; PiS did not. How did that single difference shape what each government could accomplish and what its successors face?
- The Polish presidency's veto power has blocked the restoration of judicial independence. Is this a failure of Polish institutions or evidence that they are working as designed? Defend your answer.
- Hungary's new government holds a two-thirds supermajority. Should it use that power to rewrite the Fundamental Law? What are the risks of doing so, and the risks of not doing so?
- Opposition parties won in both countries despite electoral systems tilted against them. What does this reveal about the difference between an illiberal regime and a full non-democracy, as distinguished in Section 4.5?
- Applying the explanations for backsliding in Section 4.6, were institutional, cultural, or international factors most important in these two cases? Would your answer differ for Hungary and Poland?

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## 4.8: Chapter Review Questions

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### Study Questions

Use these questions to review the chapter. Try answering each one in your own words. If a question stops you, that is the section worth rereading.

1. What four characteristics does Larry Diamond argue a democracy must include? Choose a country currently holding elections and assess it against all four.
2. What are the two-election test and the longevity test, and what are the limits of each?
3. Distinguish co-optation, patronage networks, and clientelism. Find a current example of one of the three.
4. Some governments hold regular elections and still never lose them. Identify such a country and explain, using the chapter's concepts, what keeps the incumbent in power.
5. Why is democratic backsliding difficult to identify while it is happening? Look up a country's score on Freedom House or V-Dem over the past decade and describe what the trend shows.
6. In 2026 Hungarian voters removed a government that had reshaped the country's institutions over sixteen years. Why is winning such an election easier than undoing the institutional changes afterward?

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*Note: This list merges the reference lists from Chapter 4, "Democracies and Democratization", and Chapter 5, "Non-Democracies and Democratic Backsliding", of Introduction to Comparative Government and Politics by Dino Bozonelos et al. (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative), licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0. It also includes the sources cited in Section 4.7, which is original to this edition. Entries were reformatted for consistency and minor citation errors were corrected.*

## 5: POLITICAL CULTURE, IDENTITY, AND PUBLIC OPINION

- 5.1: Introduction to Political Identity
- 5.2: Culture
- 5.3: Race and Ethnicity
- 5.4: Gender
- 5.5: National Identity
- 5.6: Religious Identity
- 5.7: Class Identity
- 5.8: Political Socialization and Public Opinion
- 5.9: Measuring Public Opinion
- 5.10: Case Study - Israel and Iran
- 5.11: Chapter Review Questions
- 5.12: Bibliography

## 5.1: Introduction to Political Identity

### Chapter Learning Objectives

Politics is shaped not only by institutions, but also by the identities, values, and social experiences that influence how people understand government and political life. This chapter examines political culture and several forms of political identity, including race and ethnicity, gender, national identity, religion, and class. It also explores political socialization and the ways public opinion is measured, then applies these ideas to Israel and Iran to show how identity, culture, and public attitudes interact with political systems.

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Explain how political culture, identity, and political socialization shape political attitudes and behavior.
- Analyze how public opinion is measured and compare the role of identity, culture, and public attitudes in Israel and Iran.

### Introduction

Identity, broadly considered, answers fundamental and personal questions: Who am I? How do I want to be perceived by others? How do I want to be seen in the future? A person's identity develops from a combination of factors, including (but not limited to) personal experiences; interpersonal relationships; perceptions of the world; calculations of risks and threats; and observations of societal mores, morals, and values. Identity forms through a process of socialization, in which an individual discovers themselves and where they think they fit within the social order. Identity, and the calculation of one's identity, has sweeping implications in society. Once formed, identity can section people into groups of "sameness" and "differentness," and sometimes conflict can follow as a result.

### Political Identity

Not surprisingly, the term "political identity" shares almost all of the same traits as the term identity, except taken from a political perspective. **Political identity** is how a person, or group of persons, think of themselves in relation to the politics and government of a state. It refers to the labels and characteristics an individual chooses to associate with based on a multitude of factors. These factors include, but are not limited to, a person's perception of political ideologies, political parties, and platforms, as well as how a person views their identity from national, racial, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and gender perspectives.

There are many political identities that political scientists consider because the mobilization of these identities has observable political consequences. Political identity may facilitate or hinder state formation, and political identity may serve as the basis for conflict. If a state's population is fairly homogeneous, or similar in identity, it may prove easier to have laws and policies that align with the political identity of the people. If a population is heterogeneous, or different in identities, there may be more conflict and less ability to unite people under similar laws and norms. This does not mean that a diverse society cannot be a peaceful or efficient one, but when identities are different enough in terms of values and concerns, conflict is more likely to arise.

While some of these identities may be fixed and out of an individual's control (e.g., race, biological sex), many are instead the result of an individual's choice with roots in symbolism, religion, and/or patriotism. Often, the observable implications of these identities occur through "political mobilization." **Political mobilization** is a process of organizing and motivating individuals with shared identities to take action on a particular political issue. There are *many* examples of political identity serving as the basis for political mobilization.

Consider the Arab Spring, which was a series of protests and uprisings against oppressive governments in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) that started in Tunisia in December 2010. Protests occurred not only in Tunisia, but also in Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen, and many of the protests resulted in violence. Across the MENA region, large numbers of protesters tended to be from two political identity groups. The first political identity group was the youth; young people were dissatisfied with the existing non-democratic regimes and wanted to usher in democracy. The second political identity group comprised those belonging to unions; under the existing non-democratic regimes, unions had been under constant

threat. In this example, the youth and union-members wanted recognition of their identities and the the ability to be represented politically, and they used that shared desire to mobilize to demand change.

A more recent example is the January 6, 2021 United States Capitol Attack, an event in which approximately 2,000-2,500 supporters of then President Donald Trump attacked the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. with the intent of overturning Joseph Biden's victory in the 2020 Presidential Election. These protests were planned and instigated by Trump supporters who identified with a faction within the Republican Party that believed there was widespread election fraud. Organizing through social media, and then attending a Trump speech on January 6, the protesters mobilized their shared political identity to march to the Capitol, attack and infiltrate the building, assault law enforcement officers, and vandalize property.

In the following sections of this chapter, we will discuss multiple types of political identities (e.g., culture, race, ethnicity, gender). First, though, we must understand how political identities form and solidify.

## Political Socialization

Individuals form their political identities through a process called "political socialization." **Political socialization** is the process by which an individual's political beliefs and values form, change, and solidify over time. Numerous actors and institutions influence this process.

One of the first places an individual begins their political socialization is with their family. The process can start out simply and implicitly. If a parent, guardian, or mentor shares their beliefs and perceptions about society or politics, a child may begin to adopt similar perceptions. In some ways, whether a child adopts the same views as their parents, guardians, or mentors will depend, at least partly, on whether the child recognizes these actors as legitimate. If the child recognizes these actors as legitimate sources of authority, they may be inclined to adopt similar perspectives; if a child does not see these actors as legitimate sources of authority, they may adopt opposing stances.



Figure 5.1.1: Families are one of the first places individuals begin to form their sense of political identity. (Source: [American Family](#), by Wazzle via [Wikimedia Commons](#) is licensed under [Public Domain](#)).

A second place where political socialization occurs is in schools. Schools are institutions that provide students with information about the world around them. Teachers and those involved with the curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular activities of their students can influence how students perceive the societal and political organization around them. These actors can sometimes have an influence similar to a family member. A student may ask: Do I trust this teacher? Do I think this teacher knows what they are talking about? If a student does trust the teacher, that student may adopt similar views; conversely, if the student does not trust the teacher, they may adopt opposing views. Many times, students in primary grades are more likely to trust teachers; as adolescence arrives, students typically begin to ask questions more critically.



Figure 5.1.2: During a student's high school years, the attitudes, beliefs, and values of their peer groups or teachers may influence their political identity. (Source: [Hibbing High School, Hibbing, Minnesota, USA](#) by McGhievia via [Wikimedia Commons](#) is licensed under [CC BY-SA 3.0](#))

A third place where political socialization occurs is through interactions with friends and peers. As children move into adolescence, research shows that adolescents are heavily influenced by their peers. This influence can be extreme, though it may not be representative or predictive of an individual's political identity later in life. Adolescent youths, in an attempt to fit in or please their friends, can be easily--though sometimes only temporarily--influenced by the thoughts, ideas, attitudes, and beliefs that are most popular among their peer group.

A fourth way in which individuals become politically socialized is through media. Over the last 40 years, the traditional media's influence has grown substantially, moving to a 24-hour news cycle with a proliferation of news outlets available in various modalities. Observers are able to access local, national, and global news at any time in their preferred format. Rather than coming from a position of complete objectivity, many of these news outlets offer judgments based on political ideological leanings (e.g., in the United States, news stations that are explicitly conservative- or liberal-leaning). In addition to traditional media, social media applications give individuals the ability to project their own thoughts, beliefs, and political judgments, while also absorbing the thoughts of others within their networks and observing stances taken by famous individuals with a wide reach. While opinions are readily available and amplified through social media, these opinions are generally not subject to editing, management, correction, or fact-checking by any overarching method of review to ensure accountability (e.g., a set of journalistic integrity principles, a process of academic peer review). Depending on the amount consumed by an individual, traditional and social media can be a strong force for political socialization.

There are many additional actors and institutions that can influence the process of political socialization. Religious institutions, for example, may take clear political stances on what they see as social and moral issues, such as the Catholic Church's opposition to abortion. Whether a religious institution influences an individual's political identity will depend on how central religion is to that individual's life. Moreover, an individual's political socialization will occur differently depending on their socio-economic status, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, and many other factors. An individual's experience on each dimension of their identity will provide a lens through which political socialization and political mobilization occurs.

In the following sections, we will consider the influence of four key identity groups as they relate to political mobilization and socialization: culture, race, ethnicity, and gender.

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## 5.2: Culture

### Introduction

**Culture**, broadly defined, is the combination of customs; social institutions; art; media; and social, economic, and political achievements of a social group. In many ways, culture is a "catch-all" for many factors that influence social behavior, habits, and traditions found in a society. This includes **norms**, which are standard practices, rules, patterns, and behaviors considered acceptable in a society. In some situations, the inability or unwillingness to abide by norms can result in punishments and violence, and some scholars argue that norms have significant influence on political behaviors.

Michele Gelfand (2018), for instance, argues that states that enforce strict adherence to norms tend to have greater control over their own populations, which manifests in lower crime rates and the promotion of self-control among individuals. In contrast, states that do not promote strict adherence to norms may be more disorganized and have higher crime rates. Yet, the states without strict adherence to norms may also be more open to other ideas and cultures, and they may perform better economically. In explaining how cultures tend to adopt strict or loose adherence to norms, Gelfand writes:

There's a hidden logic for why these differences evolve: Groups that have experienced a lot of threat tend to be tighter. The threat can come from a variety of sources, such as a high level of natural disasters and famine, a scarcity of resources, the potential of invasions, a high population density, economic uncertainty, etc. It makes sense: Groups under threat need rules to coordinate to survive. Cultures that have less threat can afford to be more permissive.

Cultures therefore develop as a result of a combination of factors, including historical origins, present-day strains and stresses, and ambitions to acquire or attain certain goals. Cultural norms evolve to adapt to their environment. In evaluating data on political, social, and economic measures among 30 different countries, Gelfand finds that cultures with either too-strict or too-loose adherence to cultural norms have lower levels of happiness and higher rates of suicide. Conversely, cultures that have more moderate adherence to norms are among the happiest and most economically successful countries.

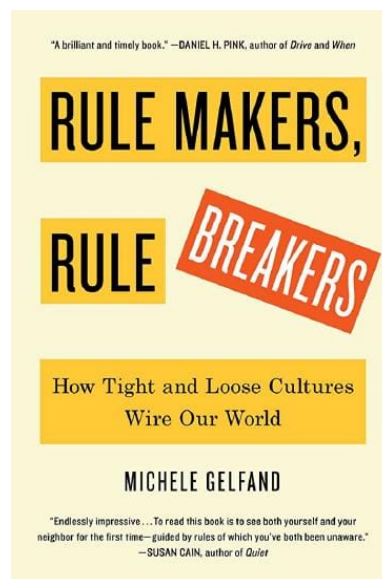


Figure 5.2.1: Gelfand's book argues that different adherence to cultural norms affects political and economic outcomes within a state. (Source: Gelfand, M. (2018). *Rule Makers, Rule Breakers: How Tight and Loose Cultures Wire our World*, Scribner.)

### Political Culture

While societal culture and norms fundamentally shape the political system, we must also consider the narrower concept of "political culture." **Political culture** is a shared set of ideological views and beliefs held by a population about the political system under which they live.

A number of factors relate to how political culture manifests in different states. First, trust, the extent to which citizens believe in the reliability and validity of their government, plays a significant role in political outcomes. For instance, if citizens do not trust the electoral process, they may be unwilling to accept election results. As discussed in Chapter 4, accepting election results is a foundational feature of any democracy. If trust does not exist, democratic institutions are unlikely to perform their functions effectively. The odds for political conflict, and even political violence, may increase as the level of trust within a given political culture decreases. Second, "post-materialism" influences how political culture manifests in a given state. **Post-materialism** is the extent to which a political culture focuses on or cares about issues that are not of immediate physical and material concern, such as human rights and environmental concerns.

While we highlight only two (of many) factors that influence political culture, we can also identify three distinct types of political culture that relate to political participation and regime type. As Almond and Verba (1963) describe in *The Civic Culture*, there are three systems of political culture: a parochial system, a subject system, and a participant system. A **parochial system** is a type of political culture in which citizens are not involved, engaged, or interested in the political operations in their state. A **subject system** is a type of political culture in which citizens are somewhat aware and responsive to their governmental systems, but their involvement is heavily controlled and legislated by their governments. In this system, there is no room for opposition or dissent; citizens are merely subjects to the government and must abide by the laws or face punishment. This system tends to align with non-democratic regimes. The **participant system** is a type of political culture in which citizens are aware of government actions and able to influence and participate in governmental decisions, but they still must abide by the laws of the state. This system tends to align with democratic regimes.

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## 5.3: Race and Ethnicity

### Introduction

Race and ethnicity are often used, mistakenly, as though they are interchangeable terms. According to Merriam-Webster, **race** is "a category of humankind that shares certain distinctive physical traits." To this end, race is a narrow term that is associated with biological characteristics, such as skin color and hair texture. Ethnicity is a broader term than race. Again using Merriam-Webster's definition, **ethnicity** categorizes groups of people "according to common racial, national, tribal, religious, linguistic, or cultural origin[s] or background[s]."

The terms race and ethnicity are both political categorizations of identity that raise problems, especially as the options available to those having to answer a question pertaining to their race and ethnicity may not be comprehensive or representative of their actual identities. On an official government document, for example, a person may hesitate to share their race or ethnicity due to fear of government reprisals against a minority group. In addition, if provided with a series of options to choose from, an individual may not believe that a given race or ethnicity appropriately captures their identity.

### Race, Ethnicity, and Political Mobilization

Race and ethnicity play a major role in politics around the world, and each of these factors can be politically mobilized to influence political outcomes.

Within the United States (U.S.), for example, we can consider the Civil Rights Movement during the 1950s and 1960s. This social movement aimed to ensure equal treatment under the law for Black and African American citizens. The momentum for the movement came from civil rights activists and protesters who sought to end racial oppression, segregation, voter suppression, and discriminatory employment and housing practices. Through racially- and ethnically-based political mobilization, including sophisticated organizational efforts that were sustained over time, the Civil Rights Movement successfully pushed for numerous court rulings (e.g., *Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954; *Loving v. Virginia*, 1967), major legislative changes (e.g., the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965), and new policies (e.g., affirmative action).



Figure 5.3.1: Participants and leaders marching from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial during the 1963 March on Washington. (Source: [Civil Rights March on Washington, D.C.](#) by U.S. Information Agency Press and Publications Service via the National Archives and Records Administration is licensed under [Public Domain](#)).

Remaining with the U.S. example, scholars today continue to study how race and ethnicity affect not only political mobilization, but also trends in political attitudes. Comparing the two major parties in the U.S., members of the Republican Party are more likely

to say that great advances have been made in racial equality in the U.S., while members of the Democratic Party are more likely to state that more needs to be done. The majority of Black Americans, according to the Pew Research Center, believe that most of the institutions in the U.S. are biased and need to be "completely rebuilt," illustrating how fundamentally race and ethnicity can interact with the political system.

More generally, across the globe, comparativists study how race and ethnicity impact (among other things) the quality of democracy, representation in political institutions, public opinion, electoral outcomes, inequality, health outcomes, and economic outcomes.

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## 5.4: Gender

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### Introduction

The political consequences of gender have been an area of increasing consideration in political science over the last two decades. Similar to previous sections in this chapter, how a term is defined has implications for how it is discussed, so it is important that we begin with clear terms. **Gender** encompasses a spectrum of characteristics ranging from feminine to masculine, and gender depends on a person's internal sense of self. Crucially, gender is a distinct concept from sex (or sometimes "biological sex"), which refers to biological differences. According to the World Health Organization, **sex** refers to "the different biological and physiological characteristics of females, males, and intersex persons, such as chromosomes, hormones, and reproductive organs." Sex is typically assigned at birth based on a set of physical characteristics. Gender, however, is more nuanced.

Gender refers to "the socially constructed characteristics of women and men – such as norms, roles, and relationships of and between groups of women and men. It varies from society to society and can be changed. The concept of gender includes five important elements: relational, hierarchical, historical, contextual, and institutional. While most people are born either male or female, they are taught appropriate norms and behaviors – including how they should interact with others of the same or opposite sex within households, communities, and work places. When individuals or groups do not 'fit' established gender norms, they often face stigma, discriminatory practices, or social exclusion – all of which adversely affect health." (World Health Organization)

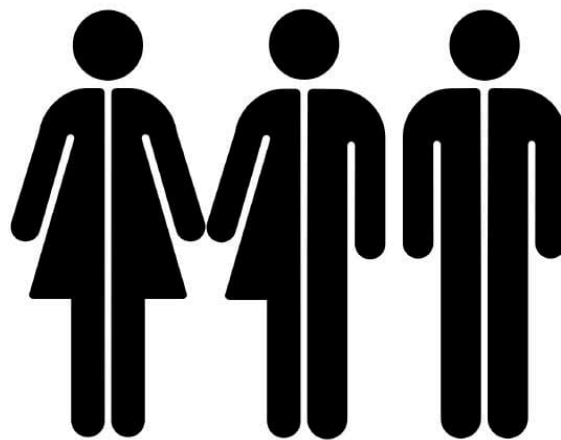


Figure 5.4.1: Three icons for people with different gender identities, adapted from an image by Dan Brunsdon for The Noun Project (Source: by Arkirkland via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under [CC0 1.0 Public Domain](#))

### Gender and Politics

The divide between male and female has often influenced politics. Women in many societies have been historically underrepresented and discriminated against. Looking globally at women's suffrage, the right of women to vote in elections, over 180 countries now allow women to vote in some capacity. But beyond the right to vote, women's rights globally are often not fully institutionalized, upheld, or prioritized.

In most countries, women who work do not earn the same as men in similar positions, even when their credentials and experience meet or exceed their male counterparts. An interesting case study of the unequal treatment for women's rights can be seen with the COVID-19 pandemic, which, in most countries, tended to push women out of the workplace. In the United States alone, female workforce participation dropped to 57 percent, the lowest level since 1988. Of the 1.1 million people who were pushed from the workforce, 80 percent were women. Economic projections calculate it will take women twice as long as men to recover from their

economic circumstances as a result of the pandemic. Outcomes outside of the United States were similarly poor for women. Women account for 39 percent of all jobs worldwide, but their participation in the workforce dropped by 54 percent with the pandemic. These findings have led a number of scholars to note that the pandemic had a globally regressive effect on gender equality.

Beyond economic outcomes, another area of concern is the acceptance (or lack thereof) of gender identity and sexual orientation in different states. **Sexual orientation** is the sustained pattern of romantic and/or sexual attraction to people of opposite sex or gender, same sex or gender, or both. The five top-ranked states in the world for acceptance of different gender identities and sexual orientations are Iceland, Norway, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Canada. On the flip-side, numerous states are accused of mistreating their citizens based on gender identities and sexual orientations, including Malawi, Malaysia, Nigeria, Oman, and Saudi Arabia. Many of these states have laws or legal codes that discriminate against members of the LGBTQIA+ community, such as so-called "morality laws" that criminalize a person's identity. The states may also engage in propaganda campaigns and mete out harsh punishments--long prison sentences and state-sanctioned violence, such as flogging--to those who do not align with the government's belief system.

According to a report published by UCLA's School of Law that analyzed the social acceptance of LGBTQIA+ people across 175 states between 1981-2020, 56 states experienced improvements in rates of social acceptance, 57 states experienced decreases in rates of social acceptance, and 62 states experienced no change in the rate of social acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ community (Flores, 2021).

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## 5.5: National Identity

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### Introduction

Political identity is not the same as "national identity," but the concepts are interrelated. While political identity is how we view ourselves in a political sense, including our political interests, affiliations, and priorities, **national identity** is how a person, or group of persons, thinks of themselves as belonging to and representing the values and traits of a nation. This can range from a relatively narrow ethnic identity to a broader civic identity that encompasses many ethnic and religious groups. In Canada, for example, there is the concept of a "cultural mosaic" of many different types of people, including immigrants, who make up the nation. This is a broad and inclusive definition of national identity. On the other end of the spectrum, some South Asian nations, such as India, are viewed as practicing a narrow and exclusionary form of national identity (Chakraborty, 2014).

As a reminder from Chapter 3, a **nation** is broadly defined as a population of people joined by common culture, history, language, and/or ancestry within a designated region or territory. A **nation-state** is a state where all or most of the people in that state belong to a single nation. In Hungary, Poland, and the United States, for example, people tend not to separate between their nation and state. A **multinational state**, alternatively, is a state that contains multiple nations, such as India and Russia.

National identity, just like other aspects of identity, creates a feeling of belonging. Symbols--such as a national flag, bird, or anthem--are commonly used to reflect the values and priorities of a nation's identity, and their easy recognition helps to inspire and bind people together. In the United States, the Pledge of Allegiance was popularized after the Civil War (and formally adopted by Congress in 1942) as a means to unite the state as one nation, yet a number of southern states continue to use imagery reminiscent of the Confederate Battle Flag (suggesting a distinct identity). In Germany, after Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor in 1933, the flag colors changed from black, red, and yellow to black, white, and red, and they subsequently reverted back after World War II. These symbols provide a visible cue to reinforce a person's sense of attachment to a nation. As Haas (1986) describes, national identity implies a "principle of identity based on impersonal ties, remote ties, vicarious ties," and these ties are arbitrated through common symbols and forms of communication.

### Nationalism

While these symbols can reinforce national identity, they are also powerful tools of "nationalism." **Nationalism**, according to Britannica, is "an ideology that elevates one nation or nationality above all others and that places primary emphasis on promotion of its culture and interests as opposed to those of other nations, nationalities, or supranational groups." Haas (1986) adds that nationalism is "the convergence of territorial and political loyalty irrespective of competing foci of affiliation." In the ideology of nationalism, national identity matters more than one's other identities. As Hechter (2001) explains, nationalism is "collective action designed to render the boundaries of the nation congruent with those of its governance unit." In other words, the ideology of nationalism aims to ensure the boundaries of the nation and the state are the same.

Nationalism is naturally tied to the development of the modern nation-state; before a national identity can exist, the nation must exist. As Benedict Anderson (1983) argues, nationalism developed in part due to the advent of the printing press, which was introduced in Europe in the 1400s. As more and more people became literate, they read newspapers ("print capitalism"). This ritual of buying and reading newspapers--and the knowledge that many others were completing the same ritual at the same time--allowed people to feel connected. People therefore no longer saw themselves as detached populations, but as "imagined communities." In this way, nations, and therefore nationalism, were socially constructed.

Scholars identify numerous varieties of nationalism in the world today, and here we will only focus on two broad distinctions. **Exclusionary nationalism** is the idea that a nation is superior or exceptional, and this type of nationalism can lead to the marginalization of others and/or violence (i.e., it promotes an "us versus them" mentality). **Liberal nationalism** is the idea that every group of people with a clear national identity should have their own state that adheres to liberal principles (e.g., the protection of individual rights). This type of nationalism can lead to independence movements, or it can develop during or after an independence movement motivated by other factors.

Nationalism can therefore serve as the ideological basis for "irredentist movements" and "separatist movements." An **irredentist movement** is an attempt by one state to restore a territory that previously belonged to it. Russian President Vladimir Putin, for example, views Ukraine (a former republic of the Soviet Union that declared independence in 1991) not as a sovereign state,

but as a crucial piece of the Russian nation with shared historical and cultural identities that should rejoin Russia. A **separatist movement** is an attempt by members of a group of people with shared identity to establish their own government, separate from the state they reside in. In Canada, for instance, there have been calls for secession by Quebec, also thought of as "French Canada." Supporters of this effort are represented by a political party called Bloc Québécois. According to *The New York Times*, about 30 percent of Quebec's citizens support secession. Far more, however, are focused on maintaining the values, language, and identity of French Canada. Similar to Quebec, the Catalonia region of Spain has its own language and traditions, and it held an independence referendum and declared the establishment of an independent Catalan Republic in October 2017. Though this independence declaration was not recognized by other states or the Spanish government, it illustrates how separatist movements can be both centralizing forces that bring people with shared identities together, but also be decentralizing or damaging to the state. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, as quoted by the BBC, "Spain risked being downgraded from a 'full democracy' to a 'flawed' one over its handling of the situation."



Figure 5.5.1: Holding hands for Catalan Independence. (Source: [Catalan independence protest in Times Square, NYC](#) by Liz Castro via [Wikimedia Commons](#) is licensed under [CC BY-SA 2.0](#))

## Identity and Citizenship

While national identity and political identity imply a feeling of belonging, **citizenship** is a legal status of being a citizen of a particular state. A person can feel a sense of belonging to a nation *without* being a citizen of the state in which the nation exists.

Roughly 30 states grant citizenship at birth (Serhan and Friedman, 2018), and almost all states have a process whereby a person can become a citizen. The difficulty of the process depends on the state; some states require lengthy residency requirements before allowing a citizenship application (e.g., 10 years in Switzerland) while other states require little more than proving ancestry from that state (e.g., "citizenship by descent" in Ireland). Citizenship typically brings certain legal rights and privileges, such as the right to vote, to hold elected office, and to be issued a passport.

Citizenship is often closely tied to **patriotism**, pride in one's state, rather than nationalism. This is because even though being a citizen confers certain rights and privileges, it also involves special duties. For example, some states like Israel, Russia, and Turkey have **conscription** for a set of citizens, which is compulsory enlistment for military service. While there are over 100 nationalities in Russia, regardless if a male citizen between the ages of 18-30 is an ethnic Chechen, Russian, Tartar, or a member of another group, all must serve a 12 month term in the military.



Figure 5.5.2: Russian guards in uniform. (Source: [Russian Guard](#) by Unknown Author via [pxhere.com](#) is licensed under [CC0](#))

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## 5.6: Religious Identity

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### Introduction

As mentioned in previous sections, individuals can have multiple identities. Just as a national identity is closely tied to a person's sense of belonging to a nation, a **religious identity** is how a person, or group of persons, thinks of themselves as belonging to and representing the values of a particular religion and/or religious sect. Yet while nations are a modern construction, religion is a far older concept.

Contrary to national identity coming only *after* the formation of a nation, some argue that religious identity may actually come *before* the development of religion. Émile Durkheim, for example, writes that religion is an eminently social thing. Rather than focusing on deities and/or supernatural elements, the formation of a religion centers on collective consciousness and community. The rituals and practices that people collectively participate in lead to a sense of unity, and this development of a unified identity is what then leads to organized religion (Wetherell and Mohanty, 2010).

Durkheim wrote about pre-modern societies, which were mostly clan or tribe-based. However, if religious identity is indeed ascribed, or collectivity-based, then it can also be free from geographical constraints. As the clan or tribe shifts from one territory to the next, the religious identity should continue as long as the community remains cohesive. Again, this is different from national identity, where lines drawn on a map strongly influence who develops a national identity. A religious identity can be detached from the land it originated, as we see historically through the growth of religions through proselytizing.

### Religious Identity and Politics

How, then, does religious identity affect politics?

If religious identity precedes religion itself, many people consider it their "primordial identity." Originally coined to discuss ethnic identities, primordialism helps us understand the salience of religious identities in politics. **Primordial identity** means that individuals have only a single religious identity, and that this identity is fixed in the present and the future. Some contend that one's religious identity is biologically determined; that is, a person is born into a religious identity. Others suggest that religious identity develops through socialization and education in childhood. Regardless of the exact timing, primordialists believe that once a person acquires an identity, it becomes immutable (Chandra, 2001).

This approach may describe the pre-modern world, but it falls short in the modern context where individuals often *choose* to join a community. Particularly in secular societies, religious identity is often a matter of choice; it is not determined by the clan, the tribe, or the nation a person is born into. Those subscribing to this choice-driven view consider religious identity a "constructivist identity." **Constructivist identity** means that individuals have multiple identities and that, as people change, so can the importance of a particular identity. Over time, individuals may even adopt a new identity altogether. Given the transitory nature of people in the modern world, there is a greater likelihood that an individual could acquire multiple religious identities in their lifetime. We see this, for example, with Protestant Christians in the United States who go "church shopping," meaning they visit different congregations before settling down on one church that best fits their needs.

This discussion of primordial versus constructivist identity helps us understand how religious identity plays a role in modern politics. When groups see their religious identity as primordial, as immutable, they are less willing to compromise politically on issues that violate their belief systems. Compromise will appear anathema to a community with a primordialist view of identity. This reasoning has been used, as one of many hypotheses, to explain why conflict may erupt between two or more religious groups.

### Dimensions of Religious Identity

When measuring religious identity, we can rely on what has been referred to as the **four 'b's'**: believing, belonging, behaving, and bonding.

**Believing** is religious belief or believing in certain religious propositions. It involves the way people conceptualize their relationship with supernatural forces. Most religions are theistic, which involve belief in a god (monotheism), gods (polytheism) or

henotheism), or some omnipresent force. Even among non-theistic traditions, such as Buddhism, adherents often profess a belief in a version of external transcendence, and that "there is some sort of spirit or life force" (Saroglou, 2011). **Belonging** is religious affiliation or belonging to a religious faith, a religious tradition, or a denomination/sect within a particular religion. Denomination is a term associated with Christianity--such as Catholics, Southern Baptists, and Latter-Day Saints (Mormons)--and often refers to a "religious community or (transhistorical) group with a common history and future" (Hoogendoorn, et. al., 2016). **Behaving** is religious commitment or behaving according to values privileged by religion. It involves norms and defining what is right and what is wrong. It can also provide an individual with a sense of purpose. **Bonding** is religious ritual or bonding by means of spiritual practices and rituals. It can include prayer, meditation, worship, religious ceremonies, and pilgrimages.

Given the complexity inherent in these four dimensions of religious identity, scholars in religion and politics prefer to use the term **religiosity** to describe "the strength of a person's attachment to organized religion" (Macaluso and Wanat, 1979), which they then attempt to measure in various ways to reflect the four 'b's.' Macaluso and Wanat (1979, p. 160), for instance, measure religiosity "as the frequency of attendance at the place of worship." Leege and Kellstedt (1993), however, contend that using attendance at the place of worship as the only measure of religiosity is too simplistic, particularly because some religions and/or denominations emphasize individual devotion or non-collective traditions.

Religiosity, the strength of a person's commitment to religion, is important for understanding the intersection of religion and politics as it can influence how a person votes, how a person views certain policies, and whether a person supports a certain political party. At the state level, religious identity can also influence political regimes (e.g., theocracies), the acceptable range of government actions (e.g., if they must adhere to religiously-based moral codes), and the relationship between church and state (e.g., whether an official state religion exists). The comparative case study at the end of this chapter, comparing Israel and Iran, will examine some of these influences.

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## 5.7: Class Identity

### Introduction

Class identity relates to both economic and social class. **Class identity** is how a person, or group of persons, thinks of themselves in relation to others in society based on their economic and social position. Class identity is inherently about power. As Robertson (2020) writes:

Classes can be divided according to how much relative power and control members of a class have over their lives. On this basis, we might distinguish between the owning class (or bourgeoisie), the middle class, and the traditional working class. The owning class not only have power and control over their own lives, their economic position gives them power and control over others' lives as well.

Class identity, and its connection to power, also manifests in politics. One of the theories of power is called the "elite theory." **Elites** are the upper socio-economic class, or the "ruling class, among those business, government, and military leaders whose decisions and actions have significant consequences" (Mills, 1956). **Elite theory** posits that elites not only have power, but that they use that power for their own self-interests. One of the components of being a member of the elites is to have **social capital**, in this case meaning a network to call on for help in finding things like a new job, new clients, and new customers. The well-connectedness of elites provides them (and their families and other close contacts) with clear benefits. Today, elite theory encompasses not only elite individuals, but elite organizations, such as major oil companies and global military contractors (Horowitz, 1981).

### Socioeconomic Class

While defining and measuring economic status is quite similar across cultures, based on measurable characteristics like money and material resources, the same cannot be said for social status. Different societies have different social values and, therefore, assign social class positions in different ways.



Figure 5.7.1: Wealth in South Florida. (Source: [Miami Millionaire Row](#), by Thank You via [flickr](#) is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#))

In terms of economic status, the photo above shows a sleek yacht. This is one indicator of wealth because of the high cost of the yacht. Therefore, we presume that the owner of the yacht is from the upper economic class. Homes, cars, and jewelry are other commonly observed indicators of economic class.

There are other markers of economic class, however, that are not always as easy to interpret. Fashion and grooming styles are

examples. In the past, perhaps, these were more fixed. In contemporary society, they are more fluid. Consider the 1794 image of the wife of a wealthy Spanish diplomat below.



Figure 5.7.2: Portrait of the wife of a wealthy Spanish diplomat, 1794. (Source: [Matilda Stoughton de Jaudenes](#) by Metropolitan Museum of Art via [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) is licensed under [CC0 1.0](#))

It is quite easy to know that this is an image of a wealthy person with high status. Yet, such markers of wealth are not always visible today. The picture of Elon Musk below offers no clues that he is one of the wealthiest persons on Earth.



Figure 5.7.3: In blue jeans and a black t-shirt, it is difficult to spot Elon Musk's wealth based on his clothing alone. (Source: [Elon Musk at the 2016 Tesla Annual Shareholder's Meeting](#), by [Steve Jurvetson](#) via [Wikimedia Commons](#) is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#))

When we combine economic factors, such as income and wealth, with social factors, such as level of education and occupation, we have **socioeconomic class**. This intersection occurs because a person's social factors often influence their economic class. However, as noted by the Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching, "An individual's socioeconomic status does not always align with their social class identification. In the U.S., for example, those who identify as middle class vary on every indicator of socioeconomic status (e.g., level of education)."

As noted above, components of social class vary significantly across cultures. In some societies, for example, it is considered more prestigious to be a religious leader than a medical doctor. Different states also place different levels of respect for teachers. According to a 2018 report from the Varkey Foundation, "In Malaysia and China, teachers are compared to doctors – seen as

the highest status profession in our sample, but [in most countries] it is most common for teachers to be compared with social workers having a mid-range status."

## Class Identity and Politics

Class identity, both economic and social, is a major component of politics. Class identity often influences political affiliations and attitudes. Politicians appeal to class identity as a means of gaining support for their policies. Class identity often drives political and social movements.

One example of the relationship between class identity and political movements is Marxism (named after Karl Marx). **Marxism**, which we will discuss more in Chapter 8, is an approach to political economy that is based on the idea of class conflict between the owner and worker classes. Marxism focuses on the exploitation of workers by owners and seeks to mobilize the working class to demand a change in the power dynamic. Marxists seek to change the economic class structure and, as a consequence, the political structure. Marx saw such class struggle as inevitable due to exploitation, and he believed that political revolution was inevitable. By overthrowing the owner class, this revolution would usher in a socialist system (Sociology Boundless, n.d.). But, before such an uprising could happen, the working class had to see *itself as working class* and recognize that--as a class--it was being exploited by the owner class.

Marx viewed class in objective terms, whereby a person's social class was "determined by his or her position within the system of property relations that constitute[d] a given economic society" (Little, n.d.). Therefore, it was not just about being a member of a certain class that had political significance, but it was also one's class identity (a feeling of belonging to a particular class) that was politically important.

Class identity is not only at the core of certain social or political movements, it is often a key focus of political campaigns seeking to win votes or support. A recent example of this in the United States is the intense interest in the working class--those engaged in manual-labor occupations or industrial work, often without a four-year college degree--during the presidential election campaign of 2015-16. Unionized working class Americans had been fairly solidly united behind the Democratic Party since the 1930s, but over the past 30 years, the Democratic Party lost its solid support from working class voters, making them a constituency of voters that candidates believed were up for grabs in the election (Zweig, 2017). At that time, Bernie Sanders characterized his run for the presidency as one focused on the working class, and such class-based appeals "also figure prominently in debates concerning the success of right-wing populist politicians such as Marine Le Pen in France, Luigi Di Maio in Italy, and Donald Trump in the US" (Robertson, n.d.).

Turning our attention to the role of class identity in Israeli politics, we see something a bit different. Rather than identity politics being a way to bring attention to groups who feel "left behind" in some way, in Israel there is a class-based identity politics movement evident in the more economically secure middle class. As Kaplan explains:

Whereas theories of identity politics tend to focus on the socially disenfranchised, we look at how the higher-ranked may use others' essentialisation of culture and identities for their own advantages. We explain the secular middle class's turn to Judaism as an attempt to reestablish or reclaim the social power they feel entitled to, under changing cultural, social and material conditions. [Kaplan, et al, 2017]

Kaplan's analysis also highlights the intersection of class, culture, and politics:

In as much as Israel is an advanced-capitalist and a Jewish state, our middle-class participants have re-adjusted to the changing terms of belonging to the Israeli collectivity. In doing so, they may very well advance the 'Judaisation' of Israeli culture, yet not merely as an explicit political process, but also as a class distinction practice. [Kaplan, et al, 2017]

This example from Israel reminds us that even groups who generally are seen as having well-established economic, social, and political power can feel their identity is threatened and, in this case, seek to redefine important aspects of that culture to help maintain their place in the hierarchy.

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## 5.8: Political Socialization and Public Opinion

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### Introduction

As described in the previous section, public opinion refers to the views and opinions of the public at large. In political science, we tend to focus on inherent political questions, such as the public's views regarding government leadership, political institutions, policy preferences, or the nature of the political regime. Common questions may include: How do you rate your overall satisfaction with your government? How do you rate your trust in the legislature? The court system? The electoral system? Which political issue do you consider the most pressing challenge facing your government today?

Knowing the public's opinion is valuable for numerous reasons. First, public opinion is information that officials need to take into account when determining what issues to focus on and how to solve problems, particularly under a democratic regime where the public can hold leaders accountable through elections. If public officials seeking re-election continually ignore their constituents, negative backlash may occur (e.g., they may lose the next election). Public officials need to know, and care about, what their constituency thinks of them and the issues they should focus on (Herrick, 2013). Second, and again particularly relevant in cases of democratic regimes with freedom of press, the results of public opinion research provide the media with the ability to inform citizens on others' views. This gives individuals the ability to self-evaluate their own views relative to their broader community. Third, knowing the public's view is valuable knowledge for scholars. There are entire subfields within political science (e.g., political behavior, as described within political psychology in Chapter 1) that primarily use public opinion as a data source, and scholars within these subfields study the impact(s) public opinion has on the polity.

### Opinion Formation

Where do our opinions come from? Most people derive their opinions (and, in this case, political opinions) from their beliefs and attitudes, which form in early childhood (Key, 1966). Beliefs are our core views and values that guide us in how we make decisions or interpret the world. For example, a person may believe in a higher power or God. Having that belief in a higher power will inform what a person observes in the world and how to interpret it. As another example, a person may have a strong belief in equality. Having that belief in equality will help the person interpret if a specific policy is having its desired outcome.

Attitudes also impact our opinions. Attitudes are made up of our personal beliefs and our life experiences. For example, someone who has never had a good experience at a bureaucratic office (e.g., the Department of Motor Vehicles in the American context) may develop a bad attitude regarding government employees or civil servants. Or, someone who has had negative experiences with the police may have a suspicious attitude toward law enforcement. Conversely, someone who has had good experience with the police may have a trusting attitude toward law enforcement. As our beliefs and attitudes take shape during childhood development, we are also being "socialized." That is, we are learning how to respond to the world around us, either in thought or action.

### Political Socialization

We are socialized into believing all sorts of things and having a variety of different views, and many (if not most) of these views stay with us throughout our lives (Zaller, 1992). Some things we are taught, and other things we learn from our experiences and those around us. As defined in Chapter 6, **political socialization** is the process by which an individual's political beliefs and values form, change, and solidify over time. While 6.1 discusses political socialization in some detail, the agents of socialization are worth brief review to further draw out the connection with public opinion.

There are different agents to socialization that mold an individual's political views. First, since political socialization begins in early childhood, family is typically the dominant influence (Davies, 1965). For example, if a child grows up in a household where caregivers vote, they may take a greater interest in voting themselves. Or, if a child's parents are politically active in a particular political party, that child may be exposed to the same information sources from which their parents base their views. Second, education is an impactful agent (Mayer, 2011), as it exposes an individual to an academic environment (i.e., information taught in the classroom by teachers) and to peer influences through classmates and friends. If a child grows up in a homogenous community, they may not encounter ethnic, linguistic, racial, or religious diversity until they go to school, and the exposure to new experiences with others may inform their politics. Third, an individual's faith or religion (depending on their level of religiosity) is another impactful agent (Lockerbie, 2013). If a person attends church regularly, they are more likely to agree with that church's

doctrine or the messages communicated by church leadership, and those messages may inform their political views.

There are other, and in some cases less impactful, agents of socialization that can also help shape an individual's views, such as a person's race, gender, age, geographical location, or occupation; a history of military service; exposure to monumental historical events (Hall and Ross, 2015); and exposure to media, which can set the agenda by choosing to focus on certain issues (Cook, et al., 1983) or introduce new and/or biased perspectives.

Once our views are established, they still can continue to change through new agents of socialization. Out of these views, we derive our political ideology and our belief in the appropriate role and purpose of government.

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## 5.9: Measuring Public Opinion

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### Public Opinion Polls

Researchers use a variety of techniques to gauge public opinion, and the most common tool that researchers use is a poll. To conduct a poll, a researcher selects a group of subjects, called a **sample**, from a broader pool of citizens, called the **population**. The subjects in the sample respond to polling questions, and researchers then use their answers to make inferences about the broader population. Why not simply poll the entire population? Imagine that a researcher is interested in comparing responses across India and China, the two most populous states in the world, with a combined population nearing three billion people. It would be impossible to poll *all* Indian *and all* Chinese citizens, so researchers must rely on representative samples of the Indian and Chinese populations. A **representative sample** is a sample from a population that accurately represents the characteristics of that population, which researchers achieve through the process of randomization. **Randomization** is when every individual in the population has an equal chance to be chosen as part of the sample. By analyzing the results from a random, representative sample, a researcher aims to make reasonable inferences about what the larger population believes.

As a simple example, imagine you are making a large pot of spaghetti sauce that you plan to serve at a party. Before serving it to others, you will taste-test the sauce. You will use a spoon to take a sample from the pot, then make a reasonable inference about the taste of the entire batch of sauce. In order for this sampling process to work accurately, the small spoon you use for your taste-test must contain all the ingredients and seasonings *at the same proportions* as they exist in the larger pot of sauce. This will give you a representative sample of sauce. A similar dynamic exists in polling (NBC News Learn, 2020); if a researcher wants to gauge what a given public (the population of interest) believes on a set of political issues, then their sample must include all the combinations of demographics and regional influences that exist in the larger body.

Even with a random sample, all polls have a "margin of error." The **margin of error** is a statistical estimation of the accuracy of the results from a sample. That is, the margin of error quantifies uncertainty; it offers a range of how much the results from a poll, based on a sample, may differ from the true values for the whole population. A larger random sample (all else equal) will have a smaller margin of error (it will be more accurate) than a smaller one.

Returning to the spaghetti sauce example, imagine the difference between taste-testing with a large versus a small spoon. If you use a large spoon, you are likely to get more of the ingredients and seasonings than if you use a small spoon. The sample from a large spoon will have a *lower* margin of error than a sample from a small spoon.

When reading poll results, the margin of error appears as a "+/-" classification. If the result of a poll (based on a random, representative sample) shows that 35 percent of respondents are satisfied with their government and the margin of error is "+/- 5 percent," this means that pollsters believe anywhere between 30 percent (35-5) and 40 percent (35+5) *of the population* is satisfied with their government. How does a researcher know if the actual number is 30, 32, 35, 37, or 40 percent? They simply do not know. If a researcher collects a larger sample (all else equal), they will be able to reduce the margin of error and provide a more precise estimate, but uncertainty will always exist when making inferences from a sample to a population. Polling is a tool that *estimates* public opinion.

To create these estimates, researchers design and field surveys in different ways. Some polls are conducted in person; some polls are conducted online; and some polls are conducted over the phone, including through a process called random digit dialing (RDD). RDD polls allow researchers to use computers to contact large numbers of people within a short period of time. By gathering a large sample, researchers can produce more accurate results. Yet RDD polls also have problems. They exhibit bias against individuals who do not own phones (and therefore cannot be included in the sample), and they also exhibit bias because some individuals will be more likely to answer their phones than others (e.g., an older, retired person may be more likely to answer than a younger, working person).

No matter the chosen survey design, in polling, concerns about bias, randomization, and sample size are ubiquitous.

### Additional Concerns in the Comparative Context

Even if a researcher believes their poll has little bias, good randomization, and a sufficiently large sample, there remain well-known issues related to survey question design, and these can be especially difficult to overcome in the comparative context.

The first issue is called "priming." **Priming** influences a respondent's answer to a survey question by pushing a respondent to think about a certain subject matter that they otherwise may not have been thinking about (Lenz, 2019). As an example, imagine that a survey researcher wishes to study attitudes toward far-right political parties. If the researcher asks questions about national identity or immigration concerns *before* they ask about the respondent's feelings toward the far-right, that researcher has primed the respondent through the earlier questions. The respondent may not have been thinking about attitudes toward identity and immigration on their own, and priming in this manner can skew the survey results related to attitudes about particular far-right political parties. In the comparative context, the way respondents assess questions will vary significantly by state; in the prior example, respondents in states with a history of far-right political parties may respond differently to nationalistic priming than states without such a history. Trying to minimize priming effects is therefore especially difficult (yet crucial) in the comparative context due to the complexity of cases involved.

The second issue, which can also skew results, is called "framing" (Nelson and Oxley, 1999). **Framing** influences a respondent's answer to a survey question based on how the question is presented. This may occur if a researcher uses emotionally-charged language in a survey question. Suppose that, in the same study about far-right political parties, a researcher wants to measure the amount of support for a far-right political party within a state. A researcher could word the survey question as follows: "Some people argue that far-right political parties pose an existential threat to democracy. To what extent do you support the far right?" Or, a researcher could alternatively word the survey question in this manner: "Some people argue that far-right political parties give a voice to citizens who have otherwise been left behind by traditional parties. To what extent do you support the far right?" Both of these questions employ clear frames; the first frames far-right political parties as a threat while the second frames far-right political parties as centering the experience of the average person. Just as with priming, the way individuals respond to frames may vary significantly across states, making it especially tough (yet important) to minimize framing effects.

The third issue is social desirability bias. **Social desirability bias** occurs when respondents give answers to questions that they think the broader society (or an interviewer) sees as "right" or answers that they think will make them look "good" in some way. If a state has a history of violent far-right political parties, for example, a respondent may not feel comfortable admitting that they support a far-right political party's anti-immigration stance. Because the respondent worries about external judgment, they will not accurately report their views. In the comparative context, what respondents see as socially desirable can vary considerably across states, and this depends on a complex slew of factors from aspects of a state's history to a state's socioeconomic status to a state's cultural identity. And, if even a relatively small number of people in the sample misreport due to social desirability bias (for whatever underlying reasons), it will skew the survey results (Streb, et al., 2008).

While there are many well-founded concerns about public opinion polls, there are also many excellent researchers trained in techniques to minimize these problems. In the next section, we will examine a series of polls that aim to conduct analysis of comparative public opinion.

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## 5.10: Case Study - Israel and Iran

### Case Study Learning Objectives

This case study looks inside Israel and Iran rather than at their mutual hostility. It compares how each state builds religious identity into its institutions, how each population actually divides along religious lines, and what those divisions do to domestic politics. Using a Most Different Systems Design, it shows how two very different political systems reached the same unusual outcome, in which religion is formally built into the legal and constitutional order.

By the end of this case study, you will be able to:

- Compare two ways religious identity can be embedded in state institutions.
- Distinguish religious identity from national identity where the two overlap.
- Explain why measuring religiosity is methodologically difficult, and more difficult in some states than others.
- Analyze how identity cleavages structure political competition within each society.

### Introduction

Israel and Iran are frequently discussed together in the context of their mutual hostility, which has included direct military exchanges. That is not the subject of this case study. The comparison here is internal: how each state builds religious identity into its institutions, how each population actually divides along religious lines, and what those divisions do to domestic politics.

Framed that way, the two cases share an outcome that is unusual among modern states. In both, religion is not merely influential in politics but formally built into the legal and constitutional order. Yet they arrived at that outcome through entirely different designs. Israel is a parliamentary democracy that defines itself as a Jewish state and delegates significant legal authority to religious institutions. Iran is a republic in which clerical bodies hold constitutional authority over elected ones. Comparing cases that share an outcome but differ in nearly every mechanism is what Chapter 1 described as a Most Different Systems Design.

Both cases also illustrate something the concepts in this chapter make visible: religious identity and national identity can overlap so completely that separating them becomes a political question in its own right.

### Israel

- Full Country Name: State of Israel
- Regime Type: Parliamentary democracy
- Head of State: President (indirectly elected, ceremonial)
- Head of Government: Prime Minister
- Legislature: Unicameral Knesset (120 seats)
- Electoral System: Nationwide proportional representation, 3.25 percent threshold
- Constitution: No single written constitution; a series of Basic Laws
- Established: 1948
- Seat of Government: Jerusalem (designation not universally recognized internationally)
- Population: approximately 10 million

### Iran

- Full Country Name: Islamic Republic of Iran
- Regime Type: Theocratic republic combining elected and unelected institutions
- Head of State: Supreme Leader
- Head of Government: President (directly elected from a vetted slate)
- Legislature: Islamic Consultative Assembly, or Majlis (290 seats)
- Candidate Vetting: Guardian Council

- Constitution: 1979, substantially amended 1989
- Established: 1979 (following revolution)
- Capital: Tehran
- Population: approximately 92 million

## Two Designs for Embedding Religion in the State

### Israel

Israel describes itself as a Jewish and democratic state, and much of its domestic political argument concerns how to hold those two commitments together. Several institutional features give the formulation concrete legal content.

The **Law of Return**, passed in 1950, grants any Jew the right to immigrate and acquire citizenship. As Section 5.5 discussed, citizenship is a legal status, and most states set criteria for acquiring it. Israel's criteria are explicitly tied to descent and religious identity, which makes the boundaries of the national community and the boundaries of a religious community substantially the same.

The **Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People**, passed in 2018, declared national self-determination in Israel to be unique to the Jewish people and designated Hebrew as the sole official language, giving Arabic a "special status." Supporters described it as codifying what had always been implicit. Critics, including many within Israel, argued it subordinated the democratic commitment to the Jewish one, particularly for the roughly one-fifth of citizens who are Arab.

Religion also governs **personal status law**. Israel has no civil marriage. Marriage and divorce are administered by recognized religious authorities, with the Chief Rabbinate handling Jewish marriage and corresponding bodies handling Muslim, Christian, and Druze communities. Israelis who cannot or will not marry through these channels commonly marry abroad, and the state recognizes those marriages. This is a striking arrangement: a democracy that delegates a core civil function to clerical authority.

Finally, Israel's electoral system shapes how religious identity translates into power. Nationwide proportional representation with a low threshold produces many parties and makes coalitions necessary. Religious parties have consequently held disproportionate leverage, serving as what observers call kingmakers, because governments frequently cannot be formed without them.

### Iran

Iran's 1979 constitution institutionalized clerical authority through the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*, guardianship of the jurist. The result is a dual structure in which elected and unelected institutions coexist, with the unelected ones holding final authority.

Iranians directly elect a president and a parliament, and these bodies exercise real administrative and legislative functions. Above them sits the **Supreme Leader**, who serves without a fixed term, commands the armed forces, and appoints the head of the judiciary, the heads of state broadcasting, and half the Guardian Council. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei held the office from 1989 until 2026, when succession became a contested question following his death.

The **Guardian Council**, a twelve-member body of clerics and jurists, vets all candidates for elected office. This is the mechanism that most clearly limits competition. In recent election cycles the Council has disqualified reformist and moderate candidates on a large scale. The 2024 presidential election, called after President Ebrahim Raisi's death in a helicopter crash, was unusual in that a reformist, Masoud Pezeshkian, was permitted to run and won the runoff with about 55 percent. Turnout tells its own story: just under 40 percent in the first round, the lowest for any presidential election since 1979, rising to about 50 percent in the runoff. Parliamentary elections earlier that year drew roughly 41 percent.

Turnout in Iran functions as a form of public opinion data. Because the state has historically treated high participation as evidence of its legitimacy, declining turnout communicates something that vetted elections otherwise suppress.

## Diversity Within

Neither society is religiously uniform, and the internal divisions matter more for daily politics than the official self-descriptions suggest.

Among **Israeli Jews**, the Pew Research Center's 2016 study identified four widely used self-descriptions: *Hiloni* (secular), *Masorti* (traditional), *Dati* (religious), and *Haredi* (ultra-Orthodox). Roughly half identified as Hiloni and just under one in ten as Haredi, with the remainder in between. Pew found these groups differed sharply on questions of religion in public life, sometimes more than Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs differed from one another on other issues. Beyond this, about 21 percent of Israeli citizens are Arab, predominantly Muslim with Christian and Druze minorities.

In **Iran**, Twelver Shia Islam is the official religion, but the population is ethnically varied. Persians constitute roughly three-fifths, alongside substantial Azeri, Kurdish, Arab, Baloch, and Lur populations. Some of these groups are predominantly Sunni, which places them outside the officially privileged religious category as well as outside the dominant ethnic one.

## When National and Religious Identity Overlap

Section 5.6 distinguished **primordialist** from **constructivist** understandings of religious identity. Both cases illustrate why the distinction has political consequences.

In Israel, Jewish identity functions simultaneously as a religious category and a national one. A secular Israeli Jew who never attends synagogue is still Jewish in the sense the Law of Return recognizes. This overlap means that debates which appear religious are often national, and vice versa. It also means that the question of who counts as Jewish, which has generated repeated legal and political disputes, is inseparable from the question of who can become a citizen.

In Iran, national and religious identity have been in tension rather than alignment. Iran possesses a Persian civilizational heritage stretching back well before Islam, and the Pahlavi monarchy actively emphasized that pre-Islamic past as the foundation of national identity. The Islamic Republic inverted the emphasis, foregrounding Shia Islamic identity instead. Neither framing has displaced the other. Iranians can and do draw on both, and which one a person emphasizes often carries political meaning.

This is constructivism in practice: the same population, with the same history available to it, has had national identity defined in substantially different ways within living memory.

## Gender as a Political Cleavage

Section 5.4 addressed gender as a dimension of political identity. It operates differently in each case, but is central to both.

In Iran, compulsory hijab laws have made women's dress a matter of state enforcement since 1979. The death in custody of Mahsa Amini in September 2022, after her detention by morality police, triggered the largest sustained protests the Islamic Republic had faced in years, organized around the slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom." The protests were suppressed, but they demonstrated how a policy grounded in religious identity can generate mobilization along gender lines, and how gender, religion, and opposition to the regime became fused in a single movement.

In Israel, gender questions arise largely through the relationship between religious communities and the state, including disputes over gender-separated public spaces, women's representation in Haredi party lists, and women's standing before religious courts in divorce proceedings.

## A Contemporary Dispute: Haredi Conscription in Israel

One ongoing Israeli conflict shows how religious identity, state institutions, and coalition politics intersect.

Since Israel's founding, yeshiva students have received deferrals from otherwise near-universal military conscription. The arrangement originated when preserving religious scholarship was viewed as a priority for the new state, and it expanded substantially as the Haredi population grew. In June 2024, after the statutory basis for blanket exemptions had lapsed, the Supreme Court ruled unanimously that the government must conscript eligible Haredi men and barred state funding for yeshivas enrolling students who were not lawfully exempt.

Implementation has been minimal. Enlistment figures have fallen far short of the targets the state presented to the court, and the dispute has continued through further rulings and legislative attempts to restore exemptions. Because Haredi parties have been essential to coalition arithmetic, the government has faced a direct conflict between judicial orders and the requirements of remaining in office.

Note how many chapter concepts converge here. A religious identity group, holding a distinct understanding of its obligations, exercises political power through an electoral system that magnifies small parties, against a judicial institution asserting equal application of law. This is identity politics operating entirely through formal institutions.

## Measuring Religiosity: A Methodological Problem

Section 5.9 discussed the difficulties of measuring public opinion. Iran offers a case where those difficulties are acute enough to shape what anyone can claim to know.

Official Iranian figures describe the population as overwhelmingly Shia Muslim. In 2020, researchers with the Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran (GAMAAN) conducted an online survey of tens of thousands of respondents and reported dramatically different results, with only about a third identifying as Shia and substantial shares identifying as non-religious, spiritual, or with other traditions (Maleki and Tamimi Arab 2020).

Which figure is closer to the truth? The honest answer is that we cannot be certain, and the reasons are instructive.

- **Social desirability bias.** As Section 5.9 explained, respondents give answers they believe are expected of them. In a state where religious dissent carries legal risk, a face-to-face survey asking about belief is measuring something other than belief.
- **Sampling.** An online survey with self-selected respondents does not produce the representative sample that valid inference requires. Iranians willing to participate anonymously online may differ systematically from those who are not.
- **Conceptualization.** As Section 1.4 noted, researchers must define concepts before measuring them. Identifying as Shia, believing in specific doctrines, and performing religious practice are three different things, and the four dimensions of religious identity discussed in Section 5.6 can diverge considerably within one person.

Israel presents a comparatively favorable measurement environment. Surveys can be conducted face to face, respondents face no legal consequence for their answers, and the Hiloni, Masorti, Dati, and Haredi categories are terms Israelis already use about themselves. Even so, those categories are self-assigned and contested at the boundaries.

The comparative lesson is that data quality is not uniform across states, and it tends to be worst precisely where governments have the strongest interest in controlling what is known. A researcher comparing religiosity across the two cases is not comparing two equally reliable measurements.

## Comparing the Two Cases

*Religion and state institutions in Israel and Iran*

| Feature                                     | Israel                                                               | Iran                                                        |
|---------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| Regime type                                 | Parliamentary democracy                                              | Theocratic republic                                         |
| How religion enters the state               | Citizenship law, Basic Laws, personal status law, coalition politics | Constitutional clerical authority over elected institutions |
| Highest authority                           | Knesset; no single written constitution                              | Supreme Leader                                              |
| Are candidates vetted on religious grounds? | No                                                                   | Yes, by the Guardian Council                                |
| Religion and national identity              | Largely overlapping                                                  | In tension (Persian and Islamic)                            |
| Principal internal religious cleavage       | Degree of observance among Jewish citizens                           | Regime religiosity versus private belief; Shia and Sunni    |
| Reliability of survey data                  | Comparatively high                                                   | Low; heavily contested                                      |

## Think Comparatively

1. Israel has no civil marriage, delegating the matter to religious authorities. Does this make Israel less democratic, or is it a legitimate accommodation of religious identity within a democracy? What would be lost under each answer?
2. Iran's 2024 presidential election had the lowest first-round turnout since 1979. What can low turnout tell a researcher that

- vett ed election results cannot?
3. In Israel, religious and national identity largely coincide; in Iran, they compete. What difference does this make for how each state defines who belongs?
  4. Official Iranian figures and independent survey data on religiosity differ enormously. As a researcher, how would you decide what to report, and what would you tell readers about your uncertainty?
  5. Haredi parties hold leverage in Israel far exceeding their share of the population. Is this a flaw in proportional representation or a feature of it? Use the material from Section 3.1.
  6. Both states privilege one religious tradition in law. What does each arrangement mean for citizens outside that tradition, and how do the two situations differ?

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## 5.11: Chapter Review Questions

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### Study Questions

Use these questions to review the chapter. Try answering each one in your own words. If a question stops you, that is the section worth rereading.

1. Distinguish political identity, national identity, and citizenship. Can a person hold one without the others? Give an example.
2. Compare primordialist and constructivist understandings of identity. Why does the difference make political compromise harder in some conflicts than others?
3. Name the four dimensions of religious identity and explain what each captures. Why might a person score high on one and low on another?
4. Find a public opinion poll reported in the news this month. Identify its sample size, margin of error, and how the questions were worded. What would you want to know before trusting the result?
5. Distinguish priming, framing, and social desirability bias. Which would most distort a survey asking about a topic that is dangerous to discuss openly?
6. Identify a recent election in which identity, whether national, religious, ethnic, or class, was a central issue. Which concepts from this chapter best explain how it was mobilized?

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*Note: This list merges the reference lists from Chapter 6, "Political Identity: Culture, Race, Ethnicity, and Gender"; Chapter 7, "Political Identity: Nationalism, Religion, and Class"; and Chapter 10, "Comparative Public Opinion", of Introduction to Comparative Government and Politics by Dino Bozonelos et al. (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative), licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0. It also includes the sources cited in Section 5.11, which is original to this edition. Duplicate entries were removed and minor citation errors were corrected.*

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## 6: CONTENTIOUS POLITICS- MOVEMENTS AND VIOLENCE

6.1: What is Collective Action? What are Social Movements?

6.2: Frameworks for Collective Action

6.3: A Framework for Explaining Social Movements

6.4: What is Political Violence?

6.5: State-Sponsored Political Violence

6.6: Non-State Political Violence

6.7: Post-Conflict Strategies

6.8: Case Study - South Africa and Northern Ireland

6.9: Chapter Review Questions

6.10: Bibliography

## 6.1: What is Collective Action? What are Social Movements?

### Chapter Learning Objectives

Political change does not occur only through elections and formal institutions. This chapter examines collective action and social movements, including why people organize, how movements develop, and the conditions that can help explain their success or failure. It also explores political violence by state and non-state actors, along with strategies for addressing conflict after violence has occurred, then applies these concepts to South Africa and Northern Ireland to examine different experiences with conflict and post-conflict political change.

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Explain collective action and social movements and identify the political and social factors that influence their development.
- Analyze forms of state and non-state political violence and compare approaches to conflict and post-conflict political change in South Africa and Northern Ireland.

### Introduction

Public education, elections, and lobbying—all of these are connected to collective action. Collective action pervades social and political life, and it is observable across all societies. **Collective action** is any activity in which coordination by and across individuals has the potential to lead to achievement of a common objective. At its broadest, collective action can lead to the provision of a public good. A society often decides that the common defense is a necessary public good and pools resources toward that goal. Beyond common defense, collective action is key for the provision of a variety of public goods—such as public education, healthcare, childcare, pensions, and infrastructure—in which individuals contribute tax revenues or labor, in a coordinated way, to support common goals. Yet collective action can also lead to the achievement of narrower objectives, such as when a focused interest group lobbies for tax breaks that benefit a smaller segment of society. Collective action can result in benefits for all or for the few. That it encompasses such a broad range of actors, actions, goals, and outcomes explains the enduring interest that political scientists have in this concept.

Societies flourish when there is the robust provision of public goods; public goods are the result of collective action. Once provided, a public good has certain characteristics. As defined in Chapter 8, public goods are defined as goods and services provided by the state that are available for everyone in society. They are non-excludable and non-rival in nature. Individuals cannot be excluded from enjoying them, and one person's enjoyment of that good does not impinge upon others' enjoyment of that good. These characteristics of a public good have the unfortunate effect of impeding the organizing of collective action to provide that good, a problem we will take up later in this chapter. So-called collective action problems are observable throughout societies, but societies also manage to solve them in various ways.



Figure 6.1.1: The lighthouse at Portland Head, Maine. A lighthouse is a classic example of a public good: No ship's captain can be excluded from benefiting from the light and each captain's enjoyment of the light does not impinge upon the ability of others to do likewise. (Source: Portland Head, Maine Lighthouse by quatro.sinko via [flickr creative commons](#) is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#))

Collective action may also lead to narrower objectives than public goods, such as the provision of **common pool resources**. These resources are non-excludable but rivalrous in consumption. A good example of a common pool resource is a river: Everyone can enjoy the river, but when a farmer diverts water from the river to irrigate their fields, that means others cannot enjoy the diverted water. Collective action also pervades the private sector, and we see this when industry advocacy groups procure favorable government policies such as tax breaks for all the firms in an industry or looser regulatory oversight.

Collective action is fundamental to the functioning of modern societies. A prominent example in our society is elections. Voting is a form of collective action, especially in a democracy where individuals' decisions to vote and cast ballots for a certain candidate or policy can determine a society's values and allocation of resources. When the electorate in a country is very large, as in the United States, collective action problems become evident. Each individual in a large electorate has disincentives to vote because they may believe their vote--out of hundreds of millions of eligible voters--will not matter. Hence, they may opt to stay home on election day (or not mail in their ballot) and save their time and energy for other purposes. Such individual-level breakdowns in collective action have the potential to lead to the collapse of any given collective action endeavor (in this case, the representativeness of a republic).

Yet history abounds with examples of collective action prevailing. It has led to social change and even revolution. While the example of voting demonstrates how collective action can work in tandem with established political institutions, collective action can also occur outside of existing political institutions. Because of this, collective action has the potential to destabilize societies and challenge existing structures. One illustration of this is when groups unite to demand the franchise (the right to vote) or when workers' strikes bring industry to a standstill.



Figure 6.1.2: In one example of collective action for political rights, women march for the right to vote in New York City in 1917. They are carrying placards with over one million signatures in support of this right. The right for women to vote in the United States was established nationally in 1920. (Source: [Suffragists](#) by Unknown Author via New York Times photo archive via [Wikimedia Commons](#) is licensed under [Public Domain](#)).

**Social movements** are a subset of collective action. All social movements rely on collective action, but not all collective action is a social movement. Social movements are coordinated and goal-oriented, but they are characterized by political activity outside of established institutions (extra-institutional). Notable examples of social movements in the 20th century United States include the Civil Rights Movement, which sought equal rights for racial minorities and an end to institutional racism at all levels of government, and various labor rights movements, such as those organized by farm-workers and industrial workers earlier in the century. These examples translate easily to a comparative context, as social movements for civil rights and labor rights have spanned the globe. The comparative cases in the final section of this chapter will explore comparative labor movements in the socialist and post-socialist world.

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## 6.2: Frameworks for Collective Action

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### The Logic of Collective Action

#### The Free Rider Problem

One of the most influential frameworks for understanding collective action is given in Mancur Olson's *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965). Olson argues that collective action failures are to be expected given rational and self-interested individuals. Such individuals are disinclined to organize and contribute to the production of a public or collective good because each individual has incentives to stand by and let others do the hard work of achieving the goal, then enjoy the fruits of that collective good once provided. This is known as the **free rider problem**. Through this logic, Olson establishes the challenges to successful collective action.

Consider the example of climate change. Collective action in the form of everyone reducing their carbon footprint would yield an abatement of this problem. Yet a single state or an individual has weak incentives to reduce their carbon footprint for several reasons. A state's leaders might reason, "If we reduce our carbon emissions through a carbon tax, that might dampen economic growth. Our constituents will not like that, and that might hurt our global competitiveness." Or an individual might think, "Let everyone else reduce their consumption. I'll keep buying lots of stuff, driving cars, taking planes, and eating excessive amounts of animal protein. After all, what difference do my actions make? If enough of everyone else changes their lifestyles, I can enjoy a healthier planet without sacrificing any of my comforts!"

The logic here is to free ride on the efforts of others, knowing that the benefits of others' work will apply to everyone regardless of their contributions. This behavior and thinking creates a free rider problem, where individuals are incentivized to refrain from contributing toward the provision of a collective good because they know they can eventually enjoy the benefits of that good if others work toward providing it. This problem raises issues of fairness, but even worse, a collective good may not be produced if enough people adopt a free rider mentality.

#### Cooperation and the Prisoner's Dilemma

Beyond the free rider problem, there are challenges to collective action because it hinges on cooperation. The challenges to cooperation are well-illustrated through a simple and eponymous game, the so-called "Prisoner's Dilemma." This game illustrates the urge to free ride or "defect" in a situation where cooperation by all would yield better outcomes for all. Defection yields better than worst-case, individual-level outcomes, so it ends up being the outcome, albeit a sub-optimal one.

The set-up for this kind of **cooperation game** is simple, and it is a powerful illustration of challenges to cooperative endeavors. Imagine two children, Child Y and Child Z, who took cookies from the cookie jar at home--without asking and while no one was looking--and were then asked about the missing cookies by a parent. There is enough evidence (the missing cookies) to punish the children for their transgression, but not enough proof of a more serious crime (such as repeated taking of cookies from the cookie jar) to extend their punishment. The interrogating parent pressures each child to offer damning evidence of the other's guilt. What should each child do?

As with all games, each player has a set of choices. To keep things simple, the children can either stay silent (cooperate) or betray their partner in the cookie-sneaking business. The combination of possible outcomes to this game are the following: both stay silent, one stays silent while the other betrays, or both betray. In this game set-up, there are potential punishments for each outcome.

The punishments for each combination of choices are the "payoffs" of the game. If both children stay silent, they each receive the lightest of possible punishments: a week without video games. If Child Y stays silent but Child Z talks, then Child Z gets zero punishment while Child Y receives a long punishment of three weeks without video games; the reverse is true if Child Y betrays and Child Z stays silent. In either scenario, one child enjoys the best individual outcome but the other child suffers the worst individual outcome. If both children decide to betray each other, then both are not allowed video games for two weeks.

## Interpreting the Payoffs

This framework illustrates the interdependent nature of the game and the weak incentives for cooperation. Each individual, in considering these payoffs, sees the immediate personal gain to betrayal. The child knows that staying silent would be the best for all, but they still have strong incentives to betray because staying silent means putting themselves at risk for the worst possible punishment. The expected outcome is both children choosing to betray each other, and both suffering worse outcomes than if they had cooperated with one another (by staying silent). This result is sub-optimal for all.

Note that in the game above there is also a cost to pay for cooperating; if both children stay silent, they each lose one week of video games. This is the case for engaging in collective action: If an individual participates in collective action, they must donate some resource (a cost), such as their time.

## Applying the Game to Collective Action

To apply this game to a collective action scenario, imagine playing this game across more than two individuals. If there were one hundred players (or one million!), the problems of coordination and cooperation rapidly multiply. While this game may seem artificial and overly simplistic, we see the dynamics of this cooperation game playing out in the real world.

To return to the example of climate change, we can simply replace the children's choices: staying silent (cooperating) is equivalent to making lifestyle changes to lighten one's carbon footprint, while betrayal (defecting) is equivalent to keeping a heavy carbon footprint. Viewed in this way, individuals' choices and individual-level outcomes make sense as well as the overall outcome for society. Such cooperation challenges are also evident beyond the individual level. For states, staying silent is equivalent to a government adopting major climate change mitigation policies, while betrayal is equivalent to doing nothing to address climate change.

## Limits of the Cooperation Game

While this simple cooperation game can highlight some of the costs and dynamics underlying strategic interactions that inform collective action, it is an imperfect means for capturing all the complexity of the social world. Cooperation may be challenging and costly in some ways, but it happens all the time. People can participate in collective action because they are true believers in a cause (not captured in this game) or because they have meaningful relationships and social ties with others. Child Y and Child Z may have a deep friendship and bonds of trust, something not reflected by the payoff structure given in the game, and this might affect their willingness to cooperate.

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## 6.3: A Framework for Explaining Social Movements

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### Introduction

Social movements often embody big ambitions that cannot be realized without collective action. The 21st century has seen the rise of myriad social movements, from the Sunrise Movement to stop climate change to the #MeToo Movement for women's rights to the Black Lives Matter Movement for racial justice. Conservative social movements have included the New Christian Right and worldwide New Right movement. While the causes and participants vary greatly, scholars seek to identify common factors across social movements and explain the conditions under which a social movement may realize its objectives.

The study of social movements is an interdisciplinary enterprise. Social scientists bring the tools of their disciplines to bear in understanding the complex emergence of collective mobilization. Psychologists bring their focus on the individual level of analysis, while sociologists and political scientists focus on group dynamics and institutional factors that enable or cauterize a social movement. One framework for understanding social movements focuses on three major factors: opportunity, organization, and framing.

### Political Opportunity

French novelist and poet Victor Hugo is credited with the observation, "Nothing is as powerful as an idea whose time has come." When applying this hopeful insight to a social movement advocating for a cause, context matters. A moment of ideational awakening may lead to concrete change only when certain stars align. Scholars have found that a social movement is more likely to emerge and prevail when the broader political context is receptive to the ideas promoted by that social movement. Climate change advocacy gained momentum on the streets of wealthy democracies when there was discourse about this problem by political elites; the U.S. Gay Rights Movement gained the most momentum when elected officials signaled that they were willing to change policies on longstanding laws against sexual minorities.

Political opportunity is thus a structural factor that affects whether a social movement forms and might prevail in its goals. **Structure** here refers to larger social forces at play during a given moment: the institutions and norms, or widely shared beliefs and practices, which constrain individual action. Structure can include whether political institutions and elites are receptive to specific changes, and whether society is accepting of the message and tactics promoted by a social movement. As David Meyer (2004, p. 128) suggests, there must be a "space of toleration [in] a polity" for activists to mobilize. And that society must not repress activists so much that they lack either the vocabulary or means to lodge their complaints. Structure is the context within which a social movement might form and press for change. As illustrated in the figure below, within this structure, activists may choose from a range of tactics regarding how to organize, mobilize, and frame their goals.

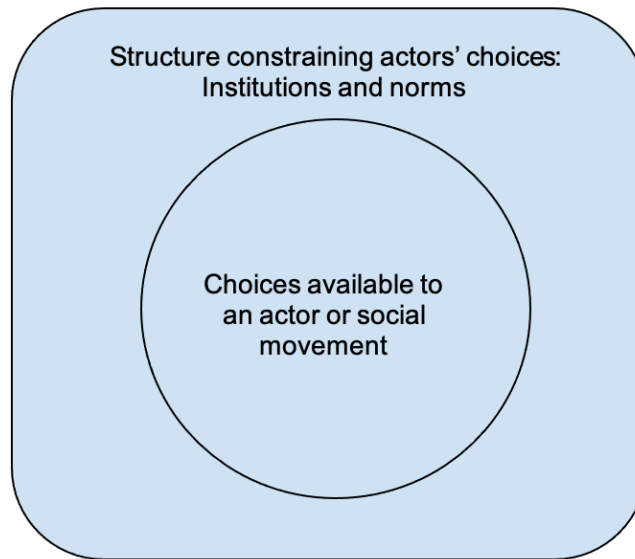


Figure 6.3.1: Structure is the broader context within which individuals or groups may act. (Source: Institutions and Norms by Charlotte Lee is licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#))

In the case of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement that unfolded during the mid-20th century, markers of political opportunity can be identified in hindsight. These include the landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court, which declared unconstitutional the segregation of schools by race. Political leaders also signaled an opening, evident in public addresses such as President John F. Kennedy's 1963 Report to the People on American Civil Rights, in which he declared, "It ought to be possible, in short, for every American to enjoy the privileges of being American without regard to his race or his color." Such events signaled that powerful formal institutions were willing to change, and the time was ripe for a social movement to activate and accelerate that change.

## Organization and Mobilization

While the emergence of a political opening is key, a social movement cannot be sustained without strong organizational structures in place. As Lenin observed, a revolution will succeed when carried out by a vanguard party that offers an "organizational weapon" by which revolutionaries may strike down existing institutions. Successful communist party movements, such as those in Russia, China, and Cuba, relied on disciplined, hierarchical party organizations that reached down to cells of activists at the grassroots level.

More contemporary social movements need not have such extreme organization, but organizational strength is a direct correlate of mobilizational power and momentum. Douglas McAdam has studied several key organizations that facilitated the successes of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. These backbone organizations included Black churches, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Black churches contained multigenerational communities united by bonds of faith and trust; HBCUs offered spaces for student organizing; and the NAACP provided organizational and political resources to advance civil rights through mass protests, coordinated activities, and legal action. All of these organizations had proven capacity for carrying out complex community actions under adverse circumstances; they were also spaces for pooling resources and communicating initiatives to a relatively large audience of proven and potential activists (McAdam, 1999).



Figure 6.3.2: U.S. Senator Kamala Harris, alumna of HBCU Howard University, meets with current students of HBCUs in 2019. HBCUs are an example of institutions that can support the organization of a social movement. (Source: [Kamala Harris speaks with HBCU students in Washington, D.C.](#) by Office of Kamala Harris via [Wikimedia Commons](#) is [Public Domain](#))

Organizational forms may be more decentralized and less hierarchical by design. The "leaderless" Black Lives Matter Movement in the U.S. is an example of this: There is no singular set of charismatic leading figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Huey P. Newton, or Bobby Seale to set the tone and agenda. Local actions are organized and executed without direction from an organizational headquarters. One strength of this evolution in the organization of a social movement is more cellular organization, with new protest repertoires and messages emerging to suit local conditions and audiences. A disadvantage is the potential for the movement to lose momentum without clearly articulated and unifying goals.

New **information and communication technologies (ICT)** have changed the ways a social movement might organize and mobilize. By the dawn of the 21st century, there was optimism regarding the possibilities for uniting activists via social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Diamond and Plattner, 2012). So-called "liberation technologies" were heralded as a means to organize a social movement in defiance of geographical constraints and even repressive governments. However, this initial optimism has been followed by critiques of these new technologies as leading to "armchair activism" by individuals unwilling to invest real resources into a social movement. Social media platforms have also proven unruly spaces for organizing due to the challenges of misinformation, government interference, and weak bonds of trust between participants. The impact of ICT on the emergence and success of a social movement has thus yielded mixed results.



Figure 6.3.3: Organized protests that eventually became a revolution in Egypt tapped into the mobilizational power of social media platforms such as Facebook. January 25, 2011 marked the beginning of this movement to overthrow the government of President Hosni Mubarak.(Source: A man during the 2011 Egyptian protests carrying a card saying "Facebook, #jan25, The Egyptian Social Network". by Essam Sharaf via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0)

## Framing

Political opportunity, organization, and mobilizational capacity are complemented by the framing of an issue. **Framing** refers to the ways in which a social problem is defined by, presented to, and resonates with members of a social movement and society more broadly. Framing is a key strategic move because the chosen frames must be culturally appropriate and meaningful.

The concept of frames explicitly brings a psychological and emotional element into our understanding of social movements: Individuals join because of an affinity for the cause rather than merely out of rational self-interest (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta, 2001). They must actively engage in "sense making" and determine for themselves, as well as fellow activists, their purpose and goals. Framing can incite emotions such as anger over a perceived injustice but also psychological safety in the belief that one is part of a larger community with shared beliefs.

Framing takes place at the inception of a social movement. It can sustain the movement and attract additional adherents from society. Framing is critical when we consider how the modern environmental movement in the U.S. was galvanized by publications such as Rachel Carson's 1962 book *Silent Spring*, which offered an evocative and powerful vision (a lifeless natural landscape) for understanding ecological disaster through the concrete example of overuse of chemical pesticides. This book helped to frame the problem and invoke the shock, anger, and anxieties that are part of the modern environmental justice movement.

## International Influences

Many of the causes embraced by social movements span states, regions, and the globe. Given the extent of globalization since the end of the Cold War in 1991, seemingly faraway events may resonate with global audiences. For example, deforestation in Indonesia spark protests in European cities over unsustainable practices in the supply chains of furniture companies that source wood from Borneo. Environmental activists in Indonesia thus find common cause with counterparts in the Netherlands. Social movements may diffuse across borders, with activists sharing tactics, resources, and providing moral support to one another in their common cause. **Diffusion**, a concept briefly introduced in Chapter 5, is defined as the spread of an idea, movement, tactics, strategies, and other resources across international borders. One prominent example of international diffusion is the spread of liberal democracy around the globe in the decades spanning the 1990s to the 2000s.

International "democracy promotion" efforts are one driver of this worldwide increase in democracy since the 1990s, whereby international resources are directed toward pro-democracy domestic social movements. These have been led by wealthy democracies (such as those of North America, the European Union, and Japan) to strengthen younger democracies worldwide. Democracy promotion can include a wide range of activities such as government-supported grants to pro-democracy activists in

other countries, nonprofit exchanges of information and expertise, and more horizontal exchanges of knowledge and resources between democracy activists worldwide. Pro-democracy movements in countries as varied as Ukraine and Nicaragua receive support from international donors and advisors.

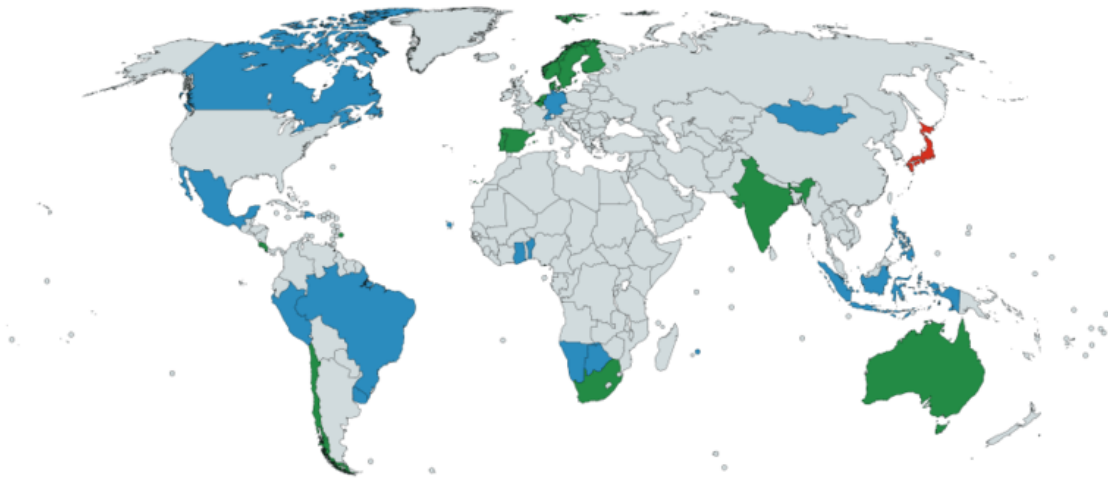


Figure 6.3.4:

World map showing which countries belong to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), an intergovernmental organization that promotes democracy worldwide. Gray marks non-members, green marks founding members, blue marks members, and red marks observing members.

IDEA's members span every inhabited continent but make up only a minority of the world's countries. Founding members shown in green include Australia, India, Chile, Spain, Portugal, and Scandinavian countries such as Sweden and Norway. Members shown in blue include Canada, Mexico, Brazil, South Africa, Mongolia, and several countries in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, plus a few in West Africa. Japan is the clearly visible observing member, shown in red. Several of the largest countries, including the United States, Russia, and China, are gray, as are most of the Middle East and Africa. The pattern shows an organization with broad geographic reach, particularly in Latin America, South and Southeast Asia, and Oceania, rather than one concentrated in a single region.

(Source: [International IDEA members](#) by Goemon via [Wikimedia Commons](#) is licensed under [Public Domain](#))

## The Role of Non-Violence

There are consequences to the tactics chosen by social movement leaders and participants. The range of tactics that a social movement may employ is vast, and social movements are constantly innovating and creating new repertoires based on changing contexts, cultural symbols, and new technologies. New strategies emerge with each social movement. Pro-democracy Hong Kong protesters, as part of their movement to secure democratic rights and autonomy within the People's Republic of China's "One Country, Two Systems" framework, created new forms of protest in 2019. One notable tactic was occupying terminals of Hong Kong International Airport. This served to disrupt the business of a global city reliant on the flow of businesspeople and tourists by air and draw global attention to their plight.

These protestors and others opted for non-violent strategies of protest, a tradition which has deep roots in various faith traditions dating back millennia. More recently, social movement leaders ranging from Mohandas K. Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., have made significant philosophical contributions and practical applications of non-violence to movements for social change.



Figure 6.3.5: In 1930, Gandhi (center) and what became millions of Indian followers engaged in non-violent civil disobedience on the 240-mile-long Salt March against British colonizers. (Source: [Gandhi leading the famous 1930 Salt March, a notable example of satyagraha](#) by Yann via [Wikipedia Commons](#) is licensed under [Public Domain](#))

Empirical research by Stephan and Chenoweth (2008) that compares non-violent and violent resistance campaigns finds that non-violent campaigns are twice as successful as their violent counterparts (53 percent compared with 26 percent). In this study, "campaigns" are "major non-state rebellions ... [which include] a series of repetitive, durable, organized, and observable events directed at a certain target to achieve a goal" (p. 8).

The success of non-violent social movements is attributed to various factors. It is due to higher public perceptions of the legitimacy of non-violent movements as well as greater public sympathy for movements committed to principles of non-violence. Non-violent movements also constrain government responses, as suppressing a non-violent movement with force can drive public support--domestic and international--even more toward the aims of the social movement.

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## 6.4: What is Political Violence?

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### Introduction

Political violence is a difficult term to define. We can start with the concept of **violence**. Kalyvas (2006) states that "[a]t the basic level, violence is the deliberate infliction of harm on people." Although some scholars rightly consider non-physical aspects, such as social or economic oppression, as a form of structural violence, this chapter will focus on physical violence. **Physical violence** is the use of physical force to exert power. While harm can come in many forms, political violence exclusively focuses on physical violence. Examples include the use of weapons by criminal gangs, kidnappings, mass shootings, and torture. While these examples can also sometimes be considered political violence, the act of violence by itself does not make it political.

Rather, **political violence** occurs when political intentions motivate the use of physical harm. For example, if revolutionaries use violence to destroy a social order, or if a state uses violence to preserve a social order, it is political violence. Those seeking to challenge the status quo may use political violence, as may those seeking to defend the status quo.

Yet differentiating when an act of violence is political, rather than simply criminal, is sometimes tricky. Consider this question: Are actions by drug cartels in the Gulf of Mexico--such as targeting law enforcement, kidnapping the loved ones of government officials, or threatening the government--political violence? While these actions target the official capacity of the government, the cartels' primary interests are financial; they want to ensure the continued flow of narcotics from Central and South America to the United States. The cartels generally do not show interest in challenging the socio-political order (e.g., they do not call for regime change), and they tend to use violence only when their interests are threatened. This is therefore an example of criminal, rather than political, violence.

### Types of Political Violence

While the definition of political violence above does not necessarily preclude interstate wars (wars between two or more states), the vast majority of political violence transpires within a state. To classify different forms of political violence, we must consider who is using violence against whom. **Intrastate political violence** is political violence that wholly or largely occurs within a state and, generally speaking, at least one of the parties involved is a "non-state actor." A **non-state actor** is any political actor not associated with a government or state. While not allied with the state, a non-state actor may have significant political influence (Lexico, n.d.). Non-state actors include a wide range of organizations and individuals, such as non-governmental organizations, multinational corporations, and trade unions. Non-state actors include those with peaceful intentions, such as charitable organizations, and those that engage in political violence, such as insurgents, guerrilla groups, and terrorists.

Some non-state actors have a transnational presence. Transnationalism is "events, activities, ideas, trends, processes, and phenomena that appear across national boundaries and cultural regions" (Juergensmeyer, 2013). Thus, **transnational political violence** is political violence that occurs across different states or crosses state borders. If a non-state actor's goal is to overthrow a government or for a region to secede (formally withdraw or separate) from a state, political violence tends *not* to be transnational. This is often the case with insurgents and guerrilla groups. However, if a non-state actor's goal is to achieve political aims through violent cross-border attacks on civilians (as in some forms of terrorism), political violence *is* transnational.

In addition to the distinction between intrastate and transnational political violence, we can separate state-sponsored political violence from non-state political violence. **Internal state-sponsored political violence** occurs when a government uses violence against its own citizens while **external state-sponsored political violence** occurs when a government uses violence against foreign citizens, usually in neighboring states. **Non-state political violence**, political violence perpetrated by non-state actors, typically arises in civil wars, insurgencies, revolutions, and terrorism. We will discuss the distinction between state-sponsored political violence and non-state political violence at length in the following two sections.

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## 6.5: State-Sponsored Political Violence

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### Introduction

As Max Weber (1919) famously defines, a state is a "human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory." A state's institutions, such as the police and the military, have the authority to use violence, when necessary, according to the rules and regulations within a given state. Yet who creates those rules and regulations--namely, who deems which threats are necessary to combat with physical force--is crucially important.

In a democratic regime, threat determinations are often left to the executive branch of government. In a parliamentary system, the prime minister's cabinet may determine threats, often in consultation with the state's intelligence agencies; in a presidential system, the president may determine threats, often in consultation with a national defense council. In either democratic system, decisions related to threats ultimately face scrutiny by opposing politicians (who, in parliamentary systems, may be able to call for a vote of no confidence) and the public (who, in either system, can fail to reelect a leader with whom they disagree). There are built-in accountability mechanisms related to political violence within a democratic regime.

In a non-democratic regime, threat determinations again take place within the executive branch of government, but there are few or no accountability mechanisms. Those who disagree with the decision of an authoritarian leader have little to no recourse. The government will likely ignore or suppress an opposition political party expressing disagreement (if an opposition party exists), and the public is unlikely to remove leadership in sham elections (elections that are neither free nor fair). In comparison to a democratic regime, a non-democratic regime has fewer checks on those with the power to choose when violence is an appropriate response.

While these broad differences related to accountability between regimes types are important to keep in mind, we observe state-sponsored political violence in both democracies and non-democracies (though to different extents). **State-sponsored political violence** is "official government support for policies of violence, repression, and intimidation" (Martin, 2020). Below, we detail two types of state-sponsored political violence: internal, when threats exist within the borders of a state, and external, when threats exist outside the borders of the state.

### Internal State-Sponsored Political Violence

Internal state-sponsored political violence occurs when a government uses violence against a perceived threat coming from its own citizens. Because the threat is internal, the state generally has the autonomy to use violence as it deems necessary given its sovereignty. As a reminder from Chapter 3, sovereignty provides the state with the ability to manage its affairs independently from outside powers and internal resistance. Internal state-sponsored political violence can take many forms.

First, the police may use force to arrest or detain those who act against the state. The police may also use lethal means, particularly if the government believes the threat to be existential (a threat to the existence of the state itself). For example, if protests erupt in support of a group espousing an apocalyptic ideology, an ideology lacking any political goals other than the destruction of the government, a state may choose to employ extreme measures to quell the protests.

Second, political violence may occur without formal sponsorship by the government, such as through vigilante groups, paramilitaries, or other armed groups that wage unofficial campaigns of violence and suppression against perceived internal threats. Even in democratic regimes, these groups may exist and--though they likely will not have the explicit support of the state--they may receive implicit support, such as by unofficially gaining information from the state's security apparatus.

Third, political violence may occur through a policy of **overt repression**, in which a state openly conducts political violence. In a non-democratic regime, violent tactics may even be official state policy. States such as the Soviet Union under Stalin, Germany under the Nazi Party, and Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge all adopted explicit repressive policies of violence toward certain segments of their populations. Stalin exiled hundreds of thousands of people to work camps in Siberia; the Nazis killed millions of people in death camps; and the Khmer Rouge massacred up to two million Cambodians in their attempt to transform the country into an agrarian utopian society.

Fourth, political violence may occur through a policy of **covert repression**, in which a state uses its secret police or domestic

intelligence agencies to repress its citizens in a hidden manner. With covert repression, the violence aims to quell opposition and stifle dissent through secretive means, with the broader society unaware that the violence is occurring (or unaware of the scale of the violence). As one example, intelligence agencies in non-democratic regimes in the Middle East and North Africa, called the *mukhabarat*, are often integrated into a state's military structure. By surveilling the population, they can alert the military or law enforcement of any potential threats to the authoritarian regime's rule. Syria's Mukhabarat, for instance, played an instrumental role in the mass detainment, torture, and death of individuals deemed threats during the decades-long rule of the Assad family (1971-2024). Covert repression can also include non-violent means. The former communist country of East Germany (officially the German Democratic Republic) employed the *Stasi*, or the State Security Service, to create a network of informants to instill fear among East German citizens opposed to the regime.

## External State-Sponsored Political Violence

External state-sponsored political violence occurs when a government uses violence against foreign citizens, usually in neighboring states. Because the threat is external, the state has less autonomy to use violence than when the threat is internal; the lack of a legitimate claim to sovereignty constrains states' actions.

One example of this type of violence is "state-sponsored terrorism." **State-sponsored terrorism** is government support for terrorist actions in other states. **Terrorism** is a violent act that generally targets non-combatants for political purposes. This tactic aims to spread fear among the general population, and the goal is that this widespread fear will pressure government leaders to make changes that are favorable to the terrorists.

Martin (2007) differentiates between two models of state-sponsored terrorism: the patronage model and the assistance model. The **patronage model** occurs when a state actively participates and encourages terrorist actions in other states. An example of this model is Iranian support for Hezbollah in Lebanon, which is both a political party and a militant organization. Founded during the devastating Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), the organization remains active. Politically, Hezbollah directly translates as "Party of God" and represents Shi'a Muslim interests in Lebanon's Parliament. Militarily, Hezbollah maintains significant military capacity and uses its weapons against what it perceives as threats, including against the State of Israel. A number of states designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organization and accuse Iran of supporting it with weaponry, training, and funding (Robinson, 2021).

The **assistance model** occurs when a state tacitly supports and encourages terrorist actions in other states. An example of this model is Pakistan's tacit support for Lashkar-e-Taiba. Lashkar-e-Taiba roughly translates as "army of the righteous." It is a Pakistani-based militant and terrorist organization that is most famous for a 2008 terrorist attack in Mumbai, India during which operatives targeted the financial district, a famous hotel landmark, and a Jewish cultural center. Since the 2008 attack, Pakistan banned Lashkar-e-Taiba and prosecuted former members. However, the government tacitly supported the organization in the 1990s and it continues to operate within Pakistan through a number of offshoot groups (Macander, 2021).

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## 6.6: Non-State Political Violence

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### Introduction

As described earlier in the chapter, non-state actors are any political actors not associated with a government or state. This grouping includes actors as varied as transnational corporations, non-governmental organizations (e.g., Greenpeace), and international drug trafficking rings. While most non-state actors are non-violent, there are some who engage in political violence, such as guerrillas, insurgents, and terrorists. Rather than focus on the type of actor (who can engage in various types of violent activities), we generally describe non-state political violence by the type of action. In this section, we will describe three types of action that non-state actors may participate in: civil wars, terrorism, and revolution.

### Civil Wars

In the simplest terms, a civil war is an armed conflict within a state between two or more groups, and one of the combatants is the government. Because the definition of political violence requires that political intentions motivate the use of physical harm, political scientists further narrow this definition: A **civil war** is an armed conflict within the territory of an internationally-recognized state (with a population of at least 500,000) between two or more groups in which one of the combatants is the government, and in which the rebel group(s) is (are) politically- and militarily-organized with stated political objectives (Sambanis, 2004). By narrowing the definition in this manner, civil war excludes small-scale instances of violence, such as one-off armed engagements between street gangs and police units. A civil war requires sustained, multi-sided, and destructive violence (researchers typically use 1,000 deaths as a minimum threshold of destruction).

Given the power imbalance in civil wars, typically with a stronger state fighting against a weaker rebel group, the weaker side often relies on creative and innovative tactics to challenge the government, such as through rebellion, insurgency, or guerrilla warfare tactics. A **rebellion** is an act that violently challenges the government to bring attention to a status quo with which the challengers are dissatisfied. An **insurgency** is an act of uprising or revolt against a government and/or a state. Insurgents often claim that they represent the will of the people against a government that no longer represents them. **Guerrilla warfare** occurs when small, lightly-armed groups engage in unconventional, small-scale, fast-moving, and irregular attacks against the state. Unlike those engaged in insurgency tactics, guerrillas usually do not engage in mass mobilization. Guerrillas tend to represent the interests of certain groups rather than the entire population. The terms rebellion, insurgency, and guerrilla warfare often overlap.

No matter the rebel group or tactics used, there are common--yet competing--explanations for why civil wars occur. The first explanation focuses on grievances, arguing that political violence along communal lines is jointly a product of deep-seated grievances about the status of the group and the situationally-motivated political interests that political actors desire to pursue (Gurr, 1993). Grievances often revolve around economic, social, and political rights. A grievance-driven civil war is more likely when a group loses a level of political autonomy that it previously enjoyed. This grievance--resentment about the restriction on a group's political rights--can help leaders of the disadvantaged group by giving a legitimizing basis to their cause and easing recruitment efforts for rebellion.

Yet many scholars challenge the grievance explanation for civil war. The second explanation instead focuses on opportunity. Collier and Hoeffler (2004, p. 564) argue that "the incidents of rebellion are not explained by motive, but by the atypical circumstances that generate profitable opportunity." Because rebellion is an industry that generates profit from exercising control over resources, whether it will be an attractive option for opportunistic actors will depend on factors such as the cost of the rebellion, the availability of financing for the rebellion, the relative military advantage of the rebel group, and the pattern of demographic dispersion. If joining the rebel movement appears to be profitable for individuals, this belief will incentivize participation, which will determine whether the rebellion is viable.

The third explanation for civil war is environmental and situational. Rather than emphasizing the necessity of strong, widespread support based on grievances, this explanation suggests that the viability of insurgency increases in states with mountainous terrain, with contiguous cross-border sanctuaries, and with an easily recruited population (Fearon and Laitin, 2003). These conditions favor insurgents given the asymmetric distribution of power between the rebels and government forces.

## Terrorism

Many non-scientific analyses of terrorist attacks--violent acts that target non-combatants for political purposes--cite religion, ethnicity, race, and extreme political ideology as the primary motivations for extremist groups to resort to violence. However, mere membership in a particular religious or ethnic group is not cause to commit a terrorist attack. When and why do political extremist groups engage in terrorism?

There are two dominant schools of theoretical explanation: psychological and rational choice. The psychological explanation of terrorism relies on the idea that the violence itself is the desired outcome as opposed to being the means to the end. Post (1990) claims that "individuals become terrorists in order to join terrorist groups and commit acts of terrorism." While Post recognizes that this is a rather extreme claim, the psychological explanation posits that the core ideology of a terrorist group rationalizes an act of violence; by joining a terrorist group, participants are psychologically-compelled to commit acts of violence.

Conversely, scholars like Crenshaw (1990) rely on the rational choice explanation of terrorism. In this explanation, the use of terrorism is the result of a willful strategy based on a careful political calculation. Terrorism is an expression of political strategy in which the act of violence is one among many alternative choices for an extremist group. When the expected benefit of a terrorist act outweighs the cost of such behavior, then such an act becomes the most strategically sound option.

The evidence is mixed regarding the effectiveness of terrorism. Terrorist action can lead to a specific change in government policy, but there have been few notable overall shifts in foreign policy. For example, al-Qaeda bombed several train stations in Madrid in 2004 as a reaction to the Spanish government's involvement in the United States-led invasion of Iraq. The Madrid attacks took place right before national elections, and they influenced how Spanish citizens voted. Once the new government came in, they withdrew Spanish forces from coalition fighting in Iraq. However, the attacks in Madrid did not change the overall course of the Iraq War; other states refused to change course.

Terrorist action can also lead to changes in government policy that the extremist group did not intend. For example, the attackers who perpetrated the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States did not intentionally desire to change airport policies. However, the attacks had a dramatic impact, forcing all air travelers to endure more intrusive safety protocols and removing privileges that formerly existed (e.g., the ability to wait at a gate to welcome a loved one).

Terrorist action can also fail to achieve its stated goals. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), for instance, calls for the creation of a caliphate, a state run by Islamic political authorities. Yet despite the best efforts of ISIS, there is no such caliphate. Syrian, Russian, Kurdish, and American forces largely defeated ISIS in 2019. Even though ISIS committed atrocious violence and killed many non-combatants, the group ultimately failed to achieve its primary political goal.

## Revolution

Though the term "revolution" appears frequently in the media and in protest slogans (e.g., "Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times"), political scientists define revolution in a very specific way: **Revolution** is a public seizure of the state in order to overturn the existing government and regime (Skocpol, 1979).

This definition has three important pieces. First, there must be public participation in the movement. This characteristic differentiates a revolution from other types of political violence, such as a coup d'état (recall from Chapter 3 that a coup d'état is an attempt to abruptly, unlawfully, and sometimes violently seize power from an existing government, and it is often conducted by political elites). Second, a revolution's main purpose is the public seizure of the state. Other types of political violence do not require the seizure of the state. For example, some politically violent actors can achieve their goals with concessions from the state, such as an expansion of voting rights or meaningful protections of civil liberties and civil rights. A revolution, in contrast, requires control over the state apparatus. Third, once revolutionaries capture a state, there must be a political regime transition. Without regime change, the episode of political violence will fall in another category, such as civil war.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 is an example that meets the definition above. It marked the end of centuries of imperial Russian rule, with the assassination of the Romanov family in 1918. The ensuing civil war saw the communists, or Bolsheviks, fight under Vladimir Lenin. Their Red Army fought against the White Army, a loose association of loyalists, capitalists, and other elements. The success of the communists in 1923 led to a dramatic reordering of Russian society, with the introduction of new social norms and the collective industrialization (over decades) of a largely agrarian society.

In some cases, revolutions may occur without violence. **Non-violence movements** are movements that engage in non-violent practices (e.g., protests, boycotts, sit-ins, civil disobedience) to accomplish political goals. To meet the definition of revolution, a

non-violent movement must still achieve all three elements: public participation, public seizure of the state, and regime transition. Unlike violent revolutions, non-violent revolutions tend to require military acquiescence to achieve their goals. The movement's leaders must convince the state's military (or some portion thereof) that the state would be better off under a new regime so that, when the time comes, the military will refuse to intervene on behalf of the existing regime. When that happens, the military authority will work with the new regime to maintain peace and security.

The fall of select communist regimes in 1989 illustrates the concept of non-violent revolution. In the aftermath of World War II, the Soviet Union installed loyal regimes in Eastern European states. As part of the Warsaw Pact, states such as Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, and Poland were satellite states, dependent on the Soviet Union for their legitimacy and survival. When popular uprisings occurred--such as in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968--Soviet forces rolled in, quelling any hopes of democratic regime change. However, when popular uprisings occurred again in these states in 1989, Soviet forces withdrew, allowing the puppet communist regimes to collapse and embark on economic and political transition.

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## 6.7: Post-Conflict Strategies

### Introduction

How does political violence end? How often does political violence reemerge? Do some conflict-ending methods lead to higher chances of lasting peace? Scholars study these questions, often in the context of civil wars, and offer various arguments. As one example, civil wars that end with a decisive victory for one side generally have a lower chance of conflict reemerging (Wagner, 1993; Licklider, 1995; Toft, 2009). If one side wins a decisive victory, this implies that the losing side no longer has the capacity to inflict substantial harm and the victor has the capacity to repress future mobilization. This lowers the probability that war will break out again.

As an example, we can consider the defeat of the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was a Tamil militant organization based in northeastern Sri Lanka. Its aim was to secure an independent state of Tamil Eelam, and it carried out its first major attack on July 23, 1983, killing 13 soldiers. In response, an anti-Tamil pogrom called "Black July" occurred, leading to a 26 year civil war between the Tamil militants and the Sri Lankan government. In July 2006, the government launched a number of major military offensives against the LTTE, driving the LTTE out of the eastern province of the island. In 2007, the government shifted its offensive to the north, taking control of the area previously controlled by the LTTE. In May 2009, the LTTE admitted defeat and ultimately dropped its demands for a separate state in favor of a federal solution. While some small-scale violence has occurred in Sri Lanka since 2009, large-scale violence in the form of civil war has not again broken out.

### Negotiated Settlements

While a decisive victory for one side can promote peace, another way that civil war can end is through a "negotiated settlement." A **negotiated settlement** is an agreement between combatants to end political violence. Hartzell (1999) argues that the key to an enduring peace agreement is the institutionalization of power-sharing mechanisms. This is because a negotiated settlement often involves the re-centralization of power in certain areas, such as a government reasserting its authority in policing or education. When rebels, insurgents, guerrillas, or terrorists disarm, they worry not only about their own safety, but also about the broader needs of those on whose behalf they were fighting. Power-sharing is therefore necessary to include former rebels in the decision-making process, to ensure proper political representation, and to protect economic interests. If a negotiated settlement aims to foster lasting peace, there must be safeguards in place to protect the interests of all sides.

Walter (1999, 2002), however, argues that power-sharing through a negotiated settlement still may not be enough for lasting peace. While two or more sides may formally agree to do something in a negotiated settlement to alleviate short-term security concerns, this does not mean that all actors will follow through on their promises, particularly when long-term problems in the post-war environment emerge. Because a negotiated settlement leaves at least some organizational capacity of all sides intact (Wagner, 1993), there must be a way to enforce these negotiated settlements. The simplest way to do this is through a "third-party guarantor." A **third-party guarantor** is an external force that can enforce the provisions of a negotiated settlement.

### Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding

Peacekeeping forces are an example of a third-party guarantor. **Peacekeeping** refers "to the deployment of national or, more commonly, multinational forces for the purpose of helping to control and resolve an actual or potential armed conflict between or within states" (Encyclopedia Princetoniensis, n.d.). Peacekeeping forces can contribute to the durability of peace established through negotiated settlements by monitoring the behavior of former belligerents, enforcing the settlement's provisions, and acting as an intermediary to reduce miscommunications that could lead to the resumption of violence.

Peacekeeping has been relatively successful since it began in the 1940s, with one estimate suggesting that peacekeeping forces reduced the risk of war recurring by over one-half. It does not seem to make a difference whether the peacekeeping forces are invited or imposed (Fortna, 2008). While traditional peacekeepers are those invited by a conflict's belligerents, peace enforcement missions occur without invitation and/or consent. The latter happens when an outside organization, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), imposes a security force in an area, as in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo following the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s. Though peacekeeping has a relatively successful history in preventing conflict resumption, international peacekeeping forces also face staunch criticism and questionable legitimacy for numerous reasons. As

one example, peacekeeping forces often have limited mandates and resources and are therefore unable to adequately protect civilians. As another, civilians have repeatedly accused peacekeepers of committing human rights abuses, such as sexual abuse, and investigating and doling out punishments for these crimes is difficult.

In addition to peacekeeping, peacebuilding is an important aspect of post-conflict reconstruction. **Peacebuilding** is the implementation of structures to promote sustainable peace. Peacebuilding efforts are relatively successful because they aim to restructure the political, economic, and social institutions in a state. This often includes building stronger institutions, encouraging mass political participation, and promoting respect for societal diversity. Doyle and Sambanis (2000) suggest that a successful peacebuilding strategy must address local sources of hostility, understand the local capacity for change, and determine the level of commitment from the international community. While peacebuilding does not require the use of peacekeepers or a peace enforcement mission, the likelihood of success increases with a combination of peacebuilding and peacekeeping measures.

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## 6.8: Case Study - South Africa and Northern Ireland

### Case Study Learning Objectives

South Africa and Northern Ireland differ in nearly every respect a comparativist might measure, from size and principal cleavage to the structure of the conflict itself. Yet both began with nonviolent civil rights movements, met state repression, endured roughly three decades of political violence, and ended through negotiated settlements in the 1990s. This case study uses a Most Different Systems Design to examine what the two societies share and how each answered the question of what to do about the past.

By the end of this case study, you will be able to:

- Trace how nonviolent movements in two societies gave way to sustained political violence.
- Apply the opportunity, organization, and framing model to two social movements.
- Compare negotiated settlements and the post-conflict mechanisms each produced.
- Evaluate what it means for a peace settlement to succeed.

### Introduction

South Africa and Northern Ireland differ in nearly every respect a comparativist might measure. One is a large, diverse country at the southern end of Africa; the other a small region of six counties in the United Kingdom. One conflict was organized around race under a formal legal system of segregation; the other around national identity and religious community. One involved a majority excluded by a minority; the other a minority within a territory that was itself a minority on its island.

Yet the trajectories rhyme. Both began with nonviolent civil rights movements that borrowed heavily from the same source. Both met state repression that helped drive the emergence of armed campaigns. Both saw roughly three decades of sustained political violence. Both ended through negotiated settlements reached in the 1990s. And both then had to answer the question this chapter's final section poses: what do you do about the past?

Because the cases share an outcome while differing on so many underlying conditions, this is a Most Different Systems Design. If two societies this dissimilar arrived at comparable endpoints, the factors they share are worth examining closely.

### South Africa

- Location: Southern Africa
- Principal Cleavage: Race, under a codified system of legal segregation
- System Contested: Apartheid, formalized from 1948
- Principal Movement Organizations: African National Congress (ANC), Pan Africanist Congress, United Democratic Front
- Armed Wing: Umkhonto we Sizwe, founded 1961
- Period of Sustained Violence: Roughly 1960–1994
- Settlement: Negotiations from 1990; interim constitution 1993; non-racial elections April 1994
- Post-Conflict Mechanism: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1996–1998
- Population: approximately 63 million

### Northern Ireland

- Location: Northwestern Europe, part of the United Kingdom
- Principal Cleavage: National identity, closely tracking religious community
- System Contested: Constitutional status of Northern Ireland; discrimination in housing, employment, and the local franchise
- Principal Movement Organization: Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, founded 1967
- Armed Groups: Provisional Irish Republican Army; loyalist paramilitaries including the UVF and UDA
- Period of Sustained Violence: Roughly 1968–1998, known as the Troubles

- Deaths: approximately 3,500
- Settlement: Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, April 1998
- Post-Conflict Mechanism: Consociational power-sharing, decommissioning, police reform, prisoner releases
- Population: approximately 1.9 million

## Movements Before Violence

Both conflicts began with movements that were explicitly nonviolent and explicitly framed in the language of civil rights.

In South Africa, the ANC was founded in 1912 and spent decades pursuing petitions, delegations, and legal challenges. Its 1952 Defiance Campaign involved deliberate, disciplined violation of apartheid laws in the tradition of civil disobedience. The 1955 Freedom Charter set out a vision of a non-racial state.

In Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association was founded in 1967 and modeled itself openly on the American civil rights movement, adopting its marches, its songs, and its rhetoric of equal citizenship. Its demands were specific and reformist: an end to discrimination in public housing allocation, one person one vote in local elections, and an end to gerrymandered electoral boundaries.

Section 6.3 identified **framing** as a key factor in social movement success, meaning how a movement presents its grievance so that it resonates. Both movements chose a frame of equal rights within an existing legal order rather than revolution against it. That framing had strategic value, since it was difficult for governments to answer on its own terms, and it travelled well internationally.

Section 6.3 also emphasized **organization**. In South Africa, movement infrastructure ran through churches, trade unions, and student networks, and later through the United Democratic Front, founded in 1983, which coordinated hundreds of affiliated organizations under conditions of severe repression. In Northern Ireland, organization was thinner and more localized, which may help explain why the civil rights movement was more easily displaced by armed groups.

## From Movement to Violence

In both cases, specific episodes of state violence against nonviolent protest marked turning points.

At **Sharpeville** in March 1960, South African police fired on a crowd protesting the pass laws, killing 69 people. The government banned the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress shortly afterward, closing off legal avenues for opposition. In 1961 the ANC formed Umkhonto we Sizwe and began a sabotage campaign, a decision its leadership defended as a response to the foreclosure of peaceful options. Nelson Mandela was convicted at the Rivonia Trial in 1964 and imprisoned for 27 years.

In Northern Ireland, civil rights marches were attacked in 1968 and 1969, British troops were deployed in August 1969, and internment without trial was introduced in 1971. On **Bloody Sunday** in January 1972, British paratroopers killed thirteen people at a civil rights march in Derry, with a fourteenth dying later. Recruitment to the Provisional IRA rose sharply afterward. Loyalist paramilitary groups formed in parallel, and violence became multi-sided.

This pattern connects to Section 6.5 on state-sponsored political violence. In both cases the state used force against its own citizens, and in both cases that force was followed by escalation rather than deterrence. South Africa's repression eventually extended to detention without trial, torture, and covert units that carried out killings, the kind of apparatus described in Section 6.5.

Section 6.6 offered competing explanations for why non-state political violence emerges. The **grievance** explanation fits both cases well: groups with concrete, documented exclusion from political rights took up arms after peaceful redress failed. The **opportunity** explanation applies less neatly, since neither conflict was primarily driven by profitable control over resources. Students should notice that explanations developed to account for civil wars in one context do not always transfer.

## Why Settlements Became Possible

Section 6.3 described **political opportunity** as the structural conditions that make movement success possible. In both cases, the opening came from a combination of stalemate and international change.

By the late 1980s, South Africa faced international sanctions, divestment campaigns, and an economy under strain, while the government had failed to suppress internal mobilization despite repeated states of emergency. The end of the Cold War removed a rationale the apartheid government had used to present itself as a bulwark against communism, and simultaneously reduced Soviet support for the ANC. Both sides had reasons to negotiate. Mandela was released in February 1990, the ANC was unbanned, and multi-party talks began.

In Northern Ireland, three decades of violence had produced what participants themselves described as a military stalemate. Neither the IRA nor the British state could achieve its aims by force. The British and Irish governments moved into alignment, and the United States supplied sustained diplomatic engagement, including the chairmanship of the talks by an American senator. The IRA declared a ceasefire in 1994.

A crucial detail for students: violence did not stop when negotiations began. South Africa's transition years between 1990 and 1994 were among the deadliest of the entire period. Negotiation and violence ran concurrently in both cases.

## Two Settlements, Two Designs

Section 6.7 discussed **negotiated settlements** and the argument that lasting peace requires institutionalized power-sharing (Hartzell 1999). Both cases confirm that power-sharing was necessary. They differ sharply in what form it took.

### South Africa: Transitional Power-Sharing

South Africa's settlement produced an interim constitution in 1993, the first non-racial election in April 1994, and a government of national unity that included the outgoing National Party for a transitional period. The final constitution, adopted in 1996, established majority rule with an extensive bill of rights and a strong constitutional court. Power-sharing was a bridge, not a permanent structure.

### Northern Ireland: Permanent Power-Sharing

The Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement of 1998, approved by referendums on both sides of the Irish border, built power-sharing into the institutions permanently. Political scientists call this arrangement **consociationalism**, a design intended for deeply divided societies. Its features include a First Minister and deputy First Minister who hold formally equal power and who cannot serve without one another, ministries allocated to parties in proportion to their seats, members of the Assembly designating themselves as unionist, nationalist, or other, and certain decisions requiring cross-community support rather than a simple majority.

The Agreement also included a **third-party guarantor** function of the kind Section 6.7 described. An independent commission oversaw the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons, completed by the IRA in 2005. Policing was restructured, with the Royal Ulster Constabulary replaced by the Police Service of Northern Ireland following an independent review. Paramilitary prisoners were released on license.

## Dealing with the Past

Here the two cases diverge most fundamentally.

South Africa created the **Truth and Reconciliation Commission**, which operated from 1996 to 1998 under the chairmanship of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Its central mechanism was conditional amnesty: individuals who made full disclosure of politically motivated crimes could apply for immunity from prosecution. The commission heard testimony from victims in public hearings, much of it broadcast, and produced an extensive documentary record. It received over 7,000 amnesty applications and granted a minority of them.

The TRC is commonly described as an exercise in **restorative** rather than **retributive** justice, prioritizing the establishment of a shared factual record over punishment. It has been criticized on several grounds: that few of those denied amnesty were subsequently prosecuted, that recommended reparations to victims were implemented slowly and partially, and that individual accountability was traded away for a truth that not everyone accepted.

Northern Ireland established no equivalent. The Agreement released prisoners without requiring disclosure, and no comprehensive truth process was created. Investigations, inquests, and inquiries have proceeded case by case over subsequent

decades, and legislation addressing conflict-era cases has been repeatedly contested. Roughly a quarter century after the Agreement, dealing with the past remains politically unresolved.

Neither approach is straightforwardly superior. South Africa purchased a documentary record at the cost of prosecutions. Northern Ireland preserved the possibility of prosecutions at the cost of a shared account of what happened. This is the trade-off between truth, justice, and peace that post-conflict societies rarely escape.

## Did the Settlements Work?

Both settlements ended sustained political violence, and by that measure both succeeded. Beyond that, the records diverge in instructive ways.

**Northern Ireland's institutions have repeatedly failed while the peace has held.** The power-sharing Executive has collapsed or been suspended several times, including from 2002 to 2007, from 2017 to 2020, and from 2022 to 2024, when it was restored with Michelle O'Neill becoming the first Irish nationalist to hold the office of First Minister. For long stretches Northern Ireland has been administered by civil servants without ministers. The consociational design that made agreement possible by giving each community a veto also gives each community the ability to halt governance. Violence has not returned at anything approaching previous levels, which is a substantial achievement, but the institutions have not delivered stable government.

**South Africa's institutions have proved durable while the underlying grievance has not been resolved.** The country has held regular competitive elections since 1994 and its constitutional court has acted independently. The 2024 election offered a significant test: the ANC lost its parliamentary majority for the first time in thirty years, taking about 40 percent of the vote, and responded by forming a government of national unity with the Democratic Alliance and other parties rather than contesting the result. Power shifted, institutions held. At the same time, South Africa remains among the most economically unequal countries in the world, and that inequality still tracks the racial lines apartheid drew. The political settlement succeeded on its own terms while leaving much of the economic structure intact.

The comparative lesson is that "did the peace hold?" is too blunt a question. A settlement can end violence and fail at governance. It can produce durable institutions and leave the original grievance substantially unaddressed. Evaluating post-conflict outcomes requires specifying which outcome is being evaluated.

## Comparing the Two Cases

*Movements, violence, and settlement in South Africa and Northern Ireland*

| Feature                                 | South Africa                              | Northern Ireland                                                                  |
|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Principal cleavage                      | Race                                      | National identity and community                                                   |
| Demographic position of excluded group  | Majority                                  | Minority within the territory                                                     |
| Initial movement strategy               | Nonviolent civil disobedience             | Nonviolent civil rights marches                                                   |
| Triggering episodes of state violence   | Sharpeville, 1960; Soweto, 1976           | Bloody Sunday, 1972; internment, 1971                                             |
| Form of power-sharing                   | Transitional                              | Permanent and consociational                                                      |
| Third-party involvement                 | Limited                                   | Substantial (US, Irish government, independent commissions)                       |
| Truth mechanism                         | Truth and Reconciliation Commission       | None comprehensive                                                                |
| Post-settlement institutional stability | High                                      | Repeatedly interrupted                                                            |
| Underlying grievance addressed?         | Politically yes; economically largely not | Civil rights grievances substantially addressed; constitutional question deferred |

## Think Comparatively

1. Both movements began nonviolently and both turned to armed struggle after state repression. Does this support or complicate the finding in Section 6.3 that nonviolent campaigns succeed at roughly twice the rate of violent ones?
2. South Africa's power-sharing was temporary; Northern Ireland's is permanent. What does each design assume about whether identity divisions fade over time?
3. Northern Ireland's Executive has collapsed repeatedly while violence has not returned. Is the Good Friday Agreement therefore a success, a failure, or both? Defend your criteria.
4. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission traded prosecutions for disclosure. Was that a justified trade? What would Northern Ireland have gained or lost from a comparable process?
5. In 2024 the ANC lost its majority and formed a coalition rather than contesting the result. What does this tell you about South African democratic consolidation, using the tests from Section 4.2?
6. South Africa's political settlement left extreme economic inequality largely intact. Can a peace settlement be considered successful if the material conditions that generated the grievance persist?

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## 6.9: Chapter Review Questions

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### Study Questions

Use these questions to review the chapter. Try answering each one in your own words. If a question stops you, that is the section worth rereading.

1. How does a social movement differ from collective action more generally?
2. What is the free rider problem, and why do the characteristics of public goods make it worse?
3. Identify a protest movement active somewhere in the world right now. Apply the three factors of political opportunity, organization, and framing. Which is strongest, and which is weakest?
4. How much more successful are nonviolent campaigns than violent ones, and what explains the difference?
5. What three elements must be present for an event to count as a revolution? Find a recent case where a government fell to popular protest and assess whether all three were present.
6. Why do negotiated settlements generally require power-sharing and third-party guarantors? Identify a conflict currently in negotiation and consider what each side would need to see before disarming.

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*Note: This list merges the reference lists from Chapter 9, “Collective Action and Social Movements”, and Chapter 11, “Political*

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## 7: POLITICAL ECONOMY AND GLOBAL CHALLENGES

- 7.1: What is Political Economy?
- 7.2: Political Economic Systems
- 7.3: Contemporary Drivers of Global Inequality
- 7.4: Understanding the Tragedy of the Commons
- 7.5: Cybersecurity and Artificial Intelligence
- 7.6: Globalization
- 7.7: Case Study - Germany and China
- 7.8: Chapter Review Questions
- 7.9: Bibliography

## 7.1: What is Political Economy?

### Chapter Learning Objectives

Political systems are closely connected to economic systems and to the global challenges governments are expected to address. This chapter examines political economy, compares major political-economic systems, and explores how inequality and globalization shape relationships within and across countries. It also considers contemporary challenges involving shared resources, environmental change, cybersecurity, and artificial intelligence, then applies these ideas to Germany and China to compare how different political and economic systems respond to domestic and global pressures.

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Compare political-economic systems and explain how political and economic institutions influence inequality, development, and globalization.
- Analyze how governments respond to contemporary global challenges, including environmental pressures, cybersecurity, and artificial intelligence, using Germany and China as comparative cases.

### Introduction

Political economy, as defined in Chapter 1, is a subfield of political science that considers various economic theories (e.g., capitalism, socialism, communism, fascism), practices, and outcomes either within a country, or among and between countries in the global system. In its simplest form, political economy is the study of the relationship between the market and powerful actors like a state's government. The **market** is the exchange of goods and services within a given territory. This almost always involves the forces of supply and demand and the allocation of resources through private economic decision-making. The interaction between the state and the market through political, economic, and societal institutions can frame deliverable outcomes, such as public goods. This can occur not only within a country, but also between them. **Public goods** are goods and services provided by the state that are available for everyone in society. They are non-excludable and non-rival in nature. Examples include public roads, public hospitals, and libraries. Clearly, political economy involves the mixing of political and economic policy goals. Finally, political economy also studies how individuals interact with the market and society (Britannica, n.d.)

Political economy overlaps with other fields and subfields in the social sciences, most notably economics. Political economists aim to understand how the state affects the market. A good example is the concept of wealth distribution within a state. **Wealth distribution** is how a state's goods, investments, properties, and resources--collectively known as "wealth"--are divided amongst its population. The wealth distribution in some states is quite even, whereas the wealth distribution in other states is quite uneven. States with uneven wealth distribution are more susceptible to political tension, as some groups may feel that they have been denied their "fair share of the pie."

Political economists look not only at how the state affects the market, but also at how the market affects the state. For example, market forces can force elected politicians to change their perspectives or tactics. A downturn in the market tends to correlate with a decrease in the election chances of incumbent politicians. Just ask George H.W. Bush, former President of the United States, who won a decisive victory in the 1991 Gulf War, but suffered a loss to Bill Clinton in the 1992 Presidential Election after an economic downturn. In describing President Clinton's victory, political strategist James Carville famously coined the phrase, "It's the economy, stupid!"

Given the expansive scope, areas of research within political economy are quite diverse. Broadly speaking, political scientists study both how the economy affects politics and how political forces affect the economy. For the purposes of this chapter, we will focus on foundations, key terms, and political economic systems.

## Foundations

### Origins of Political Economy

Scholars have been thinking about the interaction between society and the economy for centuries. Ancient Greek philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, wrote about the *oikos*, which is the Ancient Greek word for house. Aristotle saw the *oikos* as the basic unit within the *polis*, or city. From *oikos* is derived the English word *econ*-omy, or the study of household accounts, which over time translated into the study of a state's wealth and assets.

Formal study of political economy began in the mid-1700s. Adam Smith's 1776 work, *The Wealth of Nations*, is often considered the starting point, as it discusses concepts like free markets, division of labor, wealth, and trade. Smith's work was followed by David Ricardo, who wrote about comparative advantage. **Comparative advantage** refers to the goods, services, or activities that one state can produce or provide more cheaply or easily than other states. Because states have different allocations of resources—such as land, labor, and capital—each state enjoys a comparative advantage in producing those goods that rely on its abundant resources. Complementing Smith's thoughts on the "invisible hand" of the free market, Ricardo's contributions pointed to the mutual benefits that states can gain from specialization, cooperation, and voluntary trade. A few decades after Ricardo came the writings of Karl Marx, whose reactions to the free market and capitalism still provide much of the basis for contemporary criticism. Over time, the field garnered more widespread attention. As early as 1891, political economy's growth as a discipline in universities was apparent. As Charles F. Dunbar (1891) states in an article in *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*:

*It is the perception of the scope and importance of the questions with which political economy deals that turns the popular current so strongly towards it today. It is keenly felt that on the right answer of these questions must depend not only the future progress of society, but also the preservation of much that has been gained by mankind in the past.*

### Goods, Property, and Property Rights

The scope and importance of political economy extends to concepts including private goods, property, and property rights. In contrast to public goods, **private goods** are economic resources that are acquired or owned exclusively by a person or group. Public and private goods can vary greatly between states. For instance, healthcare is a public good in most states, but examples exist in which it is a private good. A defining feature of private goods is their potential scarcity and the competition that can arise from this scarcity. **Property** is a resource or commodity that a person or group legally owns. Property can include tangible items, like cars and houses, or intangible items, like patents, copyrights, or trademarks. **Property rights** are the legal authority to dictate how property, whether tangible or intangible, is used or managed. These concepts help form the foundation for many studies in political economy.

### How States Affect the Market

States can affect the market through a variety of measures.

### Fiscal Policy: Regulation and Taxation

First, they can pass laws that regulate the market. **Regulations** are rules imposed by a government on society. Various types of regulations exist, including rules to protect public interests, such as environmental policy. Regulation that affects the market is often referred to as regulatory policy, economic regulation, or fiscal regulation. For example, an effective form of regulation occurs through taxation.

**Taxation** is the process of a government collecting money from its citizens, corporations, and other entities. A state can impose taxes on income, capital gains, and estates. Taxes are an important part of a functioning society, as governments use tax revenue to pay for public goods. A state can also use taxes to regulate economic activity. A state can impose higher taxes on a product, driving up the price, to dissuade people from using it. A good example is the tax imposed on cigarettes. Sometimes referred to as "sin taxes," these are taxes levied on products or activities that the state deems harmful to society. In the United States, for example, "sin taxes" exist on tobacco, alcohol, and gambling in almost every state. Taken together, taxation, spending, and regulation are referred to as **fiscal policy**.

## Monetary Policy

In addition to fiscal policy, governments exercise monetary policy. **Monetary policy** includes all actions taken by a state's central bank to affect the money supply. Money is simply a medium of exchange. It is a way to store value and provide a unit of account in economic transactions. Printed money has no intrinsic value; its value is determined by the government that prints it. After European states began adopting the common currency of the Euro in 1999, for example, the states' former currencies no longer retained any value; the German mark, the French franc, and the Greek drachma (among others) no longer had use in economic transactions.

A central bank can choose to expand the money supply in an aim to grow the economy and maximize employment. **Economic growth** is the process by which a state's wealth increases over time. A central bank can also choose to contract the money supply in an attempt to slow the economy and moderate inflation. An economic slowdown can be the result, which can take the form of a recession. A **recession** is two consecutive quarters of declining economic activity.

Whether expanding or contracting, a central bank will manipulate the money supply through changes in interest rates. The **interest rate** is the percentage of a loan amount charged by a lender. When a central bank reduces interest rates, it hopes to stimulate economic growth. Lower interest rates make it easier for businesses to borrow money to expand production, increase hiring, or invest in research and development. Similarly, lower interest rates allow consumers to borrow money more easily to buy homes or other goods.

If economic demand is growing too fast, however, a central bank can raise interest rates to "cool off" the economy. The higher interest rate aims to reduce spending and, in turn, to control inflation. **Inflation** is a general increase in prices, usually within a given period of time. Inflation may occur for numerous reasons, including higher consumer demand for products and services, higher labor costs, or increased costs of inputs (e.g., fuel).

## International Trade and Comparative Political Economy

Beyond domestic actions by a central bank, international trade can additionally affect a state's economy. **International trade** is the exchange of goods, services, and activities between states. Generally, international trade is a topic that falls within the specialization of **international political economy (IPE)**. IPE, a specialization within the subfield of international relations, is the study of political economy from a global perspective that focuses on topics like trade, finance, and international financial and monetary institutions.

Because this textbook focuses on comparative politics, we will instead focus on the specialization of **comparative political economy (CPE)**. CPE is the comparison across and between countries of the ways in which politics and economics interact. Often, this comparison lends to observations of similar economic policies resulting in different political outcomes, or observations of similar political policies resulting in different economic outcomes. CPE generally focuses on the politics of economic development, the domestic effects and implications of globalization, general economic and social policies across states, and the analysis of different political economic systems. In the next section, we will look closely at this final topic: political economic systems.

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## 7.2: Political Economic Systems

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### Introduction

A **political economic system** describes the relationship between political and economic institutions within a given state. A major variable determining this system is the role the state plays in its economy. Does the government intervene in the economy? Or does the government let the market run free?

At one extreme, a government can take a *laissez-faire* ("let it be") approach. A **laissez-faire** approach is one in which the government chooses not to interfere in its economy (or to interfere only minimally); it instead relies on free market forces. At the other extreme, a government can take near complete control of its economy. A **command and control** approach to the economy is one in which the government owns most, if not all, means of production; it does not rely on the free market, and instead the state (or some agent representing the state, such as a political party) makes all economic decisions.

Almost all contemporary political economic systems fall somewhere between these two extremes, and they tend to cluster at particular points along the continuum of no state interference to full state interference in the economy. As examples, states that inherited their political economic systems from England, such as Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and the United States, trend more toward less government interference. Other states, including states in Latin America and Europe, trend toward more government interference in the form of higher taxes and more regulations. There are also states in which state interference in the economy takes the form of coordination, such as when or where to invest, as it does in China, Singapore, and Vietnam.

In what follows, we will review four major types of political economic systems: mercantilism, capitalism, Marxism (socialism and communism), and social democracy.

### Mercantilism

The oldest political economic system is mercantilism. **Mercantilism** is a political economic system that seeks to maximize a state's wealth through increasing exports and limiting imports. Use of the mercantilist system was most prevalent between the 16th and 18th centuries. Hallmarks of the mercantilist system at this time included the complete control of production and trade by state-led companies, high inflation, and taxes. Mercantilism also allowed for the expansion of the slave trade, as slaves were seen as necessary to an empire's economic well-being and power.

A good example of mercantilism is the British Empire. To achieve imperial economic growth, the empire strongly discouraged its colonies from importing competitive foreign products, encouraging only the importation of British products. This was often accomplished through taxation, as imperial authorities imposed tariffs on sugar and molasses imported from other states in order to promote its own monopoly on sugar from the West Indies. The British also put forth trade policies that promoted a favorable balance of trade for themselves, again in an effort to maximize power through wealth creation. Inevitably, as other empires enacted similar policies, this system led to open military conflict. The Dutch, Spanish, and Portuguese Empires tried to promote their own economic interests and to protect their own colonial markets from British encroachment.

In theory, mercantilism created a strong relationship between the British Empire and its colonies. The empire protected the colonies from the threat of foreign nations, and money from the colonies fueled the imperial engine. In practice, however, mercantilism created conflict for the colonies, especially in the Americas, where the cost of imported goods from Britain was substantially higher than imports from other regions.

Although mercantilism is the oldest of the four types of political economic systems, it is not a relic of the past. Today, we refer to mercantilist policies as "economic nationalism." **Economic nationalism** is attempts by a state to protect or bolster its economy for nationalist goals. Economic nationalists tend to favor protectionism. **Protectionism** is a set of policies aimed at protecting a state's domestic industry, such as by imposing tariffs; by implementing quotas; or by instituting **non-tariff regulatory barriers**, such as offering tax breaks or providing government subsidies for specific domestic industries. **Tariffs** are taxes imposed on imported foreign products with the purpose of making those products more expensive and, thus, making the domestically produced products more competitive. **Quotas** are limits on the number of foreign goods coming into a state. The idea is to ensure that domestic companies have a guaranteed share of the market for certain products.

As these examples of protectionist policies demonstrate, economic nationalists do not want the state to be dependent on other states for key resources. They prefer policies that lead to diversification of domestic production. While this is understandable in key sectors like agriculture, it is more controversial in sectors such as consumer products purchased with disposable income. For economic nationalists, some degree of free trade is fine if it furthers the goal of strengthening the power of the state. The common feature of political platforms espousing economic nationalism is a combination of "conservative economic proposals with nationalist stances on international trade and cooperation, as well as on immigration" (Colantone and Stanig, 2019).



Figure 7.2.1: U.S. President Donald Trump at a political rally encouraging Americans to "buy American," an example of economic nationalism (Source: [Speeches of Year One by Trump White House Archive](#), flickr is licensed under [Public Domain](#).)

## Capitalism

A competing approach to mercantilism is capitalism. **Capitalism**, also referred to as "free market capitalism," is a political-economic system in which individuals and private entities are able to own land and capital needed to produce goods and services. The forces of supply and demand are determined freely by the market, ideally with little to no interference from the state (in its purest form, capitalism is *laissez-faire*). Capitalism centers on self-interest, competition, private property, and the limited role of government control in the market. In economics, **self-interest** is the means through which individuals can act on their own behalf to make choices that benefit themselves. Within capitalism, the self-interest of uncoordinated individuals is thought to contribute to better outcomes for society at large. **Competition** occurs when industries, economic firms, and individuals vie to obtain goods, products, and services at the lowest prices. By allowing competition and self-interest of consumers, market outcomes are thought to improve for all involved.

One concern about capitalism is at the international level, particularly when it comes to trade in goods, services, and activities. Trade imbalances may lead to the exploitation of poorer states by richer states. For example, imagine an underdeveloped state that wants to build up its tourism industry. If that state follows a wholly capitalist model and allows for trade and foreign investment, it runs the risk of large corporate hotel chains taking over its fledgling domestic tourism industry.

Still, even with the existence of major trade imbalances, economists demonstrate that international trade is not a "zero-sum game." A **zero-sum game** is a situation in which one person, or entity, gains at the equal cost of another; a loss must accompany each win. Modern international trade is not a zero-sum game, as there are gains to be made, even small ones. Still, there are so-called "winners" and "losers" in trade. Winners include consumers who have more choice at competitive prices. Businesses also are winners, as they can sell products to consumers. Specialization through comparative advantage can lead to what is referred to as **economies of scale**, or the ability to "produce goods at a lower average cost" (Wolla and Esenther, 2017). States can benefit with an improved standard of living. Two examples are China and India. Both "have experienced growth and development that might not have happened without access to markets" (Wolla and Esenther, 2017).

In practice today, we often refer to capitalist states as "economically liberal." **Economic liberalism** relies on a set of policies to promote free market capitalism, namely through deregulation, privatization, and liberalization. **Deregulation** involves the removal of government power in a particular industry or economic area. An example includes former U.S. President Ronald Reagan's decision to deregulate the phone industry, over which AT&T had monopolistic control, in an effort to create competition, provide more choices, and lower prices for consumers. **Privatization** is the selling of government-owned assets. A good example includes

the sale of a state-owned airport or harbor to a private company. Greece, a country in the European Union, was forced to do so under a deal to save its economy in 2012. **Liberalization** is the loosening of government controls (allowing for more free market-oriented policies).

## Marxism (Socialism and Communism)

As free market capitalism was a critical response to mercantilism, Marxism became a critical response to free market capitalism. Developed by Karl Marx, this critique argues that capitalism is destructive, corrupt, and unable to survive as an economic system. According to Marx, capitalist systems inevitably lead to conflict between the working class (proletariat) and business owners (bourgeoisie), wherein the workers will eventually rise up against those who own the means of production. In considering more specifically its economic applications, **Marxism** is a philosophy in which the means of production are collectively owned by workers, not privately owned by individuals. This philosophy lends itself politically and economically to systems of socialism or communism.

**Socialism** is where property and the means of production are collectively owned. In most cases, production is owned and controlled by the state. Socialist theory does allow for individual ownership of property, such as one's house. The emphasis of a socialist system is to secure more equal outcomes and distribution of wealth through the collective ownership of resources and the means of production by the state. Few socialist countries exist today. The closest example we have is Venezuela.

**Communism** is where the state, usually dominated by one party, is in complete control of the political economic system, including all property. Communist theory suggests that, over time, the state will wither away, politics will become a relic of the past, and there will be equal distribution of resources. While Marx suggested that the communist struggle would begin in industrialized societies practicing capitalism, the first country to embrace communism was Russia, an imperial power that was largely agrarian and still used a serf political economy. In the Russian Revolution, communist forces loyal to Vladimir Lenin seized control, imposed communist rule through the state party apparatus, and renamed the country the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Joseph Stalin, the successor to Lenin, forcibly industrialized the country and led it through World War II. The egalitarian utopia that Marx predicted never occurred, and the USSR eventually collapsed in 1991.

Despite the decline of communism, Marxist thought still plays a prominent role in today's economic discourse, namely through policies of "economic structuralism." **Economic structuralism** describes a set of policies that aims to protect the working class from exploitation of the capital-owning class due to economic structures--domestically and internationally--such as inequality, uneven development, property rights and ownership, specialization, and trade. These policies played a significant role in the developing world, particularly in Africa and Latin America.

As one example, we can examine **import-substitution industrialization (ISI)** policies, which refer to state policies that attempt to reduce the state's dependence on foreign companies through increased domestic production. Grabowski (1994) describes ISI strategies as "utilizing a variety of policy instruments (tariffs, quotas, and subsidies) to protect the domestic market for many types of manufactured goods." Protectionism is therefore a major component of ISI strategies.

## Social Democracy

A final political economic system to consider is social democracy. **Social democracy** is a system that favors heavy market regulation to achieve a more equal society. This approach argues that capitalism can lead to a highly uneven distribution of wealth, which is viewed as inconsistent with democratic principles (i.e., an individual is unable to have true freedom if they lack the means to survive). Another term for this is "democratic socialism," an ideology that seeks democracy not just in the political sphere but also in the economic sphere.

In social democracies, governments levy high taxes on corporations and wealthy individuals and redistribute the collected funds to poorer members of society through social welfare programs. While social democracies have a capitalist system as their base, that system is overlaid with a heavy system of regulation to protect society from the potential harm that a free market capitalist system can yield. At times, some social democratic countries will take over the means of production in a particular industry. A good example is Norway where the oil company is state-owned and the revenues from the sale of oil go to pay for social expenditures, such as education and health.

Social democracy became popular in Europe, where such policies were initially put in place to blunt the ability of communist movements to rally workers to their cause. These policies proved to be quite popular, and they have become an important feature in social democracies. Sweden, for example, has developed a political economy where its citizens enjoy quite a few benefits,

including access to free health care, free education, and generous pensions. These benefits are paid for through higher taxes and societal expectations of corporate behavior. A state, such as Sweden, that has this type of a mixed economy is also often referred to as a "social market economy," meaning one that combines principles of capitalism with domestic social welfare considerations.

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## 7.3: Contemporary Drivers of Global Inequality

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### Introduction

What drives global inequality in the contemporary era? While much of today's global inequality can be attributed to the direct effects of colonialism, there are a number of recent factors that have either reinforced or exacerbated that inequality. These are the direct consequences of certain neoliberal policies, particularly those of Structural Adjustment Programs of the 1980s and 1990s; and the spread of technological advancements throughout the Global South. The first driver has its roots in what is referred to as political economy. **Political economy** is a subfield of political science that considers various economic theories (like capitalism or socialism), effect the practices and outcomes either within a state, or among and between states in the global system. In its simplest form, political economy is the study of the relationship between the market and powerful actors, such as a country's government (Bozonelos, et. al, 2022).

Political economy can help us understand the causes of and possible solutions for the issue of domestic and global inequality. In the simplest terms, asymmetrically/disproportionately distributed political and economic power affects inequality both domestically and globally. More generally speaking, the rules of economic activities are set by the political world. When one can shape the rules of the game to their advantage, it is very likely that those who set the rule will gain disproportionately more than those who had no say in setting the rule. While the discussion on the topic of global inequality is dominated by the economic issues, it is critical to simultaneously examine the political world as well. While some political and economic factors have contributed to the betterment of global economic conditions in general, they have also contributed to the widening of global inequality. The following examples will illustrate how this works.

### Neoliberal Policies: The Lingering Effects of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) & Austerity Measures

As discussed in Chapter Three, neoliberalism embraces market-orientated practices that are focused on economic development. It takes the classical liberal arguments of private property, legal enforcement of contracts and the 'invisible hand' of the market along with the principles of free market capitalism within a country and makes them global. Through identified policy proposals, including "deregulation (of the economy), liberalization (of trade and industry) and privatization (of state-owned enterprises)", this D-L-P formula was promoted worldwide by leading international economic institutions (Steger and Roy, 2021).

For example, in the 1980s dozens of developing countries faced serious debt burdens, to the point where many of them feared bankruptcy and the collapse of their financial systems. These countries, such as Mexico, turned to international institutions, namely the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, for loans that could stabilize their economies. The IMF and the World Bank, also backed by the United States, provided these loans with stipulations and conditions that these loan-receiving countries embrace neoliberal policies. The desire was for them to structurally adjust their economies to prevent reoccurring debt crises, which at the time was seen as a major threat to the global economy. This is referred to as the **Washington Consensus**, where countries were expected to embrace free market systems and reduce state involvement in their economies as the solution to financial challenges.

One of the primary policy tools recommended through the Washington Consensus was the use of **Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs)**. SAPs refer to comprehensive economic programs that major international lenders, such as the IMF and the World Bank, require as a condition for granting loans. SAPs mandate economic liberalization to facilitate market functioning and increase openness to foreign investment. The programs also require the loan-seeking countries to dramatically shift financial resources to address the balance of payment issues. Overall SAPs did not have the intended effect as promised by the Washington Consensus. Often the programs resulted in either negligible or in some cases, negative impacts on the economies and societies of the loan-recipient countries. Indeed, one of the major consequences of SAPs involved the dramatic reduction of social spending. The IMF and the World Bank demanded that countries shift their financial resources from these programs as a means of stabilizing their economies. The idea was that countries needed to get their spending under control and begin to pay down their debt. While this approach may have helped avert an economic collapse, the costs were borne by the most vulnerable segments of the society. Governments slashed spending on areas like healthcare, education, subsidies on food and energy, and police forces.

Additionally, governments were expected to implement policies that reformed their economies. These included deregulating their economies to allow for foreign competition, such as allowing for foreign hotel companies to operate within their borders. It

also involved the privatization of state-owned sectors of the economy, such as oil and natural gas, fisheries, transportation, and communications. While these macroeconomic structural shifts prevented the collapse of the economic system, it was not without consequences. One major consequence involved the weakening of labor protections, including safe working environments, guaranteed retirement benefits, protected contract and collective bargaining rights, and workers' compensation protections. Furthermore, increased foreign competition negatively impacted local employment patterns by displacing local industries. In sum, the compound effect of these structural changes contributed to the general instability of the national economy. Additionally, the deregulation of a country's natural resources industry unintentionally damaged the environment, both locally and transnationally.

The IMF and the World Bank approached these economic crises with an SAP "cookie-cutter" template. They did not account for the socio-political and cultural factors in the implementation process. For example, many major structural changes disproportionately affected the most vulnerable populations. Economic volatility often led to dramatic price swings in basic necessities, such as food and energy. Due to the stipulations of the SAPs, governments were limited in their ability to respond to these disruptions. Often, policy choices were significantly narrowed or often prescribed or dictated by the loan conditions. Consequently, the worsening economic conditions brought on by SAP policies encouraged mass migration in the Twentieth Century. Many of these economic migrants left their home in search of a better life, including job opportunities, access to education, and for general financial stability.

## Rippling Effects of Neoliberalism: Austerity Measures in Europe in the 2010s

Similar to SAPs were the austerity measures imposed on member-states of the European Union (EU) in the 2010s. **Austerity** occurs when a country implements a wide range of economic reforms to balance a country's budget or meet certain debt ratios. These reforms center on major reductions in government social spending. Austerity has its roots in the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, often referred to as the Great Recession in the United States. A number of EU countries, including Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain found themselves unable to pay back their sovereign debts and were in danger of defaulting. **Sovereign debt** is the accumulated amount of money that a country's government has borrowed and has yet to pay back. These governments accepted bailouts from the IMF, the EU, and the European Central Bank (ECB), to prevent delinquencies in payments and/or defaults.

Unlike SAPs which primarily affected countries in the Global South, austerity measures impacted countries in the Global North. However, the effects were quite similar. Austerity measures led to a dramatic drop in the standard of living for a number of the affected countries. The adoption of neoliberal reforms as conditions of the bailouts severely weakened pre-existing social protections. Pensions were reduced, spending on health care dried up and many citizens, especially in Spain, defaulted on their mortgages. The public sector shrank, leading to economic contractions that created the conditions for hundreds of thousands of educated citizens to emigrate to other EU countries. In this way, EU austerity mirrored the experiences of SAPs in the Global South. Governments were restricted in responding to public demands and had little control over internal economic policies.

A good example is in Greece where the European debt crisis was most severe. The size of the Greek economy in 2008 shrank by as much as 25.9 percent. Greece's relative living standards peaked at 85.4 percent of the EU average in 2009 and plummeted to 64.9 percent in 2016 – a level unseen since the early 1960s! Greece experienced an economic crisis on the scale of the U.S. Depression of the 1930s. Unemployment reached as high as 28 percent, the youth unemployment rate was as high as 60 percent and 45 percent of pensioners received monthly payments below the EU poverty line, which was €665 a month. From 2008-2013, Greeks became on average 40 percent poorer and one out of five Greeks experienced severe material deprivation. The industrial sector of country collapsed. As the Greek government had adopted the Euro as its currency, economic officials were unable to devalue their currency, which could have made Greek exports cheaper. Interest rates and currency printing are controlled by the European Central Bank (ECB), which tends to serve the interests of the larger economies. In addition, tourism, a major segment of the Greek economy, also suffered during the Global Financial Crisis as people were financially unable to travel for leisure. Many Greeks returned to the fields/orchards for work, on lands inherited from their parent or grandparents.

The Greek government accepted three rounds of bailouts from the IMF, the EU, and the European Central Bank to stabilize their economy: €110bn in 2010; €109bn in 2011; and €86bn in 2015. The bailout consisted of some of the most intense austerity measures ever imposed as Greece had to achieve budget cuts of €30bn over three years. The goal of austerity was to cut Greece's public deficit to less than 3 percent of GDP. Each round of bailouts came with new austerity measures. Active and retired public sector workers bore the brunt of the budget cuts. Since Greece could not devalue its currency, the main solution was to engineer an export-led recovery through 'internal devaluation'. This is a policy-driven compression of wages via labor market deregulation, including a drastic cut in the minimum wage. Essentially, Greek exports were made cheaper by cutting the wages of Greek workers. This in turn made the Greek depression worse. In the short-run, austerity hurt more than it helped. However, some would argue that these cuts set up the Greek economy to rebound and it is currently in a growth stage, with forecasts predicting that 2024 will bring it back to pre-crisis levels.

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## 7.4: Understanding the Tragedy of the Commons

Picture a group project with five people. Everyone will get the same grade, no matter who does the work. You already know how this tends to go: most of the group pitches in, one person quietly coasts, and that person still gets the grade. Now imagine the group is the entire world and the project is keeping the planet livable. That is the challenge behind global environmental politics, and it helps explain why even a landmark meeting like COP 21 could not solve climate change on its own. In this section, we will look at why cooperation is so hard, and then at four different answers to the question of what should be done about it.

### Collective Action Problems

COP 21 gave many people hope that states could limit the worst effects of climate change. It also showed how hard cooperation still is, even when the threat is existential. So why do states struggle to work together on problems that seem to be in everyone's best interest?

Part of the answer is that the harms of climate change are **negative externalities**. This means the costs of an action are not fully paid by the people or states that take it. Rising temperatures, extreme weather, and sea-level rise are felt around the world, whether or not a given country contributed much to emissions. That gap between who causes a problem and who pays for it sets up a classic collective action problem.

Widely used in economics and political science, a **collective action problem** is a situation where a group shares a goal, but individuals do not act to reach it because each one has an incentive to **free-ride**. Free-riding means enjoying the benefits of the group's effort without contributing anything yourself. Just like in the group project, that leaves everyone worse off than they could have been. In theory, a country could benefit from the world's efforts to slow climate change while doing nothing itself. It also does not help that climate risks are spread unevenly. Some states feel the threat far more than others, so their reasons to act differ.

Free-riding is also behind what is often called the "Tragedy of the Commons." Garrett Hardin (1968) asked readers to picture herders grazing cattle on a shared pasture, or *commons*. The idea is that some resources are held collectively rather than owned privately. Each herder has an incentive to graze as many cattle as possible to maximize profit. When every herder does the same, the pasture is stripped bare, even though everyone would be better off if they had conserved it. Hardin's point is that people acting in their own self-interest will deplete or degrade a shared, limited resource, and everyone ends up worse off.



Figure 7.4.1: Cattle grazing in Armenia (CC-BY-SA-4.0; Narek75 via Wikimedia)

Our global climate system works a lot like Hardin's pasture. It is **non-excludable**, meaning people cannot easily be kept from using it, and **rivalrous**, meaning one person's use leaves less for everyone else.

With any commons, each user has a reason to take as much as possible. That could mean grazing animals on a shared pasture or emitting greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. The trouble starts when many users, each pursuing their own interest, push use past what the resource can sustain. A pasture might become barren from overgrazing. In the end, everyone loses, including the free riders who thought they were looking out for themselves.

There is also an ironic twist. If states and individuals "know" cooperation is impossible in these situations, they may rush to exploit the resource before it runs out or becomes less profitable. That behavior makes the prediction come true, which is what we call a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The usual solutions to the tragedy of the commons involve regulation, privatization, or building rules and institutions to manage the resource. For grazing, that might mean privatizing the land or having a government regulate who can use it and how. Not everyone agrees with this conclusion, though. Some scholars argue it takes an overly individualistic view of human nature and overlooks communities that protect shared environmental resources without any outside rules or treaties. Elinor Ostrom (1990) is the best-known example. Her work stressed the importance of local, community-based governance and showed that people can manage **common-pool resources** (shared resources that many people use) effectively on their own terms.

Still, global problems like climate change cross state borders and local communities, and the world has no strong central government to enforce rules. Instead, states rely on voluntary commitments. That helps explain why cooperation has been so hard. I think of the tragedy of the commons as a useful cautionary tale for global environmental problems because it shows why international institutions matter. They help states cooperate, build global norms that discourage leaders from free-riding, and provide resources that support both global efforts and the community-based efforts of frontline communities.

## The Anthropocene

Overcoming the collective action problem is not the only hurdle. Many of today's global environmental challenges are also tangled up in debates about their causes, and therefore about their solutions.

In *Merchants of Doubt*, Oreskes and Conway (2010) show how a small group of scientists, often with industry ties, spread misinformation to undermine the scientific consensus on issues like acid rain and climate change. These individuals borrowed tactics from the tobacco industry's playbook to cast doubt on established findings. The result was delayed policy action and a confused public. Many world leaders and industry spokespeople argued that it was too early, and too costly, to curb human activities linked to climate change. Those objections carry far less weight today, since the overwhelming consensus among climate scientists is that human activity is the primary driver of observed changes in Earth's climate (IPCC, 2014). Some scientists go further and argue that human activity is now so large that we have entered a new geological era, the Anthropocene.

The **Anthropocene** is a geological theory suggesting that human activity has had a profound and lasting effect on Earth's geology and ecosystems. It describes the current epoch, which is simply a long span of Earth's history, as one in which humans are the dominant driver of environmental change. Industrialization, deforestation, and the burning of fossil fuels have produced unprecedented changes in the atmosphere, in biodiversity, and in ecosystems (Crutzen & McNeil, 2007). Supporters point to geological evidence, including plastics, radioactive isotopes, and altered sedimentation patterns, as widespread and long-lasting markers of this new epoch. The concept matters because it puts human activity at the center of how we understand the planet's past and future.

Critics argue that the term universalizes human impact, when in reality our effect on the environment varies a great deal by location, class, and other factors. It also has not been formally adopted as a geological epoch. Even so, the concept has gained recognition and sparked a lot of research and discussion in geology, environmental science, and sociology, and it reflects a growing consensus about the causes of problems like climate change. Agreement on the causes does not mean agreement on the fixes, though. The debates about solutions are far more divided, and they continue to this day.

## The Promethean Theory

One of those debates centers on the **Promethean theory** of environmentalism, which breaks from mainstream environmentalism's emphasis on conservation and sustainability. It takes its name from Prometheus, the figure in Greek mythology who stole fire from the gods and gave it to humanity, a symbol of human innovation and technology. Promethean environmentalists tend to see technology and human ingenuity as the solution to the problems of the Anthropocene rather than the cause. Instead of restricting human activity, they argue we can develop technologies that reduce or even reverse environmental damage (Lomborg, 2001). They often point to history for support, such as the development of cleaner energy

sources that replaced coal and oil.

Because of this outlook, Promethean environmentalists often see geoengineering as a solution to climate change. **Geoengineering** means large-scale interventions in Earth's natural systems that either pull greenhouse gases out of the atmosphere or reduce the amount of sunlight reaching the surface. Ocean fertilization, for example, adds nutrients to the ocean to stimulate the growth of CO<sub>2</sub>-absorbing phytoplankton. Stratospheric aerosol injection puts reflective particles into the upper atmosphere to scatter sunlight and cut solar radiation. At the international level, Promethean perspectives tend to favor market-based mechanisms like cap-and-trade systems and carbon pricing, which they see as efficient ways to encourage greener practices and technological innovation on a global scale.

Critics push back on two fronts. They argue the Promethean paradigm underestimates the risks of technological fixes like geoengineering. They also say it encourages a "business as usual" mindset that continues, rather than reduces, global environmental problems such as biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation.

## Sustainable Development Paradigm

The **sustainable development paradigm** takes a different path. It brings economic and environmental concerns together with social considerations in the development process. The Brundtland Commission's report, *Our Common Future*, laid out three pillars: economic development, social equity, and environmental protection (Brundtland, 1987).

The first pillar, economic development, goes beyond traditional measures like GDP. It calls for economic activity that supports the well-being of communities while avoiding excessive resource depletion and environmental damage. The second pillar, social equity, links poverty, education, healthcare, and social inclusion to the goal of a healthy environment for everyone. The third pillar, environmental protection, recognizes that natural resources are finite and promotes practices that keep ecosystems healthy for present and future generations. Because these three systems depend on one another, sustainable development looks for synergies and tries to avoid trade-offs. Neglecting one pillar can undermine long-term well-being for current and future generations alike.

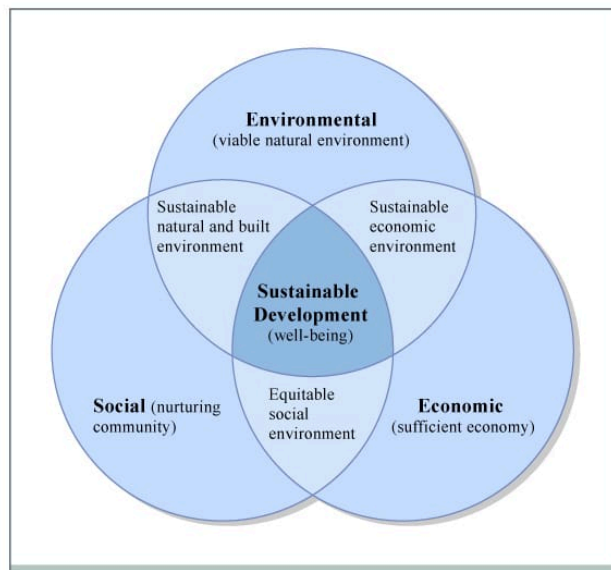


Figure 7.4.2: Venn diagram showing sustainable development as the intersection of three overlapping circles. The top circle is "Environmental (viable natural environment)," the bottom left is "Social (nurturing community)," and the bottom right is "Economic (sufficient economy)."

Where two circles overlap, the labels read: Environmental and Social, "Sustainable natural and built environment"; Environmental and Economic, "Sustainable economic environment"; Social and Economic, "Equitable social environment." The darker center, where all three overlap, is labeled "Sustainable Development (well-being)." (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0; MIT OpenCourseWare via Flickr)

In practice, this approach means moving toward low-carbon and climate-resilient economies. The Paris Agreement is a good example, since countries commit to nationally determined contributions (NDCs) to limit global temperature rise. The agreement acknowledges historical emission rates and the economic gaps among and within states, and it divides the costs and benefits of action accordingly. By pushing for agreements that cut greenhouse gas emissions and build resilience to climate impacts while also promoting equitable development pathways, international climate policy reflects a commitment to a **just transition** away

from fossil fuels for all affected communities.

Critics, however, argue this approach does not go far enough in confronting the capitalist practices tied to environmental degradation. The **degrowth movement**, for instance, proposes an intentional reduction of overall economic activity to reach ecological sustainability, with a focus on improving well-being without relying on ever-increasing material consumption. It takes a post-development view, arguing that traditional development models built on Western ideals fall short. In this view, those models fail to recognize diverse forms of well-being, local knowledge, and alternative economic structures that could help confront climate change along with the economic injustices tied to it (Hickel, 2020).

Other critics worry that sustainable development is easily co-opted for "**greenwashing**," where organizations or projects claim to be sustainable without really addressing economic or social issues. They argue the paradigm does not adequately address social justice, may reinforce existing inequalities, and does not do enough to challenge structures of power and privilege (Leach et al., 2010). Part of the reason is that sustainable development theory often reflects Western-centric perspectives, and its implementation may not fit the diverse cultural contexts where it is promoted. That can lead to models being imposed on communities that do not match their challenges and priorities. And like the Promethean approach, critics say it leans too heavily on technological solutions without tackling broader issues of consumption, economic growth, and the need for alternative economic models.

## Environmental Justice

To address that potential blind spot, scholars and activists have increasingly framed climate change as a matter of environmental justice. The meaning of the term is contested, especially as it has spread into new contexts and localities. In general, though, it examines how the distribution of environmental goods (such as parks, clean air, and clean water) and environmental ills (such as pollution and the health problems that come with it) connects to social factors like racism, classism, and sexism. Those factors unfairly shape local, national, and international responses to environmental problems (Bullard, 2005, p. 25; Harrison, 2011, p. 10). Scholars have also noted that environmental justice groups share many concerns with prominent forms of environmentalism, including the challenges covered in this chapter, but those forms of environmentalism often fail to address the social structures that produce the problems in the first place (Schlosberg, 2004).

The theory of environmental justice focuses on the fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, especially for marginalized and vulnerable communities whose voices are often overlooked, if not ignored. Its central idea is that everyone, regardless of race, income, or social status, has a right to live in a healthy and safe environment. The framework emerged as a social and civil rights movement because low-income and minority communities often bear a disproportionate share of the environmental and health risks tied to pollution and industrial activity (Bullard, 2000). Its principles include not only the right to a healthy environment but also the right to take part in decisions about how environmental harms get addressed.



Figure 7.4.3: Community of color standing up to protect the health of their communities and the Earth. Painting text reads "stand with frontline communities in our fight for environmental justice, against the ravages of toxic chemicals and climate change." (CC BY 2.0; Heidi De Vries via Flickr)

At the international level, environmental justice is about the fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens across nations, communities, and social groups. Pollution, resource depletion, and climate change often hit vulnerable populations and less developed countries (LDCs) the hardest. The concept of **climate justice** highlights the ethical and social side of climate change and calls for equitable solutions that account for historical responsibility, vulnerability, and the capacity to adapt. One example is recognizing the environmental rights of Indigenous communities, along with their unique relationships with the environment and the potential effects of "sustainable development" projects on their well-being. Another is building the capacity of frontline communities and transferring environmentally sound technologies to LDCs.

Environmental justice has helped activists make real progress on inequities in who bears environmental burdens, but it has its critics too. Some argue the definition lacks clarity, which makes it hard to apply consistently across different contexts (Walker, 2012). Others say environmental justice efforts tend to take on specific issues in isolation and lack comprehensive policies that address how social, economic, and environmental challenges are connected. These criticisms do not take away from the importance of the movement. They point to places where adjustments may be needed to achieve justice on environmental matters, both locally and globally.

## Comparing the Perspectives

These four perspectives all try to answer the same question: what needs to change to address global environmental problems? The chart below puts them side by side so you can see where they overlap and where they part ways.

*Comparing Four Perspectives on Global Environmental Problems*

| Perspective                    | How it sees the problem                                                                                | What it proposes                                                                                                          | Main criticism                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Promethean</b>              | A challenge that technology and human ingenuity can solve                                              | Cleaner energy, geoengineering, and market tools like cap-and-trade and carbon pricing                                    | Underestimates the risks of technological fixes and encourages a "business as usual" mindset   |
| <b>Sustainable development</b> | An imbalance among economic, social, and environmental needs                                           | Balance the three pillars, as in the Paris Agreement's NDCs and a just transition away from fossil fuels                  | Open to greenwashing, Western-centric, and does not do enough to challenge structures of power |
| <b>Degrowth</b>                | An economic system that depends on ever-increasing material consumption                                | Intentionally reduce overall economic activity while improving well-being                                                 | Not covered in this chapter                                                                    |
| <b>Environmental justice</b>   | An unequal distribution of environmental burdens, and exclusion of affected communities from decisions | Fair distribution of benefits and burdens, a voice in decision-making, capacity building, and technology transfer to LDCs | Definition lacks clarity, and efforts often tackle issues in isolation                         |

With these perspectives in hand, let's circle back to how we began this chapter, with waste. Now that we are historically informed and conceptually equipped, we can better understand how waste connects the local and the global.

## 7.5: Cybersecurity and Artificial Intelligence

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### Introduction

Almost every part of modern government now runs on computer networks. Elections depend on digital voter rolls, hospitals store patient records online, and power grids, water systems, and banks rely on software to function. **Cybersecurity** refers to the practices, technologies, and policies used to protect these networks and the information they hold from attack, theft, or disruption. For much of its history, cybersecurity was treated as a technical problem for engineers. Today it is also a political problem. Governments must decide who is responsible for protecting digital systems, how much surveillance is acceptable in the name of security, and how to respond when another country is behind an attack.

Comparative politics helps us see that countries answer these questions very differently. A country's regime type, its state capacity, and its economic system all shape how it approaches cyberspace. Comparing these approaches connects cybersecurity to the larger themes of this book: how institutions work, how governments hold or lose power, and how political and economic systems respond to global challenges.

### Cybersecurity and State Capacity

Earlier in this book, we saw that strong states can carry out their policies effectively across their territory. The same logic applies to cyberspace. Protecting digital infrastructure requires skilled personnel, steady funding, coordination between government agencies, and cooperation with the private companies that own most networks. States with limited capacity often struggle to defend hospitals, utilities, or election systems, which makes them attractive targets for criminals and foreign governments alike.

Estonia offers a useful example. After regaining independence in 1991, the small Baltic country built one of the world's most digital governments, moving services such as voting, taxes, and health records online. In 2007, after the government relocated a Soviet-era war memorial in Tallinn, waves of cyberattacks overwhelmed the websites of Estonian banks, media outlets, and government ministries. The attacks were widely linked to actors in Russia, although responsibility was never formally established. Estonia responded by investing heavily in cyber defense, and in 2008 NATO opened its Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Tallinn. The Estonian case shows how a crisis can push a state to build new capacity, and how digital government creates both efficiency and vulnerability.

International organizations now try to measure this capacity. The International Telecommunication Union's Global Cybersecurity Index, for instance, ranks countries on their legal, technical, and organizational commitments to cybersecurity. Measures like this allow comparativists to ask why some governments invest more than others, and whether regime type, wealth, or past experience with attacks explains the difference.

### Regime Type and the Internet

One of the clearest comparative divides in cyberspace concerns how governments balance security against individual rights. Scholars often describe two broad models, although most countries fall somewhere between them (DeNardis 2014; Segal 2016).

### The Open, Multistakeholder Model

Many democracies favor an open internet governed by a mix of public and private actors. Under this model, governments set rules for security and privacy, but private companies, courts, and civil society groups also shape policy. The European Union is a leading example. Its General Data Protection Regulation, in effect since 2018, gives individuals rights over their personal data. Its NIS2 Directive, adopted in 2022, requires organizations in essential sectors such as energy and health care to meet security standards and report serious incidents. The United States relies more heavily on the private sector and on rules written sector by sector. It created the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency in 2018 to coordinate federal efforts, while states such as California have passed their own data privacy laws.

Democracies are not free of tension between security and liberty. In 2013, former government contractor Edward Snowden revealed large-scale surveillance programs run by the U.S. National Security Agency, sparking debates across democracies about

how much monitoring is acceptable. What distinguishes democracies is that courts, legislatures, and a free press can challenge these practices.

## The Cyber Sovereignty Model

Authoritarian governments are more likely to treat the internet as territory to be controlled. China has developed the most extensive version of this approach. Its system of filters and blocks, often called the Great Firewall, restricts access to foreign websites and platforms. China's Cybersecurity Law, which took effect in 2017, explicitly invokes "cyberspace sovereignty," and its Data Security Law and Personal Information Protection Law, both effective in 2021, give the state broad authority over how data is stored and shared. Russia moved in a similar direction with its 2019 "sovereign internet" law, which allows authorities to route and filter internet traffic and, in principle, to disconnect the Russian internet from global networks.

These tools serve the goals discussed in Chapter 4, where we examined strategies non-democracies use to stay in power. Controlling information makes it harder for opponents to organize, and digital surveillance can identify protesters and critics. Scholars call this pattern **digital repression** (Feldstein 2021).

## The Gray Zone

The line between these models is not always sharp. Some democracies and hybrid regimes also restrict online activity. The digital rights organization Access Now documents hundreds of government-ordered internet shutdowns each year, and India, the world's largest democracy, has recorded more shutdowns than any other country in several recent years, often during protests or unrest in particular regions. Cases like these show that regime type shapes cybersecurity policy, but it does not determine it completely.

## Cyber Conflict Between States

Cyberspace has also become an arena for competition between states. Cyber operations are attractive because they are relatively inexpensive, can be carried out from a distance, and are often difficult to attribute with certainty. Most fall below the threshold of open warfare, which allows states to pressure rivals without triggering a military response (Rid 2013; Kello 2017). Several incidents illustrate the range of these operations:

- **Stuxnet (discovered 2010):** A sophisticated computer worm that damaged centrifuges at Iran's Natanz nuclear facility. It is widely attributed to the United States and Israel, although neither government has officially confirmed its role (Zetter 2014).
- **Election interference (2016):** The U.S. intelligence community concluded that Russia used hacking and social media campaigns to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2017).
- **WannaCry (2017):** A ransomware attack that spread to computers in roughly 150 countries and disrupted Britain's National Health Service. The United States and the United Kingdom attributed it to North Korea.
- **NotPetya (2017):** Malware that began in Ukraine and spread worldwide, causing billions of dollars in damage to companies. Western governments attributed it to Russia's military intelligence service (Greenberg 2019).

Not all threats come from governments. Criminal groups also target essential services. In 2021, a ransomware attack on Colonial Pipeline, which supplies fuel to much of the eastern United States, forced the company to shut down its pipeline for several days. Cases like this blur the line between crime and national security and raise questions about how much responsibility governments should take for protecting privately owned infrastructure.

## Governing Cyberspace Across Borders

Because networks cross national borders, no single government can secure cyberspace alone. International cooperation has grown slowly and unevenly. The Council of Europe's Convention on Cybercrime, known as the Budapest Convention, opened for signature in 2001 and remains the main treaty for cooperation among law enforcement agencies. In 2015, a United Nations Group of Governmental Experts endorsed voluntary norms for responsible state behavior, such as refraining from attacks on critical infrastructure during peacetime (United Nations General Assembly 2015). In December 2024, the UN General Assembly adopted a new Convention against Cybercrime. Supporters argued it would improve cooperation against online crime, while human rights organizations warned that its broad provisions could be used to justify surveillance of journalists and dissidents.

These debates reflect the same divide described above. Countries that favor cyber sovereignty tend to support agreements that strengthen state control, while many democracies emphasize protections for privacy and free expression. The result is a

patchwork of national laws and international norms rather than a single global system.

## Comparing Approaches

*Selected national and regional approaches to cybersecurity*

| Country or Region | General Approach                                             | Examples of Key Policies                                                                         |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Estonia           | Highly digital government with strong national cyber defense | Expanded cyber defenses after the 2007 attacks; hosts NATO's cyber defense center (2008)         |
| European Union    | Rights-based regulation across member states                 | General Data Protection Regulation (2018); NIS2 Directive (2022)                                 |
| United States     | Private-sector-led, sector-by-sector approach                | Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (2018); state privacy laws such as California's |
| China             | Cyber sovereignty and centralized control                    | Cybersecurity Law (2017); Data Security Law (2021); Personal Information Protection Law (2021)   |
| Russia            | Sovereign internet and information control                   | Sovereign internet law (2019)                                                                    |

## Artificial Intelligence and Cybersecurity

Artificial intelligence adds another layer to cybersecurity governance. AI can assist governments and organizations with detecting unusual network activity, identifying vulnerabilities, processing large amounts of security data, and responding more quickly to potential attacks. At the same time, AI can strengthen the capabilities of attackers. The United Kingdom's National Cyber Security Centre concluded that AI is already being used to improve activities such as reconnaissance, social engineering, vulnerability research, basic malware generation, and the processing of stolen data (National Cyber Security Centre 2025).

AI systems can also become targets themselves. Attackers may attempt to manipulate training data, exploit software vulnerabilities, or use techniques such as prompt injection to cause an AI system to behave in unintended ways. The National Institute of Standards and Technology has therefore developed an Artificial Intelligence Risk Management Framework and additional guidance specifically addressing risks associated with generative AI (National Institute of Standards and Technology 2023; Autio et al. 2024).

Governments are also taking different approaches to regulating AI. The European Union's Artificial Intelligence Act creates a risk-based regulatory framework with different requirements depending on how an AI system is used (European Parliament and Council of the European Union 2024). China has adopted regulations governing generative AI services that address issues including data security, personal information, content, and national security (Cyberspace Administration of China et al. 2023). In the United States, NIST's AI Risk Management Framework provides voluntary guidance for organizations managing AI-related risks. These different approaches demonstrate how the politics of cybersecurity increasingly overlap with broader debates about government regulation, innovation, privacy, national security, and the appropriate role of the state.

Cybersecurity therefore offers an important case for comparative government. Technology may cross national borders easily, but political institutions still influence who regulates it, what interests receive protection, and how governments respond when new technologies create both opportunities and risks.

## Connecting to Course Themes

Cybersecurity touches nearly every topic in this book. It is a question of **institutions**, because legislatures, executives, courts, and bureaucracies must decide who protects networks and how. It is a question of **regime type**, because democracies and authoritarian states balance security and freedom differently. It is a question of **political economy**, because private companies own most digital infrastructure and technology firms hold enormous influence over how information flows. And it connects to **collective action**, because activists use digital tools to organize while governments use the same tools to monitor and repress them.

## Think Comparatively

1. Why might a country with a highly digital government, like Estonia, be both better protected and more exposed to cyberattacks than a less digital country?
2. Compare the European Union's approach to data protection with China's approach to cyber sovereignty. What values does each approach prioritize?
3. Should governments or private companies be primarily responsible for protecting critical infrastructure such as pipelines and hospitals? How might the answer differ across political and economic systems?
4. Internet shutdowns occur in both democracies and authoritarian regimes. What does this suggest about the relationship between regime type and digital rights?
5. How do the European Union's, China's, and the United States' approaches to regulating artificial intelligence reflect their broader approaches to cybersecurity and the role of the state?

## 7.6: Globalization

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### Introduction

When the Cold War ended in 1991, many observers believed the world was converging on a single model. Democracy had outlasted authoritarianism, capitalism had outlasted communism, and free markets seemed destined to spread everywhere. Political scientist Francis Fukuyama (1992) famously described this moment as the "end of history," meaning that liberal democracy might be the final form of human government. Journalist Thomas Friedman (1999) described globalization as an overarching international system that would shape the domestic politics and foreign relations of nearly every country.

Three decades later, the picture looks more complicated. Trade, travel, and technology have connected the world more closely than ever, yet nationalism has surged, authoritarian states have grown more assertive, and many governments are now trying to limit their dependence on global markets. Comparative politics helps explain why. Globalization does not affect every country in the same way, and states make different choices about how to engage with it. This section examines what globalization is, how states have responded to it, and why it has become one of the most contested issues in contemporary politics.

### Three Dimensions of Globalization

Scholars generally agree that globalization is more than economics (Steger 2020). It is useful to think about three connected dimensions.

#### Economic Globalization

Economic globalization is the dimension most people think of first. Since the 1980s, countries have lowered barriers to trade and investment, and companies have built supply chains that stretch across many countries. A smartphone may be designed in one country, assembled in another, and built from parts made in a dozen more. The World Trade Organization, created in 1995, established common rules for international trade, and China's entry into the organization in 2001 marked a turning point in the global economy. Economic globalization has lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, particularly in Asia, but it has also exposed workers and industries to intense international competition.

#### Political Globalization

Political globalization refers to the growing number of international organizations, treaties, and networks that influence national governments. Institutions such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and regional bodies like the European Union shape policy on trade, human rights, security, and the environment. Nongovernmental organizations and multinational corporations also operate across borders and can pressure governments to act. In the most integrated cases, such as the European Union, member states pool parts of their sovereignty, agreeing to shared rules in exchange for access to a larger market and greater collective influence.

#### Cultural Globalization

Cultural globalization involves the spread of music, film, food, language, and values across borders. Critics have long worried that this process spreads Western, and especially American, consumer culture at the expense of local traditions (Barber 1995). Yet cultural flows increasingly move in many directions. South Korean music and television, often called the Korean Wave, now have a worldwide audience, and streaming platforms carry films from India, Nigeria, and Latin America to viewers everywhere.

Sociologist Roland Robertson (1995) used the term **glocalization** to describe how global influences are adapted to local settings. Fast food chains, for example, change their menus to fit local tastes and religious practices, and social media platforms are used differently depending on local politics and culture. Glocalization reminds us that globalization does not simply erase differences between societies. It often produces new combinations of the global and the local.

## Measuring Globalization

Because globalization varies across countries, comparativists try to measure it. The KOF Globalisation Index, produced by researchers at ETH Zurich, scores countries on economic, social, and political globalization using indicators such as trade flows, foreign investment, international travel, internet use, and membership in international organizations (Gygli et al. 2019). Measures like this allow researchers to ask comparative questions. Why are some countries far more globalized than others? Do highly globalized countries have different welfare systems, levels of inequality, or rates of political backlash?

## Globalization and the State

A central debate in comparative politics asks whether globalization weakens the state. Some observers predicted a "race to the bottom," in which governments would cut taxes, regulations, and social spending to attract mobile investment. The evidence is more mixed. Political economist Dani Rodrik (1998) found that countries more open to trade actually tend to have *larger* governments, because citizens demand social protection against the risks of international competition. Small, trade-dependent European democracies such as Denmark and the Netherlands paired open markets with generous welfare states and close cooperation among government, business, and labor (Katzenstein 1985).

Rodrik (2011) later argued that countries face a **globalization trilemma**. A country cannot fully achieve deep global economic integration, national sovereignty, and democratic politics all at the same time. It can pursue any two, but something must give. This framework helps explain why globalization creates political conflict. When global rules limit what elected governments can do, voters may feel they have lost control over their own economic futures.

The varieties of capitalism approach also shows that states engage with globalization in different ways (Hall and Soskice 2001). Liberal market economies, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, rely heavily on competitive markets and flexible labor. Coordinated market economies, such as Germany and Japan, rely more on cooperation among firms, unions, and government, including strong vocational training systems. Each model has adapted to global competition in its own way, which is why globalization has not produced a single economic model worldwide.

## Different Paths Through Globalization

*Selected national approaches to globalization*

| Country        | General Approach                                               | Key Examples                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| United States  | Liberal market economy that long championed free trade         | Led creation of the World Trade Organization (1995); raised tariffs beginning in 2018 and more broadly in 2025; new industrial policy through the CHIPS and Science Act and Inflation Reduction Act (2022) |
| Germany        | Coordinated market economy built on manufacturing exports      | Export-oriented industry supported by unions, employers, and vocational training; exposed to energy and supply chain risks after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine                                         |
| China          | State-led capitalism integrated into global markets            | Joined the World Trade Organization (2001); export-driven growth; Belt and Road Initiative (2013); push for technological self-reliance                                                                    |
| Denmark        | Small open economy with a strong welfare state                 | High trade openness combined with extensive social protection and job training, often called "flexicurity"                                                                                                 |
| United Kingdom | Liberal market economy that reversed deep regional integration | Voted to leave the European Union in 2016; formally left in 2020                                                                                                                                           |

## Winners, Losers, and Backlash

Globalization has produced large overall gains, but those gains have been unevenly distributed. Economist Branko Milanovic (2016) showed that between the late 1980s and the late 2000s, incomes rose rapidly for the emerging middle classes of Asia and for the richest people in the world, while working-class and lower-middle-class incomes in wealthy countries grew slowly.

Research on the United States found that communities most exposed to Chinese import competition experienced lasting job losses and lower wages (Autor, Dorn, and Hanson 2013).

These uneven effects help explain the political backlash against globalization that has appeared in many countries. Rodrik (2018) argues that populist movements on both the left and the right have drawn support from voters who feel left behind by trade, immigration, and financial integration. The 2016 Brexit referendum, in which British voters narrowly chose to leave the European Union, is one prominent example. Nationalist and populist parties across Europe, Latin America, and Asia have also campaigned against international institutions and trade agreements. Connecting these trends to earlier chapters, globalization can strengthen national identity as a political force, fuel social movements, and in some cases contribute to democratic backsliding.

## From Hyperglobalization to "Slowbalization"

A series of shocks has slowed the pace of global integration. The 2008 global financial crisis showed how quickly problems in one country's financial system could spread worldwide. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragility of long supply chains when shortages of masks, medicines, and computer chips affected countries around the world. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine led to sweeping sanctions and forced European countries to rethink their dependence on Russian energy. Rising tension between the United States and China has led both countries to restrict trade and investment in sensitive technologies.

In response, many governments have returned to policies that were out of favor during the height of globalization. Tariffs, subsidies for domestic industries, and efforts to move supply chains closer to home or to politically friendly countries have become more common. Some observers describe this period as "slowbalization," a slowdown rather than a full reversal of global integration. Trade, travel, and digital connections remain far higher than in earlier decades. What has changed is that states are more willing to intervene in markets in the name of national security, economic resilience, and domestic political pressure.

These developments suggest that the state remains the central actor in comparative politics. Global forces shape the choices governments face, but domestic institutions, political coalitions, and national histories still determine how each country responds.

## Connecting to Course Themes

Globalization links many topics in this book. It shapes **political economy**, because trade and investment affect growth, inequality, and the role of the state. It interacts with **identity**, because nationalism and cultural change often rise in response to global integration. It affects **regime type**, because both democracies and authoritarian states use globalization to pursue their own goals. And it connects to the global challenges discussed in this chapter, including inequality, climate change, and cybersecurity, none of which any single state can solve alone.

## Think Comparatively

1. Why might a small, trade-dependent country like Denmark develop a larger welfare state than a large economy like the United States?
2. Using Rodrik's globalization trilemma, explain which goal the United Kingdom prioritized when it voted to leave the European Union.
3. How have China and Germany each benefited from globalization, and what risks has each faced as global integration has slowed?
4. Does cultural globalization make societies more alike or more different? Use the concept of glocalization in your answer.
5. Why have many governments returned to tariffs and industrial policy in recent years? Do these policies signal the end of globalization or a new phase of it?

## 7.7: Case Study - Germany and China

### Case Study Learning Objectives

Germany and China have almost nothing in common politically, yet both built decades of growth on the same basic model: manufacture more than you consume and sell the difference abroad. This case study uses a Most Different Systems Design to compare a federal parliamentary democracy with a single-party state, showing how similar economic strategies can emerge from very different regimes. It also examines why both now face strain as the world grows less willing to absorb what they produce, and how their trade relationship has reversed.

By the end of this case study, you will be able to:

- Compare a coordinated market economy with a state-led capitalist economy.
- Explain how each state intervenes in its economy and through what institutions.
- Analyze the shared vulnerability of export-led growth models.
- Connect industrial policy to global challenges including climate and trade conflict.

### Introduction

Germany and China have almost nothing in common politically. One is a federal parliamentary democracy with an independent constitutional court and competitive elections. The other is a single-party state in which the Communist Party directs the economy and vets political participation. If regime type determined economic strategy, these two should have pursued entirely different paths.

They did not. Both built decades of growth on the same basic model: manufacture more than you consume, and sell the difference abroad. Both became the dominant exporter in their respective categories. And both now face strain from the same direction, as the world grows less willing to absorb what they produce.

This is a Most Different Systems Design. Two states differing on regime type, scale, income level, and political culture converged on a similar economic strategy and are encountering similar limits. The comparison suggests that economic structure can operate somewhat independently of political system, which is itself a finding worth taking seriously.

There is a further reason to compare them now. The relationship between the two has reversed. For two decades Germany prospered by selling machinery to a China that was building. China now builds that machinery itself, often more cheaply, and sells it into Germany's markets.

### Germany

- Full Country Name: Federal Republic of Germany
- Political Regime: Federal parliamentary democracy
- Economic System: Coordinated market economy
- Growth Model: Export-led manufacturing
- Key Sectors: Automobiles, industrial machinery, chemicals, electrical equipment
- Distinctive Institutions: Codetermination, works councils, sectoral collective bargaining, dual vocational training, the *Mittelstand*
- GDP: approximately \$5 trillion (third largest globally)
- Recent Growth: Contraction in 2023 and 2024; roughly 0.2 percent in 2025; forecasts near 0.5 percent for 2026
- Capital: Berlin
- Population: approximately 84 million

## China

- Full Country Name: People's Republic of China
- Political Regime: Single-party state
- Economic System: State-led capitalism
- Growth Model: Investment- and export-led manufacturing
- Key Sectors: Electric vehicles, batteries, solar equipment, steel, electronics, machinery
- Distinctive Institutions: State-owned enterprises, directed credit through state banks, five-year plans, targeted industrial policy
- GDP: approximately \$21 trillion (second largest globally)
- Recent Growth: 4.7 percent in the first half of 2026; official target of 4.5 to 5 percent, the lowest in decades
- Capital: Beijing
- Population: approximately 1.4 billion

## Two Ways to Coordinate an Economy

Section 7.2 placed political economic systems along a spectrum from laissez-faire to full state control. Neither of these cases sits at either pole. Both involve substantial coordination, but through entirely different institutions.

### Germany: Coordination Through Bargaining

Germany is the standard example of what Section 7.6 introduced as a **coordinated market economy**. Firms remain privately owned and the state does not direct production, but economic decisions are negotiated among organized actors rather than settled purely by market competition.

Under **codetermination**, employees of large firms elect representatives to company supervisory boards, and works councils give workers a formal voice in plant-level decisions. Wages are set largely through **sectoral collective bargaining** between employer associations and unions rather than firm by firm. The **dual vocational training** system combines classroom instruction with paid apprenticeships, producing the skilled workforce that precision manufacturing requires and giving firms an incentive to retain workers they helped train. The *Mittelstand*, a dense network of mid-sized, often family-owned specialist manufacturers, supplies components to the larger firms.

These institutions produce a distinctive set of trade-offs. They deliver high wages, low labor conflict, and sustained quality in engineering-intensive sectors. They also make rapid adjustment difficult. A system built to retain skilled workers and negotiate change incrementally is not built to pivot quickly when the technology underlying an industry shifts.

### China: Coordination Through the State

China's economy combines private enterprise with direct state steering. State-owned enterprises dominate finance, energy, telecommunications, and heavy industry. State banks direct credit toward sectors designated as strategic. Five-year plans and targeted industrial policies set objectives that provincial governments and firms are expected to meet.

The results in targeted sectors have been dramatic. China now accounts for the substantial majority of global solar equipment manufacturing and more than half of global electric vehicle production, along with dominant positions in batteries and related supply chains. Research and development spending rose from roughly 1.8 percent of GDP in 2012 to about 2.6 percent by 2023.

The method also generates a characteristic problem. When credit is directed toward designated sectors and local governments compete to meet targets, the result is frequently production capacity exceeding what any market can absorb. Chinese officials have recently described this as *neijuan*, or involution, and launched an "anti-involution" campaign to consolidate overbuilt sectors including steel, cement, and solar.

## The Relationship Inverts

For roughly two decades, the two economies were complementary. China industrialized and needed machine tools, factory equipment, chemicals, and vehicles. Germany made those things. German firms earned substantial profits in the Chinese market,

and Chinese demand helped carry Germany through the eurozone crisis.

That relationship has reversed. Chinese manufacturers now produce machinery, vehicles, and industrial equipment domestically, frequently at lower cost and at quality that increasingly matches or approaches German output. Economists refer to this as the second China shock, distinguishing it from the earlier wave that affected labor-intensive manufacturing in wealthy countries. The first shock displaced low-wage work. This one reaches into precisely the high-value engineering sectors that were supposed to be safe.

The consequences for Germany have been substantial. The economy contracted in 2023 and 2024 and has barely grown since, with industrial production running roughly 15 percent below its 2017 peak. Major employers including Volkswagen, Bosch, and ThyssenKrupp have announced job reductions in the tens of thousands. Chinese manufacturers now sell more electric vehicles globally than all German brands combined.

Germany's difficulties are not solely attributable to China. The loss of inexpensive Russian natural gas after 2022 raised energy costs permanently for chemicals, glass, ceramics, and metals, creating what analysts describe as a structural cost disadvantage. American tariffs added further pressure on an export-dependent economy. But the competitive shift is central.

## How Each State Has Responded

Both governments have intervened, and the form of intervention reflects each system's institutions.

**Germany** reached first for fiscal policy. In March 2025 it loosened the *Schuldenbremse*, the constitutional debt brake that had effectively prohibited debt-financed public investment, and established a special fund of roughly €500 billion for infrastructure and climate neutrality over twelve years. Notably, Germany cannot set its own trade policy. Tariffs are an EU competence, and the European Commission has imposed duties on some Chinese goods including electric vehicles, in force since late 2024. The German automotive industry association opposed those tariffs, fearing retaliation against German exports to China. This is a striking illustration of Section 7.1's core claim that political economy concerns the interaction between states and markets: Germany's largest export industry lobbied against protection for itself, because its interests as an exporter outweighed its interests as a domestic producer.

**China** reached for industrial policy. The anti-involution campaign aims to consolidate overbuilt sectors and curb what officials have called irrational price competition. Investment continues to flow toward advanced manufacturing, semiconductors, and clean energy. But China faces its own constraints: a property sector downturn that has persisted for years, sustained deflationary pressure, weak domestic consumption, and youth unemployment near 17 percent.

## The Shared Vulnerability

Here is the comparative insight. Germany and China have opposite political systems and, at the moment, opposite-looking economic problems. Germany is stagnating and losing export share. China is growing and recorded a trade surplus of roughly \$1.19 trillion in 2025, the largest any country has ever recorded.

Both, however, depend on the same arrangement. A growth model built on exporting more than you consume requires other countries to consume more than they produce. That works while the global economy expands and markets stay open. It becomes fragile when growth slows or barriers rise.

Barriers are rising. The European Union has opened investigations into Chinese electric vehicles, solar panels, and steel. The United States has imposed steep duties. Brazil, Indonesia, and India have raised their own barriers against inexpensive Chinese imports. This is the "slowbalization" described in Section 7.6, and it constrains both economies, though Germany feels it through lost competitiveness and China through closing markets.

Neither has solved the underlying problem. Germany has not found new export markets to replace a China that now competes rather than buys. China has not succeeded in shifting growth toward domestic consumption, which is why exports remain essential despite the trade friction they generate.

## Connecting to Global Challenges

Section 7.4 introduced the tragedy of the commons and the collective action problem underlying climate change. China's

industrial policy sits awkwardly across both sides of that problem.

By manufacturing solar panels, batteries, and electric vehicles at enormous scale, China has driven down the global cost of decarbonization more than any policy any single country has adopted. Clean energy has become a substantial contributor to Chinese GDP growth, with clean-power generation, transmission, and storage accounting for a large share. From the standpoint of the global commons, this is a public good produced largely through one state's industrial strategy.

The same subsidies, however, generate the overcapacity and trade conflict described above, and China remains the world's largest emitter in absolute terms. Meanwhile Germany, which pioneered renewable energy policy, now finds its energy-intensive industries disadvantaged by high power costs while importing the cheap green technology Chinese policy produced.

This is the collective action problem in an unfamiliar form. The usual worry is that no state will bear the cost of providing a global public good. Here, one state bore much of the cost of making clean technology affordable, and the result has been trade disputes rather than gratitude, because the same policy that produced the public good also threatened other states' industries.

Section 7.5 noted that Germany and China regulate technology through opposing frameworks, with Germany operating under EU rules emphasizing individual rights and China under a cyber sovereignty model emphasizing state control. Each approach reflects the political system that produced it, and each shapes where investment in artificial intelligence and data-intensive industry flows.

## Comparing the Two Cases

*Political economy in Germany and China*

| Feature                             | Germany                                                           | China                                                       |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| Political regime                    | Federal parliamentary democracy                                   | Single-party state                                          |
| Economic system                     | Coordinated market economy                                        | State-led capitalism                                        |
| How coordination happens            | Bargaining among firms, unions, and banks                         | Party-state direction of credit and targets                 |
| Ownership of major firms            | Private                                                           | Mixed, with dominant state-owned enterprises                |
| Growth model                        | Export-led manufacturing                                          | Investment- and export-led manufacturing                    |
| Principal policy tool used recently | Fiscal (debt brake reform, investment fund)                       | Industrial (consolidation of overbuilt sectors)             |
| Control over trade policy           | Delegated to the European Union                                   | Retained by the national government                         |
| Current strain                      | Stagnation, lost competitiveness, high energy costs               | Deflation, property downturn, overcapacity, closing markets |
| Shared vulnerability                | Dependence on foreign demand in a period of rising trade barriers |                                                             |

## Think Comparatively

1. Germany and China have opposite political systems but adopted similar export-led growth strategies. What does this suggest about the relationship between regime type and economic model?
2. Germany's institutions were built to retain skilled workers and negotiate change gradually. How does that strength become a weakness when an industry's underlying technology shifts?
3. The German automotive industry opposed EU tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles. Why would a domestic industry oppose protection for itself, and what does this reveal about how economic interests are formed?
4. China's subsidies produced overcapacity at home and cheaper clean technology worldwide. Using the framework in Section 7.4, is this a solution to a collective action problem or a source of new ones?
5. Both economies depend on others consuming more than they produce. Can every major economy pursue export-led growth simultaneously? What does your answer imply about the sustainability of the model?
6. Germany cannot set its own trade policy because that authority belongs to the European Union. Using Rodrik's globalization trilemma from Section 7.6, what did Germany trade away, and what did it gain?

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## 7.8: Chapter Review Questions

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### Study Questions

Use these questions to review the chapter. Try answering each one in your own words. If a question stops you, that is the section worth rereading.

1. Name the four political economic systems and the core commitment of each. Which best describes the economy where you live?
2. What is comparative advantage, and does international trade create losers? Identify a tariff imposed by any government in the past year and explain who it was intended to protect and who pays for it.
3. Compare a coordinated market economy with a liberal market economy. Why has Germany's model struggled to adjust to competition from China?
4. State the globalization trilemma and explain what it predicts about political conflict. Find a recent case where international rules or agreements constrained what an elected government could do.
5. Why is climate change a collective action problem, and how does the tragedy of the commons apply? What would have to change for states to cooperate more effectively?
6. Trace one product you own back through its supply chain as far as you can. What does it reveal about economic globalization, and what would disrupt it?

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# List of Key Terms

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## How to Use This Guide

This guide lists every key term from the course with a short definition. Use it to check your recall, not to replace reading the chapters. On the exam you may be asked to define a term, apply it to a country, or explain how two terms relate to each other, so for each term you should also be able to name an example from one of the case studies.

Two terms appear in more than one chapter with different meanings. Pay attention to which chapter a question comes from.

## Module 1: Why and How We Compare

- **Area studies:** An approach to comparative analysis in which scholarship is organized geographically, such as Latin American Studies or East Asian Studies.
- **Case study:** An intensive examination of a single case, often to better understand a particular variable of interest.
- **Causal case study:** A case study organized around a central hypothesis about how one variable affects another.
- **Comparative politics:** The subfield of political science that studies political structures around the world in an organized, methodological way, looking first within countries and then across them.
- **Confounding variable:** A third variable that influences both the independent and dependent variables, producing a misleading appearance of a relationship between them.
- **Correlation:** A relationship between two variables. It is positive when they rise and fall together, negative when one rises as the other falls.
- **Cross-national studies:** Research that uses systematically comparable data from two or more countries, often quantitative.
- **Deductive reasoning:** Starting with a general theory and testing it against specific observations. A top-down approach.
- **Dependent variable:** The presumed effect in a cause-and-effect relationship. Also called the outcome variable.
- **Descriptive case study:** A case study that describes what the researcher observes without testing a central causal hypothesis.
- **Empirical research:** Analysis based on experiment, experience, or observation, as opposed to normative analysis about how things ought to be.
- **Experiment:** A study in which the researcher controls the random assignment of subjects to treatment and control groups.
- **External validity:** The extent to which findings can be generalized beyond the cases actually studied.
- **Falsifiability:** The ability of a statement to be logically contradicted through empirical testing. A research question that cannot be proven false is not scientific.
- **Formal institutions:** Institutions based on clear, written rules, usually with authority to enforce them through punishment.
- **Hypothesis:** A specific, testable prediction about the relationship between two or more variables.
- **Independent variable:** The presumed cause in a cause-and-effect relationship. Also called the explanatory variable.
- **Inductive reasoning:** Using specific observations to build toward a general theory. A bottom-up approach.
- **Informal institutions:** Institutions based on unwritten conventions about how people should behave, with no formal authority monitoring compliance.
- **Institutions:** The beliefs, norms, and organizations that structure social and political life. They are predictable, stable, and shape individual behavior.
- **Method of agreement:** John Stuart Mill's approach of comparing two or more cases to isolate the characteristic they have in common.
- **Method of difference:** John Stuart Mill's approach of comparing two or more cases to isolate the characteristic they do not have in common.
- **Most Different Systems Design (MDSD):** Selecting cases that differ on most variables but share the same outcome, to ask why different systems produce the same result.
- **Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD):** Selecting cases that are similar on most variables but differ in outcome, to isolate what explains the difference.
- **Natural experiment:** An observational study in which a treatment is randomly assigned by some factor other than the researcher.
- **Operationalization:** The process of making an abstract concept measurable.
- **Qualitative research:** Research that explores ideas and phenomena in depth, usually using a small number of cases.
- **Quantitative research:** Research that tests a theory or hypothesis through statistical analysis of data from a large sample.

- **Sovereignty:** Fundamental governmental power and authority in decision-making within a given territory.
- **Subnational studies:** Research comparing governments below the national level, either within one country or across several.

## Module 2: States, Regimes, and the Role of the State

- **Anarchy:** A situation with no societal structure, no established hierarchy of power, and no central governing authority.
- **Authority:** The state's power to get things done.
- **Charismatic legitimacy:** Authority based on the personal charisma and appeal of a particular leader.
- **Constitution:** A written document describing the basic principles and laws of a state.
- **Country:** A term encompassing both the political institutions of the state and the nation or nations within a territory.
- **Coup d'état:** An abrupt, unlawful, and sometimes violent seizure of power from an existing government, usually by political or military elites.
- **Cult of personality:** A state's use of a leader's real and exaggerated traits to solidify that leader's power.
- **Democracy:** A political regime in which the supreme power of government is vested in the people.
- **Direct democracy:** A system in which citizens participate directly in making laws and government decisions.
- **Failed state:** A state whose structures are so weak that the state effectively breaks down, though some government functions may persist.
- **Government:** The organization or group of people with the power to set rules for, manage, and regulate a political unit. Governments change while the state continues.
- **Hard power:** The ability to get others to do what you want through military force or aggressive economic measures.
- **Indirect (representative) democracy:** A system in which citizens elect representatives to make laws on their behalf.
- **Junta:** The small group of military leaders who run the government in a military regime.
- **Legitimacy:** The state's ability to establish itself as a valid power over its citizens.
- **Military regime:** A non-democracy in which military elites, rather than civilians, run the government.
- **Nation:** A population joined by common culture, history, language, or ancestry within a designated territory. A nation can exist without sovereignty.
- **Non-democracy:** A political regime that denies citizens meaningful institutional channels for making choices about their collective well-being.
- **Personalist regime:** A non-democracy ruled by a single, all-powerful leader, usually relying on charismatic legitimacy.
- **Political regime:** The set of rules that structures access to political power within a state.
- **Political regime transition:** A change from one type of political regime to another, in either direction.
- **Power:** The ability to get others to do what you want them to do.
- **Rational-legal legitimacy:** Authority derived from firmly established laws, rules, regulations, and procedures rather than from a person or tradition.
- **Social contract:** A formal or informal agreement in which the ruled submit to the laws of the rulers in exchange for certain benefits, such as protection.
- **Soft power:** The ability to get others to do what you want through persuasion and attraction, such as diplomacy or cultural influence.
- **State:** A national-level organization that administers its own legal and governmental policies within a designated territory and holds sovereignty.
- **State capacity:** The ability of a state to use its power to carry out its policies and promote its interests.
- **Strong state:** A state able to defend its territory, collect taxes, enforce laws, manage its economy, and maintain stability. Note that a state can be strong without being wealthy or democratic.
- **Traditional legitimacy:** Authority to rule based on historical precedent, such as hereditary succession.
- **Weak state:** A state unable to perform basic political tasks such as defending its territory, collecting taxes, or enforcing its laws.

## Module 3: Political Institutions

- **Administrative oversight:** The legislature's responsibility for ensuring that laws are properly carried out by government agencies.
- **Bicameral legislature:** A legislature with two chambers, such as the U.S. House and Senate or the German Bundestag and Bundesrat.
- **Bureaucracy:** A form of organization with a defined chain of command, division of labor, clear lines of authority, and adherence to established rules. It trades flexibility for predictability and fairness.
- **Case law:** The body of law built from earlier court decisions, which guides later rulings.
- **Checks and balances:** Powers that allow each branch of government to limit the others.

- **Civil service (merit) system:** A system of hiring government employees based on their ability to do the job, created to replace patronage-based hiring.
- **Coalition:** A temporary grouping of two or more political parties, common in parliamentary systems where no party holds a majority.
- **Congressional legislature:** An elected legislature that makes laws and shares power with other branches, but does not choose the head of government.
- **Consultative legislature:** A legislature that advises a ruler on laws and policy but lacks genuine lawmaking power.
- **Electoral system:** The set of rules governing how elections are conducted and how results are determined.
- **Executive branch:** The branch responsible for implementing and enforcing laws.
- **Federal system:** A system in which sovereignty is constitutionally shared between the national government and subnational governments.
- **Filibuster:** The use of unlimited debate in the U.S. Senate to delay or block legislation.
- **Gridlock:** The inability to pass legislation, often occurring when different parties control the executive and legislative branches.
- **Head of government:** The official who runs the day-to-day business of the state, such as a prime minister.
- **Head of state:** The symbolic representative of the state, such as a monarch or ceremonial president.
- **Judicial review:** The power of courts to determine whether laws and government actions are constitutional. Its strength varies widely across democracies.
- **Legislative branch:** The branch that makes and revises laws, provides administrative oversight, and represents constituents.
- **Majoritarian voting system:** A system in which a candidate must win a majority of votes, often requiring a second round or runoff.
- **Parliamentary system:** A system in which the chief executive is chosen by the legislature and depends on its confidence to remain in office.
- **Plurality voting system:** A system in which the candidate with the most votes wins, regardless of whether that is a majority. Also called first-past-the-post.
- **Political party:** An organized group of people who unite under shared values to get their preferred candidates elected to office.
- **Presidential system:** A system in which an independently elected president serves as both head of government and head of state for a fixed term.
- **Proportional voting system:** A system in which the distribution of legislative seats reflects the overall distribution of votes.
- **Semi-presidential system:** A system in which a directly elected president and a prime minister share executive power.
- **Separation of powers:** The division of government functions among legislative, executive, and judicial branches.
- **Spoils system:** The practice of awarding government jobs to party loyalists rather than on the basis of ability.
- **Subnational government:** Any level of government below the national level, including states, provinces, counties, cities, and special purpose districts.
- **Unitary system:** A system in which power is concentrated at the national level, with any subnational authority delegated from above.
- **Vote of no confidence:** A legislative vote that removes a head of government from office in a parliamentary system.

## Module 4: Democracy, Authoritarianism, and Regime Change

- **Aristocracy:** A form of government in which power is held by nobility or those considered to be of the highest class.
- **Carrots and sticks:** The combination of inducements that reward loyalty and punishments that enforce compliance, used by regimes to stay in power.
- **Civil rights:** Protections from discrimination.
- **Clientelism:** A strategy in which rulers buy the loyalty of broad segments of the population by distributing resources and services.
- **Co-optation:** Bringing opponents into regime-controlled institutions, such as legislatures or courts, in order to neutralize and monitor them.
- **Corruption:** The misuse of public resources for private gain.
- **Democratic backsliding:** The gradual degradation of a democracy toward more illiberal and autocratic rule. It is usually incremental, which makes it hard to identify while it is happening.
- **Democratic consolidation:** The process by which a new democracy becomes established, stable, and secure, so that democracy becomes "the only game in town."
- **Democratization:** A regime transition from a non-democratic regime to a democratic one.
- **Dominant party system:** A system in which the same political party is elected to office repeatedly, complicating tests of consolidation.

- **Fair elections:** Elections in which all votes carry equal weight, votes are counted accurately, and results are accepted by all parties.
- **Free elections:** Elections in which all eligible citizens are able to vote for the candidates of their choice.
- **Hybrid regime:** A non-democracy combining features of more than one type, such as a single-party system led by a personalist leader.
- **Illiberal regime:** A regime with some markers of democracy, such as multiple parties and elections, but with institutions so tilted toward the incumbent that competition is unfair.
- **Liberal democracy:** A democracy that holds free, fair, and regular elections and also protects civil liberties and civil rights.
- **Longevity test:** The claim that a democracy is consolidated once it has held free, fair, and regular elections for an extended period.
- **Monarchy:** A regime led by a single hereditary ruler, typically grounded in traditional legitimacy.
- **Neighborhood effect:** The tendency of states to move toward the regime type prevailing among their regional neighbors. Also called diffusion.
- **Oligarchy:** A regime in which a small group of wealthy elites controls political office and national resources without accountability to the public.
- **Paramilitaries:** Irregular armed groups, not part of the national military, that carry out violence on behalf of a state.
- **Patronage network:** A relationship in which leaders with access to resources distribute them to supporters in exchange for loyalty.
- **Political accountability:** Institutional channels for holding political leaders responsible for their decisions and actions.
- **Political competition:** The presence of multiple genuine options in political life, such as more than one party, candidate, or policy position.
- **Propaganda:** Biased information designed to convince an audience of a particular perspective or narrative.
- **Sharp power:** The use of information and communication technologies to destabilize other countries' democracies by spreading misinformation and sowing division.
- **Single-party regime:** A non-democracy in which members of one political party hold governing power, often quite stable over time.
- **Suffrage:** The right to vote in political elections.
- **Theocracy:** A non-democracy in which political authority is grounded in a sacred text and held by religious leaders.
- **Totalitarian regime:** A non-democracy seeking total control over all aspects of society, associated with twentieth-century fascist and communist states.
- **Two-election test:** The claim that a democracy is consolidated once a government elected in free and fair elections is later defeated and all sides accept the result. Also called the transfer of power test.

## Module 5: Political Culture, Identity, and Public Opinion

- **Attitudes:** Views formed from the combination of personal beliefs and lived experience.
- **Beliefs:** Core values that guide how a person makes decisions and interprets the world.
- **Citizenship:** The legal status of being a citizen of a particular state, carrying both rights and duties.
- **Class identity:** How a person thinks of themselves in relation to others based on economic and social position. It is fundamentally about power.
- **Constructivist identity:** The view that individuals hold multiple identities whose relative importance can change over time.
- **Culture:** The combination of customs, institutions, arts, media, and achievements of a social group, including its norms.
- **Elite theory:** The theory that a ruling class of business, government, and military leaders holds power and uses it in its own interests.
- **Ethnicity:** A categorization of people according to common racial, national, tribal, religious, linguistic, or cultural origins. Broader than race.
- **Framing (Module 5):** The influence of how a survey question is worded on the answer a respondent gives.
- **Gender:** A spectrum of socially constructed characteristics rooted in a person's internal sense of self, distinct from biological sex.
- **Irredentist movement:** An attempt by one state to reclaim territory it considers rightfully its own.
- **Margin of error:** A statistical estimate of how much results from a sample may differ from the true values for the whole population.
- **Multinational state:** A state containing multiple nations, such as India or Russia.
- **Nation-state:** A state in which all or most of the people belong to a single nation.
- **National identity:** How a person thinks of themselves as belonging to and representing the values of a nation.
- **Nationalism:** An ideology elevating one nation above others and seeking to align the boundaries of the nation with those of the state.

- **Norms:** Standard practices, rules, and behaviors considered acceptable in a society.
- **Political culture:** A shared set of ideological views and beliefs held by a population about the political system under which they live.
- **Political identity:** How a person or group thinks of themselves in relation to the politics and government of a state.
- **Political mobilization:** The process of organizing and motivating people with shared identities to take political action.
- **Political socialization:** The process by which a person's political beliefs and values form, change, and solidify over time, shaped by family, education, peers, media, and religion.
- **Post-materialism:** The extent to which a political culture prioritizes concerns beyond immediate material needs, such as human rights and the environment.
- **Priming:** Influencing a respondent's answer by making them think about a subject they would not otherwise have had in mind.
- **Primordialism:** The view that a person holds a single, fixed identity that does not change over time.
- **Public opinion:** The views and opinions of the public at large, particularly regarding government and 政策 questions.
- **Race:** A category of humankind sharing certain distinctive physical traits. Narrower than ethnicity.
- **Religiosity:** The strength of a person's attachment to organized religion, often measured through believing, belonging, behaving, and bonding.
- **Representative sample:** A sample that accurately reflects the characteristics of the population it is drawn from, achieved through randomization.
- **Separatist movement:** An attempt by a group with shared identity to establish its own government separate from the existing state.
- **Social desirability bias:** The tendency of respondents to give answers they believe are socially acceptable rather than their true views. It is especially severe where honest answers carry risk.

## Module 6: Contentious Politics: Movements and Violence

- **Civil war:** A sustained armed conflict within a state between two or more organized groups, one of which is the government, with stated political objectives.
- **Collective action:** Any activity in which coordination across individuals has the potential to achieve a common objective.
- **Collective action problem:** The difficulty of organizing coordinated action even when all participants would benefit from it.
- **Common pool resources:** Resources that are non-excludable but rivalrous, meaning one person's use reduces what is available to others.
- **Covert repression:** A state's use of secret police or intelligence agencies to suppress opposition in a hidden manner.
- **Diffusion:** The spread of ideas, movements, tactics, and resources across international borders.
- **Framing (Module 6):** How a social movement defines and presents a problem so that it resonates with members and with society more broadly.
- **Free rider problem:** The incentive individuals have to avoid contributing to a collective good while still enjoying its benefits.
- **Guerrilla warfare:** Small, lightly armed groups conducting unconventional, fast-moving attacks against the state, usually without mass mobilization.
- **Insurgency:** An uprising or revolt against a government, whose participants typically claim to represent the will of the people.
- **Intrastate political violence:** Political violence occurring wholly or largely within a single state.
- **Negotiated settlement:** An agreement between combatants to end political violence, usually requiring institutionalized power-sharing to endure.
- **Non-state actor:** Any political actor not associated with a government, ranging from charities and corporations to insurgents and terrorists.
- **Non-violent resistance:** Movements using protests, boycotts, sit-ins, and civil disobedience to achieve political goals. Research finds these succeed at roughly twice the rate of violent campaigns.
- **Overt repression:** A state's open and publicly acknowledged use of political violence against its own population.
- **Peacebuilding:** The implementation of political, economic, and social structures intended to promote sustainable peace after conflict.
- **Peacekeeping:** The deployment of national or multinational forces to help control and resolve an armed conflict.
- **Political opportunity:** The structural conditions, including the receptiveness of institutions and elites, that make a social movement's success possible.
- **Political violence:** The deliberate use of physical harm motivated by political intentions, whether to change or to preserve a social order.
- **Power-sharing:** Institutional arrangements guaranteeing former combatants a role in decision-making, considered essential to lasting settlements.
- **Prisoner's Dilemma:** A game illustrating why rational individuals may fail to cooperate even when cooperation would benefit

them both.

- **Public good:** A good or service that is non-excludable and non-rival, meaning no one can be excluded and one person's use does not diminish another's.
- **Rebellion:** A violent challenge to the government intended to draw attention to a status quo the challengers reject.
- **Revolution:** A public seizure of the state that overturns the existing government and produces a regime transition. It requires public participation, seizure of the state, and regime change.
- **Social movement:** A coordinated, goal-oriented form of collective action that operates outside established political institutions.
- **State-sponsored political violence:** Official government support for policies of violence, repression, and intimidation.
- **State-sponsored terrorism:** Government support for terrorist actions carried out in other states, either actively (the patronage model) or tacitly (the assistance model).
- **Terrorism:** A violent act targeting non-combatants for political purposes, intended to spread fear and pressure a government to change.
- **Third-party guarantor:** An external force that enforces the provisions of a negotiated settlement, such as a peacekeeping mission or an independent commission.
- **Transnational political violence:** Political violence that crosses state borders.

## Module 7: Political Economy and Global Challenges

- **Anthropocene:** The proposed geological epoch in which human activity has become the dominant driver of environmental change.
- **Austerity:** A set of economic reforms, centered on major reductions in government social spending, adopted to balance a budget or meet debt targets.
- **Capitalism:** A system in which individuals and private entities own land and capital, and supply and demand are determined by the market with limited state interference.
- **Communism:** A system in which the state, usually dominated by one party, controls the entire political economy including all property.
- **Comparative advantage:** The goods or services a state can produce more cheaply or easily than other states, given its resources.
- **Critical infrastructure:** Systems so essential that their failure would harm public safety, the economy, or national security, such as electricity, water, health care, and finance.
- **Cyber sovereignty:** The idea that each state should control the internet within its borders, including what information its citizens can access.
- **Cybersecurity:** The practices, technologies, and policies used to protect networks and information from attack, theft, or disruption.
- **Digital repression:** The use of surveillance and information control technologies by a government to suppress opposition.
- **Economic nationalism:** Attempts by a state to protect or strengthen its economy for nationalist goals, the modern form of mercantilism.
- **Environmental justice:** The fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, with attention to how pollution and climate harm fall disproportionately on marginalized communities.
- **Fiscal policy:** Government taxation, spending, and regulation.
- **Globalization:** The growing movement of goods, money, people, information, and ideas across national borders, with economic, political, and cultural dimensions.
- **Globalization trilemma:** Rodrik's argument that a country cannot simultaneously achieve deep economic integration, national sovereignty, and democratic politics. It can have any two.
- **Glocalization:** The blending of global influences with local traditions, so that global products and ideas take on local forms.
- **Laissez-faire:** An approach in which the government does not interfere in the economy, relying instead on free market forces.
- **Mercantilism:** A system seeking to maximize a state's wealth by increasing exports and limiting imports, dominant between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.
- **Monetary policy:** Actions taken by a central bank to affect the money supply, principally through interest rates.
- **Multistakeholder governance:** An approach in which governments, private companies, technical experts, and civil society share responsibility for managing the internet.
- **Negative externalities:** Costs of an action that are not borne by those who take the action, such as emissions affecting the global climate.
- **Neoliberalism:** A set of policies emphasizing deregulation, liberalization, and privatization, promoted globally by international financial institutions.
- **Protectionism:** Policies aimed at shielding domestic industry, including tariffs, quotas, subsidies, and non-tariff barriers.

- **Slowbalization:** A slowdown, rather than a full reversal, of global economic integration following shocks such as the financial crisis, the pandemic, and rising trade barriers.
- **Social democracy:** A system combining a capitalist base with heavy regulation, high taxation, and extensive social welfare programs to achieve a more equal society.
- **Socialism:** A system in which property and the means of production are collectively owned, usually by the state, with emphasis on equal distribution.
- **Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs):** Economic programs required by lenders such as the IMF and World Bank as a condition of loans, mandating liberalization and reduced social spending.
- **Sustainable development:** An approach integrating economic development, social equity, and environmental protection to meet present needs without compromising future generations.
- **Tragedy of the commons:** The tendency of individuals acting in self-interest to deplete a shared, limited resource, producing a collectively bad outcome.
- **Varieties of capitalism:** The approach distinguishing liberal market economies, which rely on competition, from coordinated market economies, which rely on negotiation among firms, unions, and government.
- **Washington Consensus:** The view, backed by the IMF, World Bank, and United States, that developing countries should adopt free market reforms and reduce state involvement in their economies.

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    - [3.10: Bibliography](#) - [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#)
  - 4: Democracy, Authoritarianism, and Regime Change - [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#)
    - [4.1: What is Democracy?](#) - [CC BY-NC 4.0](#)
    - [4.2: Democratic Consolidation](#) - [CC BY-NC 4.0](#)
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    - [4.6: Democratic Backsliding](#) - [CC BY-NC 4.0](#)
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    - [4.8: Chapter Review Questions](#) - [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#)
    - [4.9: Bibliography](#) - [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#)
  - 5: Political Culture, Identity, and Public Opinion - [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#)
    - [5.1: Introduction to Political Identity](#) - [CC BY-NC 4.0](#)
    - [5.2: Culture](#) - [CC BY-NC 4.0](#)
    - [5.3: Race and Ethnicity](#) - [CC BY-NC 4.0](#)
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- 5.12: Bibliography - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
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  - 6.3: A Framework for Explaining Social Movements - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
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## INDEX

No index terms found.

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### S

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**Sample Word 1** | Sample Definition 1

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