



AP[®] COMPARATIVE GOVERNMENT and POLITICS

Preliminary Course Outline for Academic Year 2005-06

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The Course

The AP® course in Comparative Government and Politics introduces students to fundamental concepts used by political scientists to study the processes and outcomes of politics in a variety of country settings. The course aims to illustrate the rich diversity of political life, to show available institutional alternatives, to explain differences in processes and policy outcomes, and to communicate to students the importance of global political and economic changes. Comparison assists both in identifying problems and in analyzing policymaking. For example, we only know that a country has a high population growth rate or serious corruption when we compare it to other countries. Careful comparison of political systems produces useful knowledge about the policies countries have effectively initiated to address problems, or indeed, what they have done to make things worse. We can compare the effectiveness of policy approaches to poverty or overpopulation by examining how different countries solve similar problems. Furthermore, by comparing the political institutions and practices of wealthy and poor countries, we can begin to understand the political consequences of economic well-being. Finally, comparison assists explanation. Why are some countries stable democracies and not others? Why do many democracies have prime ministers instead of presidents?

In addition to covering the major concepts that are used to organize and interpret what we know about political phenomena and relationships, the course should cover specific countries and their governments. Six countries form the core of the AP Comparative Government and Politics course. Great Britain, Russia, China, Mexico, and Nigeria are all regularly covered in college-level introductory comparative politics courses.¹ The inclusion of Iran adds a political system from a very important region of the world and one that is subject to distinctive political and cultural dynamics.² By using these six core countries, the course can move the discussion of concepts from abstract definition to concrete example, noting that not all concepts will be equally useful in all country settings. The following sections provide general descriptions of the major themes and concepts of the course.

¹ We recognize that the official names of these countries are United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Russian Federation, People's Republic of China, United Mexican States, and Federal Republic of Nigeria, respectively. However, for purposes of the AP Comparative Politics Exam we use the commonly known forms of these names.

² Iran's official name is Islamic Republic of Iran.

Topics

I. Introduction to Comparative Politics

The beginning of a college comparative politics course and the beginning of most textbooks in comparative politics introduce students to the study of politics: They explain how political scientists study politics and why it is important for students to be informed about politics abroad. It is useful to distinguish between normative, or value-related, questions, and empirical or factual questions at this early stage and to emphasize that political scientists are interested in both sorts of questions. In explaining how political scientists divide up their field of study, it is important to make clear what comparative inquiry has to offer.

We live in an interdependent world: what happens in Mexico, for example, impacts the United States. This point provides a good opportunity to introduce the theme of globalization and the general political and economic permeability of national borders. It is here that teachers will want to contrast the concepts of state, nation, regime, and government – a lesson inevitably leading to discussions about legitimacy, authority, and bases of political power, as well as the differences among these concepts. Thus, students might learn that the state is generally used to refer to the political power exercised over a defined geographic territory through a set of public institutions, in contrast to the nation that is often understood as a human community with a shared culture and history. This course treats governments as collections of individuals who occupy political office or exercise state power, whereas regimes are treated as the sets of rules and institutions that control access to, and exercise of, political power and that typically endure from government to government. Regime change occurs when these rules and institutions are replaced.

Students will need to grasp the conceptual differences and similarities among types of political systems. Despite vast differences between economies and regime types, most countries face similar and fundamental challenges, including those presented by the natural environment, social and ethnic diversity, economic performance, and the delivery of health care to citizens.

II. Sovereignty, Authority and Power

The study of politics requires an understanding of power. Comparative politics recognizes that power is territorially organized into states, or countries, that more or less control what happens within their borders, which is to say that they exercise sovereignty. At the same time, it is important that students recognize that there has not always been a system of states. This system of states, in fact, is relatively recent and first emerged in Europe. There are now increasing pressures to move beyond this system to more supranational systems of governance, such as the emerging European Union (EU). It is also important to emphasize that sovereignty can also be affected by internal divisions over power and its distribution.

Across national borders, the sources of power that are the foundation for politics vary, and these different sources have an effect on the construction of the rules of politics. These rules — which generally take the form of constitutions — need to be understood in this context. Constitutions define both the role and constituent parts of a government and the limits and obligations of government with respect to the rights of citizens. Studying different types of political regimes, from forms of democracy to the various non-democratic forms, enables students to gain a clearer picture of how states strike a balance between citizen rights and government power. The exercise of power requires justification, and political scientists use the concept of legitimacy to refer to the popularly accepted use of power by a government.

Students must conceptualize the different ways in which political legitimacy is expressed in states, as well as recognizing when legitimacy has been lost.

State power is exercised within the context of specific economic systems. The course should introduce students to the scope and role of government in the economy. Students also should be familiar with belief systems that might form the foundation for claims to legitimacy. Ultimately both the belief systems that strengthen the legitimacy of the political system and the structures of the economy will have an impact on governmental effectiveness, capacity and control over state resources. Students should seek to understand the basics of the relationship between sources of authority, political power and governance.

Political scientists are interested in political culture, core values, and beliefs, and how they are fostered and disseminated through the process of political socialization. These values are often organized in specific ideologies that influence the direction of the exercise of power. Students should be encouraged to explore the differences in political values and beliefs. For instance, in some countries, religious belief-systems play this important political role. In other countries, more overt political agendas and ideologies perform this role.

III. Political Institutions

The study of political institutions should include the formal structure and workings of states and governments. In this introductory course, this means that students should master knowledge about different authority systems and government structures. A deep level of detail is not expected; rather, students should become familiar with the more-general descriptions of major political institutions. Determining what levels to focus on should be driven by the contextual environment in each of the six countries. Thus, for example, every state has multiple levels of authority, though the powers that

correspond to each vary widely. Some countries keep most policymaking at the national level, while others distribute powers more widely to regions and localities. Depending on the country, some authority is now passing to supranational organizations such as the EU as well.

It is important that students are familiar with the branches of government in the countries they study, and how these branches relate to one another. Students should understand different arrangements of executive power, different legislative structures, and the different models of executive-legislative relations. Beyond basic concepts such as parliamentary and presidential systems, or separation and fusion of power, students should be able to characterize the advantages and drawbacks of different institutional arrangements and understand how executive and legislative policymakers interact with other branches of the state apparatus. Some countries such as Britain have independent court systems, while China and others do not. Often, these judicial features depend on the roots of the legal system, whether the system uses code or civil law, ideology, custom and traditional authority, or religious codes. Students should understand the implications of whether a country has judicial review, and whether it operates through an independent national court system, theocratic oversight, or supranational courts.

Note, however, that the course curriculum must take students beyond constitutional arrangements. Since politics is both formal and informal, students need to understand formal constitutional patterns as well as procedures that are more informal. In this context, comparing institutions in different political and country settings will be very helpful. For instance, students should also understand how political elites are recruited and how political preferences are aggregated. The core countries offer examples of the major electoral systems, as well as cases of single-party systems (China, Mexico under the PRI), two-party systems (Great Britain), and multi-party systems (Russia, contemporary Mexico, Nigeria). Each system embodies particular perspectives on the purposes elections and parties serve.

The number of parties in a particular country is usually connected to the country's ideological spectrum as well as the electoral system. Students should also explore how interest groups exercise political influence in pluralist, corporatist, and single-party systems.

The six AP countries provide good examples of how the exercise of real political power often does not correspond to the model implied by formal political structures. For China, Nigeria, and Mexico before the PRI's decline, revealing contrasts can be drawn between written constitutions and informal political realities. The composition and recruitment of political elites and how they are linked to other elites in society reveals much about informal political power.

The bureaucracy is a crucial part of the political system. Technical experts advise and administer policy that, in principle, is fashioned by political leaders. The ideological sympathies and traditions (e.g., professionalism) of the bureaucracy and its channels of recruitment influence its political role. The military also affects politics in many countries through informal pressure, as in China and Russia, or through periodic seizures of power as in Nigeria. The professional or political role of the armed forces, and the nature of civilian control over them, varies across countries and time. The intelligence community or secret police can be an additional locus of coercion. Similarly, the judiciary plays a variety of roles in the six countries, in some places, it exhibits important levels of autonomy, and in other countries, it is used to establish religious or ideological domination. Students should become familiar with the ways in which the judiciary does or does not exercise independent power and shapes public policies and political practices of citizens as well as of the state.

IV. Citizens, Society, and the State

Ultimately, politics hinges on the interactions between state and society. Therefore, the course should not be confined to the internal workings or the institutional underpinnings of states. Through

country cases, students can learn how certain kinds of cleavages such as ethnicity, religion, or class become politically relevant. Some regimes like China and Iran have formal arrangements for representing social groups such as ethnic or religious minorities. A country's political patterns depend largely on the characteristics and demands of its population. Institutions can blunt or exacerbate cleavages in society. The countries studied in this course provide ample evidence for pursuing questions about how states manage and respond to deeply held divisions among their citizens.

Gaining an understanding of civil society both conceptually and within countries will provide useful tools that will enable students to explore the ways in which state power is mediated and the power of citizens may be enhanced. Much of politics is affected by the extent and nature of citizen organization independent of the state. Advocacy groups, social networks, and the media all shape citizens' political views and mobilize political forces. The interaction between regime-type and patterns in civil society is often crucial. Students should explore the range of ways that a citizenry can act politically, both through traditional means such as voting, and through more forceful political action such as strikes and insurgencies. Events in some of the covered countries, such as Iran's 1979 revolution, China's 1989 Tiananmen crisis, and Mexico's 1994 Chiapas revolt, provide examples of extraordinary political pressures. The emergence of global civil society, such as transnational networks of human rights and environmental groups, is also having significant effects on government-citizen relations.

The media too has played important roles not only domestically within countries but also as a purveyor of global culture. Students should consider the relation between the media (in its various forms) and the state, as well as in the ways it influences and shapes public perceptions, beliefs, and practices.

Citizens participate in politics in a variety of ways. A significant exercise of political power in most societies is political participation. Students should learn how to define the concept and describe the ways in which political participation can both support and undermine a political system. Since participation can take a variety of forms, and can be voluntary or coerced, students will need to discuss the different ways that citizens in China, for instance, participate, and to contrast those methods with citizens in other countries. In this process, students should be exposed to the continuum of participation, ranging from behavior supportive of a regime to behavior that seeks to change or overthrow it.

Participation takes both individual and group forms. In political science, group participation is often framed as social movements. Contemporary social movements — ranging from anti-globalization, to environmental issues, civil rights, and enfranchisement claims, have specific forms and particular methods. While it would be impossible to cover all the social movements in each of the countries, the curriculum should enable students to gain some insight into major social movements. In this process, students will need to grapple with the connection between social movements and representation — especially since this is often the most basic claim put forward by social groups demanding the attention of their states.

V. Political and Economic Change

Much of the cross-case coverage will inevitably deal with processes of change, since this has been the primary theme of politics in the recent past. One way to introduce students to the notion of change is to explore the interaction between political and economic trends. The countries provide illustrative examples of this interaction, which can take the form of political and economic reform, coups d'état, and revolutions. Students should be able to distinguish among these types of political and economic change.

Since the end of the Cold War, a wave of democratization has occurred throughout much of the developing world and in the former Communist bloc. Comparing Russia, Mexico, and Nigeria in light of their democratic transitions offers an interesting study in contrasts. The study of democratization should include examination of the preconditions, processes, and outcomes of these transitions. The success of democratization can be compared across countries, just as contrasts can be drawn with countries like China in which democratization has barely begun or has foundered. Democratic consolidation often requires new elite pacts, constitutional arrangements to minimize conflict, and acceptance of democracy by key social groups. The economic preconditions and effects of stable democracy will provide a useful counterpoint to studies of countries facing the upheavals of political change. In addition to democratization, students should reflect on the conditions that lead to breakdowns of authoritarianism. Cleavages within a regime, breakdowns in state capacity, international pressure, and a substantial degree of mobilization by opponents are all frequently associated with regime change.

All six AP countries have undergone significant economic policy shifts over the past two decades. Students should investigate the consequences of economic reform packages. Not only should students understand the basic economic policies, but they also need to understand the interaction between domestic economic reforms and their political effects. For instance, countries such as China and Mexico have revised fundamental national “bargains,” that change the relationship between capital and labor that date back half a century or more. Students should be encouraged to trace outcomes such as income gaps or rising standards of living, or differential access to social services and education to economic policies and their impact. Within the context of economic change, the course should address issues such as corruption and economic inequality.

Globalization has become an increasingly important theme over the last two decades, especially as national policymaking has been affected by interdependence. Certain previously domestic economic policy responsibilities have been pooled by participating states in supranational organizations like the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the EU. How do global and domestic forces interact in such a context? The cultural aspects of globalization also must be examined. Emergence of a worldwide consumer culture and ideological convergence among elites of different countries, on the one hand, is balanced by new ethnic fragmentation and widening class-based cultural cleavages within countries, on the other. Additionally, some attention should be given to the backlashes against globalization. Students should evaluate how these backlashes bear on themes such as sovereignty and the ideal of the nation-state. Some responses to globalization reaffirm the sovereignty of the modern state, while others also transcend it by taking religious or ethnic identities as a reference point.

VI. Public Policy

Public policy will require analysis within each country as well as comparatively. Policy issues need to be approached both as domestic and as global policy matters, as there are broad and enduring policy areas common to most countries: How to ensure successful economic performance where poverty is widespread? How to provide for social welfare needs for citizens? How to extend and protect individual liberties and freedoms? In every state, the approach to these problems will be different, but in all states, these recurring puzzles demand the attention of the state's policy makers.

Policymaking is influenced by a broad range of factors. First, consideration must be given to formal and informal institutional influences on policy making. Interest groups, political parties, executive, judicial and legislative branches all participate in the creation of policy. For many of the systems

studied, changes in the economic substructure have been both the result of policy changes as well as causal factors in policy development. For example, privatization in Mexico has resulted in changing policy needs. Often, conservative economic trends that move away from the traditional social welfare state and its benefits also have an impact on liberal/left party politics, as has happened in the Labour Party of Great Britain. Interest groups make different demands on government, with different consequences for public policy.

Second, development itself results in numerous shifts and alterations in policy requirements. Thus, as the Chinese economy has transformed to a market socialist system, policy makers in non-economic areas have had considerable pressures placed on them. Likewise, the Russian economic structural changes since 1990 have caused a wide range of policy challenges in the areas of civil rights, environmental concerns and so on.

Third, global pressures also are exerted on policy makers in both developed and developing systems. International agreements and organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Bank, the EU, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) push for policy changes in all six of the systems studied. Many of the countries have witnessed considerable policy debates over such issues as sovereignty and the conflicting interests of world and domestic policy needs. Globalization creates considerable tension in areas such as environmental policy, income distribution, taxation policy and the like. Very often, global considerations have produced a divergence among different interest groups within the system itself.

Policy concerns are broad and may differ from country to country. Issues may include social welfare policy (including education, pension policy, poverty issues); civil liberties, rights and freedoms; the environment; control and management of natural resources; economic performance (including

employment, inflation, monetary policy in general, income distribution); and population and migration policies. Gender and ethnicity are also critical concerns to policy makers in all systems. Students should be able to discuss and analyze policy differences in a comparative context, exploring how different systems create different solutions to domestic and global problems.

Throughout the course, students should develop the ability to move back and forth between conceptualizing political problems and the practice of politics in the different countries. The emphasis should be on broad trends that allow comparison, rather than on details that are unrelated to larger trends and concepts.