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# UNIT 1 COMPARATIVE POLITICS: NATURE, SIGNIFICANCE AND EVOLUTION

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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Among the several fields or sub-disciplines into which Political Science is divided, Comparative Politics is the only one which carries a *methodological* instead of a substantive label. The content and boundaries of comparative politics are poorly defined, partly because the 'field' is an ambiguous compound of method and subject areas. As some scholars have argued comparative politics has a "messy centre". This is because it focuses on comparison and the comparative method, as a method of political inquiry. While all analysis involve some degree of comparison without which an individual phenomenon cannot be understood, comparative politics teaches us how to do so. It attempts to instill into this exercise scientific **rigour** and technique. While **comparative** government existed as a sub-discipline for a long time, comparative politics is a relatively new field dating from the post second world war period. It is a field that is difficult to define, has undergone many changes and reached a plateau by the 1980s beyond which it could not move. But in recent years it has again attracted a growing interest due to the emergence of new areas such as comparative public policy.

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## 1.2 WHAT IS COMPARATIVE POLITICS AND ITS EVOLUTION

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Broadly the goal of comparative politics is to encompass the major political similarities and differences between countries. The task is to develop some perspective on the mixture of **constants** and variability which characterises the world's governments and the contexts in which they operate. While the term comparative government is quite old, the term comparative politics as mentioned above is relatively new. The change is significant, as are a number of differences between the two, which go much beyond that of nomenclature. **The** former is described as the traditional approach while the latter is viewed as the modern approach. In 1955 R.C. Macridis clearly differentiated **the two** when he pointed out that the traditional approach was non comparative, descriptive, parochial, static and **monographic**. These characteristics require a brief discussion.

The traditional approach was *non-comparative* and *descriptive*. In that standard textbooks described a **number** of countries one after the other in detail, but attempted little comparison. It was hence monographic in character i.e. we had excellent country studies but no attempt to understand why particular countries had a multi-party system or why democracy worked better in one country than another. This was because the *traditional approach was much narrower in scope as it was based on the formal-legal approach that characterised political science as a whole.*

Consequently, as its name implies, it was restricted to the study of the formal processes of governments and institutions. In contrast, comparative politics is wider in scope and encompasses not merely institutions but political processes as well i.e., it covers political parties, pressure groups and a wide range of informal institutions and processes as well. This enables better analysis of institutions and processes *within* states and *between* states. Hence, it can be comparative in a way that the traditional approach could not be. Second, comparative politics, in contrast to the traditional approach, is *multi-disciplinary* in outlook, meaning that it draws not only on political science but also on history, economics and sociology. Part of this was due to changes in the discipline of political science as a whole, and partly due to the behavioural approach, which, as we shall see, affected comparative politics also. Third, the traditional approach *was parochial* i.e. restricted to European governments and therefore Eurocentric in its outlook and analysis. The post-war period saw a broadening of the field as *after* decolonisation, the number of states increased throwing up fresh theoretical and methodological questions. Finally the traditional approach was *static*; it did not try to understand why systems change. Comparative politics in contrast, has been preoccupied with questions of how political systems change from tradition to modernity and the problems that rapid change can produce, and also why some systems change more slowly than others and retain traditional features.



In the 1950s and 60s, a number of distinguished scholars such as Harold Lasswell and Gabriel Almond, took on the task of carving out and establishing the field of comparative politics. Their basic task was to distinguish it from Political Theory on the one hand, and from International Relations and Area Studies on the other. Comparative Politics was described as different from Political Theory as it *involved* not only theorising but also *classifying*, categorising and discovering relationships among variables, hypotheses building and empirical testing. It was suggested that circular relationship can be visualised between theory and comparative politics. Comparative research begins by taking a fairly established theory, testing it empirically in the field in a number of situations and then refining the theory again in the light of the findings. Many theoretical tools such as party-systems, federalism, parliamentary systems etc. were formulated in this manner.

*Comparative politics has had, and continues to have, 'boundary' problems with International Relations. This is because there is common ground between them, the former often studies countries as enclosed within a world capitalist system.* Many scholars such as A.G. Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein have developed large-scale approaches such as Dependency and Underdevelopment using this method. But there are major differences: comparative politics does not deal with the relationships *between* countries in depth concentrating on comparison of political phenomenon *within* countries, while the former is a central subject in International Relations. Area Studies arose during the Second World War when there was need to have knowledge about the history, culture, economy and social structure of certain strategic areas important during the war for framing policy. This necessitated an interdisciplinary team consisting of social scientists, from different disciplines, which could focus upon an area intensively and provide the required information. *Comparative politics also studies 'areas' intensively, a major difference is that while Area Studies experts can provide a great deal of data which explains immediate events, long term and underlying deeper trends require analytical and theoretical tools which only comparative politics can provide.* There however, remains a contested proposition between the two sub-disciplines.

*The shift which took place from comparative government to politics thus, can be traced to two changes in the immediate post-war period: developments internal to the discipline of*

*political science and second, the broadening of the empirical field to include the New States which arose out of de-colonisation.* In the late 1950s Political Science was affected by the 'Behavioural Revolution' which had already affected anthropology and sociology. This created a desire for greater scientific rigour and a multi-disciplinary approach. The Behavioural Revolution implied that behaviour was more important than rules, thus necessitating the systematic collection of large amounts of data about politics in various countries as well as fields. As data without theory would be blind, the behavioural revolution implied the explicit elaboration of concepts, models and hypotheses. The emergence of the Third World further stimulated a whole new approach to the explanation of differences between politics and society in rich and poor countries – the development and modernisation theme.

It led to the use of two frameworks in comparative politics: the systems approach and structural-functional analysis. The notion of system was taken from the biological and physical sciences where the human body or any machine was visualised as a system with sub-systems (organs or parts) which had 'boundaries' but which were closely interrelated and overlapped. Human society was therefore made up of various systems – political system, economic system etc. each of which performed specialised functions. All societies, it was argued, move from simple to complex i.e. the roles performed by individuals within them become more specialised leading to the emergence of distinct systems with clear-cut boundaries and functions. The more complex, the more developed or modern the system becomes, human societies were visualised as moving towards greater specialisation and modernity. The *political system* was conceptualised as a system in which policies are to be implemented for further development. Complementary to this the structural functional approach, borrowing from sociology, attempted to create a value-free science of politics by describing all systems as having similar basic structures and functions – irrespective of the level of development of their political, social and economic systems – which could be compared and analysed. All systems attempted in their passage from simple to complex, or tradition to modernity, to reach a point of equilibrium.

The emergence of a number of New States as a result of process of de-colonisation also encouraged such theorising. By the use of systems analysis and the structural functional framework, all political systems, it was felt could be studied irrespective of their differing historical background, level of economic development, culture and values. The main dilemma was whether the theoretical tools and techniques used to study European governments should be merely extended to the study of the New States, or was there need for a change. Concepts such as multi-party system, federalism, parliamentary and presidential systems were the product of comparative observation of Western governments over a long period of time. Would they be useful in studying non-Western governments and processes, or was there, as Lucian Pye claimed, a distinct 'non-Western political process' due to differences of history and culture? In general the only concession made to the differences between the east and west was to allow for some 'cultural differences' in analysis. Apart from this the concepts of political development and modernisation fashioned by scholars such as James Coleman, Gabriel Almond and Lucian Pye were seen as useful for analysing and comparing the new states. A similar development is seen on the Left as well with the fashioning of large scale concepts such as Underdevelopment and Dependency to understand the developing countries and to highlight their differences with the West. Thus the emphasis was on 'grand theory' or large-scale theorising about political system.

These approaches ran into trouble from the very beginning. These were criticised as Eurocentric, reductionist and too ambitious. Comparisons on this scale proved very difficult. There was therefore

a return to a more normative **science** that did not ignore cultural differences, which make comparisons **difficult**, and middle range theorising in which comparison is pitched at a lower level. Many scholars were disillusioned by their own efforts. Almond, writing in the International Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences, argued that Comparative Politics was at best a 'movement and not a sub-discipline within Political Science'. By the end of the 1970s, comparative politics reached a plateau; parts of it were incorporated into political theory and parts into area studies. A more optimistic assessment would be that while the attack on the traditional approach was successful, the new alternatives suggested also were not free from limitations. The reorientation of comparative politics resulted in an expansion of the sub-discipline in terms of theoretical depth and empirical scope as attempts were made to integrate a growing but disparate body of knowledge by means of theory.

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### 1.3 THE COMPARATIVE METHOD

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Scholars are not agreed on the comparative method, its nature and scope. Some of them like A.N. Eisenstadt, argue that the term does not properly designate a specific method, but rather a special focus on cross-societal, institutional or macro-societal aspects of societies and social analysis. Others like Arend Lijphart, hold that it is **definitely** a method, not just a convenient term vaguely symbolising the focus of one's research interests. But it can be defined as one of the basic methods – the others being the experimental, statistical and case study methods – **of establishing** general propositions. On the other hand, Harold Lasswell argues that for anyone with a scientific approach to political phenomena, the idea of an independent comparative method seems redundant, **because** the scientific approach is 'unavoidably comparative'. Gabriel Almond also equates the comparative with the scientific method. Yet, it is essential to underline that scholars do recognise that the comparative method, is a method of discovering empirical relationships among variables and not a method of measurement. The step of measuring variables is logically prior to the step of finding relationships among them. It is the second of these steps to which the term comparative method refers. Finally, a distinction should be made between method and technique. The comparative method is a broad-gauge, general method, not a narrow specialised technique. It is in this vein that scholars refer to the method of comparison, or some prefer the term comparative approach, because it lacks the preciseness to call it a method. The comparative method may also be thought of as a basic research strategy, in contrast with a mere tactical aid to research.

The comparative method is best understood if briefly compared with the experimental, statistical and case study method. The experimental method is used to understand the relationship between two variables in a controlled situation. Since such experiments are not possible in political **science**, an alternative is the statistical method, which entails the conceptual (mathematical) manipulation of empirical data in order to discover controlled relationships among variables. It handles the problem of control by means of partial correlations or cross-tabulations **i.e.** by dividing the sample into a number of different groups (for example on the basis of age, income, education etc.) and looking at the correlation between the two selected variables in each. This has come to **be accepted** as a standard procedure and is applied almost automatically in empirical research. Thus, the statistical method is an approximation of the experimental method as it uses the same logic. Therefore comparative method essentially resembles the statistical method except **that the** number of cases it deals with is often too small to permit statistical methods. But it is necessary to understand that the comparative method is not an adequate substitute for the experimental method as in the natural sciences.

But these weaknesses can be minimised in a number of **ways**. The statistical method is best to use as far as possible, except in cases where entire political systems are being compared, then the

**comparative** method has to be used. The two can also be used in combination. In this comparative analysis is the first stage in which macro-hypotheses are carefully formulated usually covering the structural elements of **total** systems, and the statistical stage the **second**, in which through **micro**-replications these are tested in as large a sample as possible. Second, too much significance must not be attached to **negative** findings: for example rejecting a hypothesis on the basis of **one** deviant case especially when the sample is small. Rather, research should aim at probabilistic and not universal generalisations. Third, it is necessary to increase the number of **cases** as much as possible (is too small a sample which is not of **much** use). Comparative politics has advanced because of the formulation of universally applicable theories or "grand theories" based on the comparison of many countries or political phenomenon within them. For example, structural functional analysis theory opened up a world of comparative research unknown before. Fourth, increase the number of variables if not the number of cases; through this more generalisations are possible. **Fifth**, focus on 'comparable cases' i.e. those that have a large number of comparable characteristics or variables which one treats as 'constants', but dissimilar as far as those variables which one wants to relate to each other. This way we study the 'operative' variables by either the statistical or comparative method. Here the area or regional approach is useful, for example comparing countries within Latin America or Scandinavia or Asia. But many scholars have pointed out that this is merely a manageability argument, which should not become an imprisonment. Another alternative is studying regions within countries, or studying them at different points of **time** as the problem of control is **much** simpler as they are within the same federal structure. Here it may be mentioned that the states within the **Indian** Union provide a rich laboratory for comparative research that has not yet been undertaken. Finally, many scholars feel that focus should be on 'key' or contextual variables, as too many variables can create problems. This not only allows manageability but also often leads to 'middle range **theorising**' or partial comparison of political systems. This has been used **successfully** in anthropological studies as tribal systems are simple. Political scientists can also do this by limiting the number of variables.

The case study **method** is used whenever only one case is **being** analysed. But it is closely connected with the comparative method, and certain types of **case** studies can become an inherent part of the comparative method whenever an in-depth study of a variable is needed prior to comparison with other similar ones. The scientific status of the case study method is somewhat ambiguous because science is neither generalising nor a ground for disapproving an established generalisation. But its value lies when used as a building block for making general propositions and even theory-building in political science when a number of **case** studies on similar subjects are carried out. Case studies can be of many types for example at theoretical or interpretative, theory confirming or **infirmitg**, each useful in specific situations. Thus the comparative and the case study method have major drawbacks. Because of the inevitable limitations of **these** methods it is the challenging task of the investigator in the field of comparative politics to apply these methods in such a way as to **capitalise** on their inherent strengths and they can be useful instruments in scientific political inquiry. Many scholars have spent much of the post-war period constantly improving the use of these methods.

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## 1.4 CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE

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In the post-war period, comparative politics has passed through many phases. In each of these changes have been made, and continue to be made by scholars. Comparative politics first focused on the **input** side relying on political sociology, claiming that basic properties of political systems were to be understood against background information about structure and processes in society; thus it was claimed that political conflict dimensions were structured according to cleavage dimensions

in the social structure. This reductionist approach offset a reaction by political scientists such as Samuel Huntington, who argued for the autonomy of politics in relation to social and economic factors. Hence, the second stage in modern comparative politics aimed at institutional analysis of the variation of political systems and their constituent parts such as parties and party systems on their own right. Central to this were crucial distinctions between different types of democracy, authoritarian rule and modernising politics. The shift was from democracy to 'order' through stable institutions. Finally the growing interest in the output side of politics within Political Science also affected comparative politics. Why study different political systems if it was not the case that politics matters for policies? This was also possible due to the rediscovery of the centrality of the state both on the right and the left of the spectrum. ***The third stage therefore implied a merger of comparative politics with public policy and political economy, attempting to understand what different political systems does (policy inputs) and actually accomplish (policy outcomes). This led to comparative public policy.***

Those who emphasise the input side typically refer to the impact of social cleavages, the basic problem being the extent to which environment determines the polity. The cleavage approach reducing politics to cleavage dimensions in the social structure seems as exaggerated as institutionalism or the hypothesis that there is no relationship whatsoever between social and economic factors and the political system. But how does one strike a balance between social and economic determinism and political indeterminism or the new institutionalism? How in the comparative analysis of the political system in various countries can one identify crucial concepts, with which to sort out in careful fashion major system differences and similarities? As the attempt to separate traditional, developing and modern politics, failed as a result of the value-loaded nature of these concepts, the distinction between democratic and authoritarian regimes became the fundamental one. However, even if there is unanimity as to the meaning and applicability of the term 'democracy', there is disagreement about the properties or indicators that identify a democratic regime. Two very different types of democratic models have been recognised: the Westminster type democracy versus the consensus or consociational type democracy. But how about the far larger set of non-democratic systems? Today we have more than 160 polities known as Third World and there is as yet no agreement about the taxonomy of Third World Politics. No doubt, much future comparative research will focus on the set of non democratic regimes in order to set out how they vary along a few basic dimensions.

A major development of contemporary significance is the emergence of comparative analysis of public policy or political economy, which has since the mid 1970s added a new dimension to comparative politics. To the extent that it focuses on the output or 'outcome' side of the black box of the political system, there is ***continuity*** from the past. The difference is a shift from grand comparative theory of 'Political Development' and problems of 'Modernisation', to a much narrower field of concentration namely the State and its central role in development. The change is from meta-analysis to meso-analysis, which focuses upon the linkage between definition of problems, setting of agendas, decision-making and implementation processes. It has given comparative politics a more specific, problem solving and policy orientation. ***Comparative politics remains multidisciplinary, but has moved away from Sociology and closer to Economics. It also signals a return to more normative concerns rather than a constant emphasis upon scientific methods.*** It has also re-established a link between academic political science and practitioners of public administration.

Through Public Policy a society is able to define the relationship between the production of goods and services along the boundaries of what is possible, given the constraint of resources. But simply

the questions it asks are what is the appropriate 'public' arena of the State vis-a-vis the private sphere and what kinds of policies lead to development? By comparative analysis of what states do within this public arena, it is able to theorise the appropriate sphere of the State. Consequently, public policy is descriptive, analytic as well as prescriptive in its approach. Politics is now conceptualised as "public choice" among a number of alternative policies, and its goal is to integrate knowledge into an overarching discipline capable of analysing public choice and decision-making and thereby contributing to the democratisation of society. *Political economy more specifically, is concerned with the effects of political choices on the production and exchange of goods and services. It is an analysis of the consequences of political choices that political leaders make involving the polity's scarce resources.* The value of the approach lies in realising that in developing societies, *choices are really paths of development.* The choice before leaders is through public policies to merely cope with, induce, or introduce radical social and economic change. Therefore, within political economy, 'Political Development' is re-defined as the increasing capacity to meet and induce changing and expanding demands and generate resources to be able to do so. While political economy provides the theory, public policy is the method by which these can be put into action. The end results of all this has meant that the focus is on smaller comparisons or, on what is possible. Middle range comparison today is more modest, focusing on a single region or comparable set of regions. In conclusion, the field of comparative politics has fragmented and no single definition of comparative politics exists. This has its merits; it means that it allows focus on what is significant and useful and not necessarily what is global and all encompassing as earlier.

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## 1.5 SUMMARY

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In this unit, you have studied about the nature and evolution of Comparative Politics as a sub-discipline within the larger discipline of Political Science. Though it is one of the oldest forms in the study of Politics, it has stimulated much interest in the post Second World War period, making it relatively a new field. While the Traditional approach was more parochial and monographic, the **modern** approach is wider in scope. It was successful in its attempt to **analyse** the rapid changes that have occurred in political institutions and processes and their shift from tradition to modernity. The second section of this unit focuses on the feasibility of the Comparative Method. Though various scholars do recognise the comparative method as a logical step, they differ in their opinions on its applicability - whether it is scientific, statistical, experimental or merely a basic method. While the interpretations vary on this factor, efforts are on to improve the use of these methods from time to time. The last section focuses on the contemporary relevance of Comparative Politics. Though the subject is multidisciplinary in character, the merger of this sub-discipline with public policy and political economy has added a new dimension in **analysing** as to what different political systems do and accomplish (inputs and outputs of the policy). Thus it establishes a linkage between the policy orientation, decision making and implementation processes.

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## 1.6 EXERCISES

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- 1) What is Comparative Politics? Briefly **analyse** its evolution as a sub-discipline.
- 2) Analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the Comparative Method.
- 3) Evaluate the contemporary significance and contribution of the Comparative method.