

---

## UNIT 1 NATURE, SCOPE AND UTILITY OF COMPARATIVE STUDY OF POLITICS

---

### Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Comparative Study of Politics: Nature and Scope
  - 1.2.1 Comparisons: Identification of Relationships
  - 1.2.2 Comparative Politics and Comparative Government
- 1.3 Comparative Politics: A Historical Overview
  - 1.3.1 The Origins of Comparative Study of Politics
  - 1.3.2 The Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries
  - 1.3.3 The Second World War and After
  - 1.3.4 The 1970s and Challenges to Developmentalism
  - 1.3.5 The 1980s: The Return of State
  - 1.3.6 The Late Twentieth Century: Globalisation and Emerging Trends/Possibilities
- 1.4 Comparative Study of Politics: Utility
  - 1.4.1 Comparing for Theoretical Formulation
  - 1.4.2 Comparisons for Scientific Rigour
  - 1.4.3 Comparisons Leading to Explanations in Relationships
- 1.5 Summing Up
- 1.6 Key Words
- 1.7 Some Useful Books
- 1.8 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

---

### 1.0 OBJECTIVES

---

In this unit we shall focus on the **nature**, **scope** and **utility** of a comparative study of politics. Through these you will be able to look for answers to questions like, (a) **what is** the *nature* of comparative politics i.e., what is it that gives comparative political analysis its specificity: its characteristics, elements, constituents, perspective, purpose/aims, and the ideological/structural/contextual framework within which these are realised, (b) **what constitutes** its scope i.e., the range, field, or area of activity that it encompasses and, (c) its *utility* i.e., its usefulness and relevance for enhancing our understanding of political reality, or how does comparative study help us understand this reality better. It should be pointed out, however, that these aspects cannot be studied in isolation of each other in a compartmentalised form. For a proper understanding of the nature, scope and utility of a comparative study of politics, one has to look at the latter's development historically and see how its attributes evolved with changing contexts and concerns.

The unit is divided into different sections which take up in some detail the above outlined themes. Each section is followed by questions based on the section. Towards the end of the unit is provided a list of readings which can be used to supplement this unit. A set of questions follow the readings which will help you assess your understanding. All terms which have specific meanings in comparative political analysis have been explained in the section on keywords.

---

### → 1.1 INTRODUCTION

---

As the term itself points out, comparative politics is about comparing political phenomena. The emphasis is on both the method of inquiry i.e., comparative, and the substance into which inquiry is directed i.e., political phenomena. As will be pointed out in Unit 2 *Comparative Method and Methods of Comparison*, the comparative method is not the sole prerogative of comparative politics, and is



used with equal ease in other disciplines as well e.g., Psychology and Sociology. It is the substance of comparative politics i.e., its subject matter, vocabulary and perspective, which gives comparative politics its distinctiveness both as a method and as a specific field of study.

The nature and scope of comparative politics has been determined historically by changes in the above mentioned features i.e., (a) subject matter (b) vocabulary and (c) political perspective. To understand *where*, *why* and *how* these changes took place we have to look at what is the focus of study at a particular historical period, what are the *tools*, *languages* or *concepts* being used for the study and what is the *vantage point*, *perspective* and *purpose* of enquiry. Thus in the sections which follow, we shall look at the manner in which comparative politics has evolved, the continuities and discontinuities which have informed this evolution, the ways in which this evolution has been determined in and by the specific historical contexts and socio-economic and political forces, and how in the context of late twentieth century viz, *globalisation*, radical changes have been brought about in the manner in which the field of comparative politics has so far been envisaged.

## → 1.2 COMPARATIVE STUDY OF POLITICS: NATURE AND SCOPE

We mentioned in the previous section that the comparative method is commonly used in other disciplines as well. We also know from the earlier section, that comparative politics is distinguished from other disciplines which also use the comparative method, by its specific subject matter, language and perspective. In that case, we might well ask the question, is there at all a distinct field of *comparative political analysis* or is it a *sub-discipline subsumed within the larger discipline of Political Science*. The three aspects of subject matter, language, vocabulary, and perspective, we must remember, are inadequate in establishing the distinctiveness of comparative politics within the broad discipline of Political Science, largely because *comparative politics shares the subject matter and concerns of Political Science*, i.e. democracy, constitutions, political parties, social movements etc. Within the discipline of Political Science thus the specificity of comparative political analysis is marked out by its *conscious use of the comparative method to answer questions which might be of general interest to political scientists*.

### 1.2.1 Comparisons: Identification of Relationships

This stress on the *comparative method* as defining the character and scope of comparative political analysis has been maintained by some scholars in order to dispel frequent misconceptions about comparative politics as involving the study of 'foreign countries' i.e., countries other than your own. Under such an understanding, if you were studying a country other than your own, (e.g., an American studying the politics of Brazil or an Indian studying that of Sri Lanka) you would be called a **comparativist**. More often than not, this misconception implies merely the gathering of information about individual countries with little or at the most implicit comparison involved. The distinctiveness of comparative politics, most comparativists would argue, lies in a *conscious and systematic use of comparisons to study two or more countries with the purpose of identifying, and eventually explaining differences or similarities* between them with respect to the particular phenomena being analysed. For a long time comparative politics appeared merely to look for similarities and differences, and directed this towards classifying, dichotomising or polarising political phenomena. Comparative political analysis is however, not simply about identifying similarities and differences. The



purpose of using comparisons, it is felt by several scholars, is going beyond 'identifying similarities and differences' or the 'compare and contrast approach', to ultimately study political phenomena in a larger framework of relationships. This, it is felt, would help deepen our understanding and broaden the levels of answering and explaining political phenomena. (See Manoranjan Mohanty, 'Comparative Political Theory and Third World Sensitivity', *Teaching Politics*, Nos.1 & 2, 1975).

### 1.2.2 Comparative Politics and Comparative Government

The often encountered notion that comparative politics involves a study of governments arises, asserts Ronald Chilcote, from 'conceptual confusion'. Unlike comparative government whose field is limited to comparative study of governments, comparative politics is concerned with the study of all forms of political activity, governmental as well as nongovernmental. The field of comparative politics has an 'all encompassing' nature and comparative politics specialists tend to view it as the study of everything political. Any lesser conception of comparative politics would obscure the criteria for the selection and exclusion of what may be studied under this field. (Ronald Chilcote, *Introduction, Theories of Comparative Politics*, p.4)

It may, however, be pointed out that for long comparative politics concerned itself with the study of governments and regime types, and confined itself to studying western countries. The process of decolonisation especially in the wake of the second World War, generated interest in the study of 'new nations'. The increase in numbers and diversity of units/cases that could be brought into the gamut of comparison, was accompanied also by the urge to formulate abstract universal models, which could explain political phenomena and processes in all the units. Simultaneous to the increase and diversification of cases to be studied was also an expansion in the sphere of politics so as to allow the examination of politics as a total system, including not merely the state and its institutions but also individuals, social groupings, political parties, interest groups, social movements etc. Certain aspects of institutions and political process were especially in focus for what was seen as their usefulness in explaining political processes, e.g., political socialisation, patterns of political culture, techniques of interest articulation and interest aggregation, styles of political recruitment, extent of political efficacy and political apathy, ruling elites etc. These systemic studies were often built around the concern with nation-building i.e., providing a politico-cultural identity to a population, state-building i.e., providing institutional structure and processes for politics and modernisation i.e., to initiate a process of change along the western path of development. The presence of divergent ideological poles in world politics (Western capitalism and Soviet socialism), the rejection of western imperialism by most newly liberated countries, the concern with maintaining their distinct identity in the form of the non-aligned movement and the sympathy among most countries with a socialist path of development, gradually led to the irrelevance of most modernisation models for purposes of global/large level comparisons. Whereas the fifties and sixties were the period where attempts to explain political reality were made through the construction of large scale models, the seventies saw the assertion of Third World-ism and the rolling back of these models. The Eighties saw the constriction of the levels of comparison with studies based on regions or smaller numbers of units became prevalent. With globalisation, however, the imperatives for large level comparisons increased and the field of comparisons has diversified with the proliferation of non-state, non-governmental actors and the increased interconnections between nations with economic linkages and information technology revolution.



In the section which follows we shall take up these developments in comparative political analysis, emphasising in each case, the changes in the character and field of enquiry.

### → 1.3 COMPARATIVE POLITICS: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The nature and scope of comparative politics has varied according to the changes which have occurred historically in its subject matter. The subject matter of comparative politics has been determined both by the *geographical space* (i.e. countries, regions) which has constituted its field as well as the *dominant ideas* concerning social reality and change which shaped the approaches to comparative studies (capitalist, socialist, mixed and indigenous). Likewise, at different historical junctures the thrust or the primary concern of the studies kept changing.

#### 1.3.1 The Origins of Comparative Study of Politics

In its earliest incarnation, the comparative study of politics comes to us in the form of studies done by the Greek philosopher Aristotle. Aristotle studied the constitutions of 150 states and classified them into a *typology of regimes*. His classification was presented in terms of both descriptive and normative categories i.e., he not only *described* and *classified* regimes and political systems in terms of their types e.g., democracy, aristocracy, monarchy etc., he also distinguished them on the basis of certain *norms of good governance*. On the basis of this comparison he divided regimes into good and bad - ideal and perverted. These Aristotelian categories were acknowledged and taken up by Romans such as Polybius (201-120 B.C.) and Cicero (106-43 B.C.) who considered them in formal and legalistic terms. Concern with comparative study of regime types reappeared in the 15th century with Machiavelli (1469-1527).

#### 1.3.2 The Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

The preoccupation with philosophical and speculative questions concerning the 'good order' or the 'ideal state' and the use, in the process, of abstract and normative vocabulary, persisted in comparative studies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries signified the period when *liberalism* was the reigning ideology and European countries enjoyed dominance in world politics. The 'rest of the world' of Asia, Africa and Latin America were either European colonies or under their sphere of influence as ex-colonies. Comparative studies during this period (James Bryce's *Modern Democracies* (1921), Herman Finer's *Theory and Practice of Modern Governments* (1932) and Carl J. Friedrich's *Constitutional Government and Democracy* (1937), Roberto Michels, *Political Parties* (1915) and M. Duverger, *Political Parties* (1950)) were largely concerned with a comparative study of institutions, the distribution of power, and the relationship between the different layers of government. These studies were *eurocentric* i.e., confined to the study of institutions, governments and regime types in European countries like Britain, France and Germany. It may thus be said that these studies were in fact not genuinely comparative in the sense that they excluded from their analysis a large number of countries. Any generalisation derived from their analysis a large number of countries could not legitimately claim having validity for the rest of the world. It may be emphasised here that exclusion of the rest of the world was symptomatic of the dominance of Europe in world politics - a dominance - which however, was on the wane, and shifting gradually to North America. All contemporary history had Europe at its centre, obliterating the rest of the world (colonised or liberated from colonisation) (a) as 'people without histories' or (b) whose histories



were bound with and destined to follow the trajectories already followed by the advanced countries of the West. Thus the above mentioned works manifest their rootedness in the normative values of western liberal democracies which carried with it the baggage of racial and civilisational superiority, and assumed a prescriptive character for the colonies/former colonies.

### 1.3.3 The Second World War and After

In the nineteen thirties the political and economic situation of the world changed. The **Bolshevik Revolution** in Russia in 1917, brought into world politics, Socialism, as an ideology of the oppressed and, as a critical alternative to western liberalism and capitalism. With the end of the second World War a number of significant developments had taken place, including the waning of European (British) hegemony, the emergence and entrenchment of United States of America as the new hegemon in world politics and economy, and the bifurcation of the world into two ideological camps viz. (western) capitalism and (eastern) socialism. The majority of the 'rest of the world' had, by the time the second World War ended, liberated itself from European imperialism. For a period after decolonisation the notions of development, modernisation, nation-building, state-building etc., evinced a degree of legitimacy and even popularity as 'national slogans' among the political élite of the 'new nations'. Ideologically, however, these 'new nations', were no longer compelled to tow the western capitalist path of development. While socialism had its share of sympathisers among the new ruling elite of the Asia, America and Latin America, quite a number of newly independent countries made a conscious decision to distance themselves from both the power blocs, remaining non-aligned to either. A number of them evolved their own specific path of development akin to the socialist, as in the case of Ujama in Tanzania, and the mixed-economy model in India which was a blend of both capitalism and socialism.

It may be worth remembering that the comparative study of governments till the 1940s was predominantly the *study of institutions*, the legal-constitutional principles regulating them, and the manner in which they functioned in western (European) liberal-democracies. In the context of the above stated developments, a powerful critique of the institutional approach emerged in the middle of 1950s. The critique had its roots in behaviouralism which had emerged as a new movement in the discipline of politics aiming to provide scientific rigour to the discipline and develop a **science of politics**. Known as the **behavioural movement**, it was concerned with developing an enquiry which was quantitative, based on survey techniques involving the examination of empirical facts separated from values, to provide value-neutral, non-prescriptive, objective observations and explanations. The behaviouralists attempted to study social reality by seeking answers to questions like 'why people behave politically as they do, and why as a result, political processes and systems function as they do'. It is these 'why questions' regarding *differences in people's behaviours* and their implications for *political processes and political systems*, which changed the focus of comparative study from the legal-formal aspects of institutions. Thus in 1955 Roy Macridis criticised the existing comparative studies for privileging formal institutions over non-formal political processes, for being descriptive rather than analytical, and case-study oriented rather than genuinely comparative. (Roy Macridis, *The Study of Comparative Government*, New York, Random House, 1955). Harry Eckstein points out that the changes in the nature and scope of comparative politics in this period show a sensitivity to the changing world politics urging the need to reconceptualise the notion of politics and develop paradigms for large-scale comparisons. (Harry Eckstein, 'A Perspective on Comparative Politics, Past and Present' in Harry Eckstein and David Apter eds., *Comparative Politics: A Reader*, New York, Free Press, 1963.) Rejecting the then traditional



and almost exclusive emphasis on the western world and the conceptual language which had been developed with such limited comparisons in mind, **Gabriel Almond** and his colleagues of the American Social Science Research Council's Committee on Comparative Politics (founded in 1954) sought to develop a theory and a methodology which could encompass and compare political systems of all kinds - primitive or advanced, democratic or non-democratic, western or non western.

The broadening of concerns in a geographic or territorial sense was also accompanied by a broadening of the sense of politics itself, and in particular, by a rejection of what was then perceived as the traditional and narrowly defined emphasis on the study of formal political institutions. The notion of politics was broadened by the emphasis on 'realism' or politics 'in practice' as distinguished from mere 'legalism'. This included in its scope the functioning of less formally structured agencies, behaviours and processes e.g. political parties, interest groups, elections, voting behaviour, attitudes etc. (Gabriel Almond, *Political Development*, Boston, 1970). With the deflection of attention from studies of formal institutions, there was simultaneously a decline in the centrality of the notion of the state itself. We had mentioned earlier that the emergence of a large number of countries on the world scene necessitated the development of frameworks which would facilitate comparisons on a large scale. This led to the emergence of inclusive and abstract notions like the *political system*. This notion of the 'system' replaced the notion of the state and enabled scholars to take into account the 'extra-legal', 'social' and 'cultural' institutions which were crucial to the understanding of non-western politics and had the added advantage of including in its scope 'pre-state'/'non-state' societies as well as roles and offices which were not seen as overtly connected with the state. Also, with the change of emphasis to actual practices and functions of institutions, the problems of research came to be defined not in terms of what legal powers these institutions had, but what they actually did, how they were related to one another, and what roles they played in the making and execution of public policy. This led to the emergence of *structural-functionalism*, in which certain functions were described as being necessary to all societies, and the execution and performance of these functions were then compared across a variety of different formal and informal structures. (Peter Mair, 'Comparative Politics: An Overview', p.315)

While the universal frameworks of *systems* and *structures-functions* enabled western scholars to study a wide range of political systems, structures, and behaviours, within a single paradigm, the appearance of 'new nations' provided to western comparativists an opportunity to study what they perceived as economic and political change. Wiarda points out that it was in this period of the sixties that most contemporary scholars of comparative politics came of age. The 'new nations' became for most of these scholars [ironically] 'living laboratories' for the study of social and political change. Wiarda describes those 'exciting times' which offered unique opportunities to study political change, and saw the development of new methodologies and approaches to study them. It was during this period that were advanced in the field of comparative politics: *study of political culture*, *political socialisation*, *developmentalism*, *dependency and interdependency*, *corporatism*, *bureaucratic-authoritarianism* and *later transitions to democracy etc.* (Howard J. Wiarda, 'Is Comparative Politics Dead? Rethinking the Field in the Post-Cold War Era', *Third World Quarterly*, Vol.19, no.5.)

This period saw the mushrooming of universalistic models like Easton's *political system*, Deutsch's *social mobilisation* and Shils' *centre and periphery*. The theories of modernisation by Apter, Rokkan, Eisenstadt and Ward and the theory of political development by Almond, Coleman, Pye and Verba also claimed



universal relevance. These theories were claimed to be applicable across cultural and ideological boundaries and to explain political process everywhere. The development of comparative political analysis in this phase coincided with the international involvement of the United States through military alliances and foreign aid. Most research in this period was not only funded by research foundations, it was also geared to the goals of US foreign policy. The most symbolic of these were the Project Camelot in Latin America and the Himalayan Project in India. This period was heralded by the appearance of works like Apter's study on Ghana. Published in 1960, *Politics of Developing Areas* by Almond and Coleman, sharply defined the character of the new 'Comparative Politics Movement'. The publication of a new journal in the US entitled *Comparative Politics* in 1969 reflected the height of this trend. (Manoranjan Mohanty, 'Comparative Politics and Third World Sensitivity', *Teaching Politics*, Nos. 1 & 2, 1975). 'Developmentalism' was perhaps the dominant conceptual paradigm of this time. To a considerable extent, the interest in developmentalism emanated from US foreign policy interests in 'developing' countries, to counter the appeals of Marxism-Leninism and steer them towards a non-communist way to development. (Howard J. Wiarda, 'Is Comparative Politics Dead? Rethinking the Field in the Post-Cold War Era', *Third World Quarterly*, Vol.19, no.5, p.937)

### 1.3.4 The 1970s and Challenges to Developmentalism

Towards the 1970s, developmentalism came to be criticised for favouring abstract models, which flattened out differences among specific political/social/cultural systems, in order to study them within a single universalistic framework. These criticisms emphasised the ethnocentrism of these models and focussed on the Third World in order to work out a theory of underdevelopment. They stressed the need to concentrate on solutions to the backwardness of developing countries. Two main challenges to developmentalism which arose in the early 1970s and gained widespread attention were (a) dependency and (b) corporatism.

Dependency theory criticised the dominant model of developmentalism for ignoring (a) domestic class factors and (b) international market and power factors in development. It was particularly critical of US foreign policy and multinational corporations and suggested, contrary to what was held true in developmentalism, that the development of the already-industrialised nations and that of the developing ones could not go together. Instead, dependency theory argued, that the development of the West had come on the shoulders and at the cost of the non-West. The idea that the diffusion of capitalism promotes underdevelopment and not development in many parts of the world was embodied in Andre Gunde Frank's *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America* (1967), Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972) and Malcolm Caldwell's *The Wealth of Some Nations* (1979). Marxist critics of the dependency theory, however, pointed out that the nature of exploitation through surplus extraction should not be seen simply on national lines but, as part of a more complex pattern of alliances between the metropolitan bourgeoisie of the core/centre and the indigenous bourgeoisie of the periphery/satellite as they operated in a worldwide capitalist system. The corporatist approach criticised developmentalism for its Euro-American ethnocentrism and indicated that there were alternative organic, corporatist, often authoritarian ways to organise the state and state-society relations. (Ronald Chilcote, *Theories of Comparative Politics*, p.16)

### 1.3.5 The 1980s: The Return of the State

During the later 1970s and into the 1980s, still reflecting the backlash against developmentalism, a number of theories and subject matters emerged into the field of comparative politics. These included bureaucratic-authoritarianism, indigenous concepts of change, transitions to democracy, the politics of structural



adjustment, neoliberalism and privatisation. While some scholars saw these developments as undermining and breaking the unity of the field which was being dominated by developmentalism, others saw them as adding healthy diversity, providing alternative approaches and covering new subject areas. Almond, who had argued in the late 1950s that the notion of the state should be replaced by the political system, which was adaptable to scientific inquiry, and Easton, who undertook to construct the parameters and concepts of a political system, continued to argue well into the 1980s on the importance of political system as the core of political study. The state, however, received its share of attention in the 60s and 70s in the works of bureaucratic-authoritarianism in Latin America, especially in Argentina in the works of Guillermo O'Donnell e.g., *Economic Modernisation and Bureaucratic Authoritarianism* (1973). Ralph Miliband's *The State in Capitalist Society* (1969) had also kept the interest alive. With Nicos Poulantzas's *State, Power, Socialism* (1978), and political sociologists Peter Evans, Theda Skocpol, and others *Bringing the State Back In* (1985), focus was sought to be restored onto the state.

### 1.3.6 The Late Twentieth Century: Globalisation and Emerging Trends/Possibilities

- a) **Scaling down of systems:** Much of the development of comparative political analysis in the period 1960s to 1980s can be seen as an ever widening range of countries being included as cases, with more variables being added to the models, such as policy, ideology, governing experience, and so on. With the 1980s, however, there has been a move away from general theory to emphasis on the relevance of context. In part, this tendency reflects the renewed influence of historical inquiry in the social sciences, and especially the emergence of a 'historical sociology' which tries to understand phenomena in the very broad or 'holistic' context within which they occur. (Theda Skocpol and M.Somers, 'The Use of Comparative History in Macro-social Inquiry', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, No.22, 1980 and P.Abrams, *Historical Sociology*, Ithaca, 1982). There has been a shying away from models to a more indepth understanding of particular countries and cases where more qualitative and contextualised data can be assessed and where account can be taken of specific institutional circumstances or particular political cultures. Hence we see a new emphasis on more culturally specific studies (e.g., English speaking countries, Islamic countries), and nationally specific countries (e.g., England, India), and even institutionally specific countries (e.g., India under a specific regime). While emphasis on 'grand systems' and model building diminished, the stress on specific contexts and cultures has meant that the scale of comparisons was brought down. Comparisons at the level of 'smaller systems' or regions, however, remained e.g., the Islamic world, Latin American countries, Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia etc.
- b) **Civil Society and Democratisation Approach(es):** The disintegration of Soviet Union brought into currency the notion of the 'end of history'. In his article 'The End of History?' (1989), which was developed later into the book *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), Francis Fukuyama argued that the history of ideas had ended with the recognition and triumph of liberal democracy as the 'final form of human government'. The 'end of history', invoked to stress the predominance of western liberal democracy, is in a way reminiscent of the 'end of ideology' debate of the 1950s which emerged at the height of the cold war and in the context of the decline of communism in the West. Western liberal scholars proposed that the economic advancement made in the industrialised societies of the west had resolved political problems, e.g., issues of freedom and state power, workers rights