Terms and Ideas

- The state
- Regime
- Government
- Institution
- Comparative method
- Method of agreement
- Method of difference
- Correlation vs. Causation

Questions

Q: How should we define politics?

A: Following Lasswell (as quoted in Samuels 2013, p. 4), politics is about "who gets what, when, and how." This underscores the distributive dimension of politics, both as concerns things that are tangible (such as wealth) and intangible (such as rights).

Q: What is the comparative method?

A: The comparative method attempts to understand general relationships by systematically comparing and contrasting cases. Comparativists look for patterns across places that share features but differ in outcomes, or that differ in features but share outcomes. The goal of comparative research is to generate explanations that can travel across contexts.

Q: What distinguishes the method of agreement from the method of difference?

A: The method of agreement is used in instances where cases have different attributes but shared outcomes; the aim is to isolate the variable that these cases agree on. Meanwhile, the method of difference is used in instances where cases have different outcomes but shared attributes; the aim is to isolate the variable that these cases differ on.

Q: What are the challenges with establishing causal relationships?

A: Causality is often difficult to prove in comparative politics because researchers cannot run controlled laboratory experiments. Even when two variables correlate (such as economic development and democracy), this does not prove that one causes the other; the relationship might be spurious. For both practical and ethical reasons, it is often impossible to isolate one factor while controlling for others. Furthermore, even when a causal relationship is suspected, it is often difficult to determine the exact mechanism. The data comparativists work with can be difficult to collect, interpret, and compare across cases.

Q: What are the different approaches used in comparative politics?

A: As mentioned in lecture, there are four main approaches: economic, cultural, voluntarist, and institutional. The economic approach emphasizes material factors such as class conflict, resource distribution, and development. The cultural approach stresses that ideas and values shape political outcomes. These two are often grouped together as structuralist approaches. The voluntarist approach focuses on leaders and their choices, while the institutionalist approach emphasizes the rules and structures that shape political competition, determine incentives, and even influence identities. Institutions can be measured in terms of their stability and compliance.

Q: What are the weaknesses of each approach?

A: Both the economic and cultural approaches can be too deterministic and blind to influences outside of their respective domains. Cultural explanations in particular struggle to make sense of rapid political change. The voluntarist approach can be useful to explain single cases but often does not lend itself to generalization. Finally, the institutionalist approach can put too much emphasis on formal rules while neglecting informal practices that might contravene them.

Q: How does a state differ from a regime or government?

A: As discussed in lecture, we define the state as "the set of permanent administrative, legal, and coercive institutions with a monopoly over the legitimate use of force in a given territory." The regime is the system of rules and procedures that determine how power is allocated, while the government consists of the particular leaders and officials who have positions within the state at a given time. States tend to outlast governments and, oftentimes, regimes.

Takeaways

The lectures and readings from this week are in many respects intended to prepare us for the semester ahead. Their contents provide a framework for how to think about and evaluate political science literature before we turn to specific topics on the syllabus.

As we examine various political phenomena in the coming weeks, keep in mind the different approaches that authors use to develop their arguments. As we have seen, there are multiple ways to think about the same puzzle, and each comes with its own strengths and weaknesses. The same holds true for the specific methods of analysis (whether qualitative or quantitative) used to marshal evidence. Consider the assumptions that each author makes in order to extend findings from one case to others, to argue about causes and effects, and to make simplifications that facilitate analysis. Understanding what constitutes a good causal argument will be instrumental in allowing you to develop critiques of the course material.

After all, our aim in this course is not to merely describe the world around us but to build arguments that can explain it (while considering what these explanations leave out).

References

Samuels, David. *Comparative Politics*. Pearson, 2013.