

Chapter 1

US and comparative politics: an overview

Learning outcomes

Key questions answered in this chapter:

- What are the key facts about the USA?
- How did it all start?
- What were the Articles of Confederation?
- How do the three branches of government fit together?
- What is representative democracy?
- What is popular sovereignty?
- Why hold elections?
- Why are parties and pressure groups important?
- What are the three theoretical approaches we will use in our study of comparative politics?



Introduction

The USA is a vast country. The entire UK would fit into the state of Oregon (see Figure 1.1). The 48 mainland states cross four time zones. At midday in New York, it is 11 a.m. in Chicago, 10 a.m. in Denver, and just 9 a.m. in Los Angeles. It takes just under 6½ hours to fly from London to Boston on America's east coast. But it takes another 6½ hours to fly from Boston to Los Angeles on America's west coast. If you took a train from Boston to Los Angeles, it would take you just over three days.

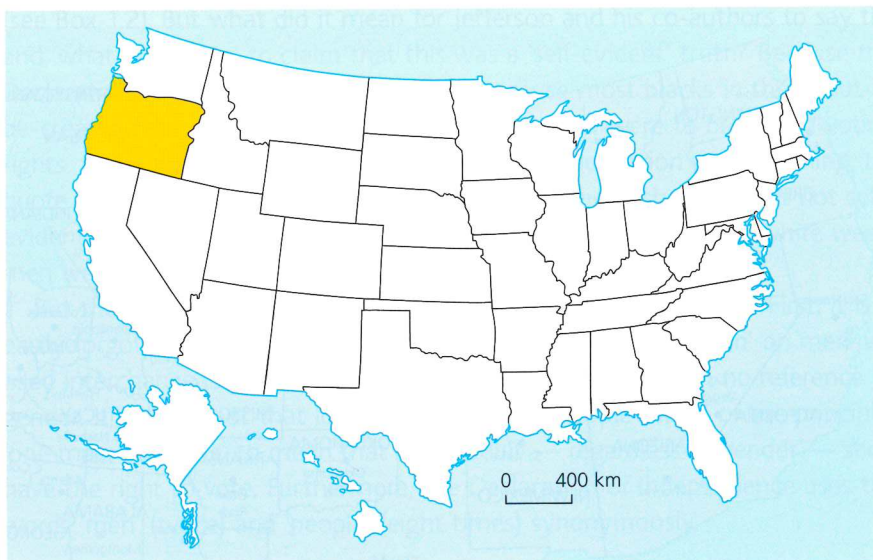


Figure 1.1 The state of Oregon (highlighted) is the geographic size of the UK

The USA is also a very diverse country. There is the tropical landscape of Florida but also the frozen Arctic wastes of Alaska. There are the flat prairies of Kansas but also the Rockies of Wyoming and Colorado. There are the deserts of Arizona but also the forests of New Hampshire and Maine. It is diverse in its landscape, its climate, its economy and its people. The USA is also 'the hyphenated society', in which people think of themselves as African-Americans, Hispanic- and Latino-Americans, Asian-Americans, Irish-Americans, Polish-Americans, or even Native-Americans. American society has been described as a 'melting pot' — a great cauldron filled with people from diverse lands, cultures, languages and religions. This diversity gives rise to Americans' need for symbols of unity — most notably in their attachment to the American flag. While flag waving is still regarded as something of an oddity in the UK — generally associated with football supporters or the Last Night of the Proms — countless families in rural and suburban America go through the daily ritual of raising and lowering the flag outside their homes each morning and evening. Public buildings in the USA display the flag as a matter of course. Each day begins in most American schools with children standing to face the flag at the front of the classroom and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance (see Box 1.1). There is even a day each year — 14 June — designated as Flag Day.

Box 1.1

Pledge of Allegiance

'I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one nātion, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.'

These characteristics of size and diversity have important political implications too. Size brings with it the need for decentralisation — for the federal system of government established by the country's Founding Fathers in 1787. Diversity comes in the form of laws that differ between states about such matters as elections, crime and punishment. Different regions of the country have discernibly different ideological characteristics. The 'conservative' South stretches from Texas to Virginia (see Figure 1.2). The 'liberal' Northeast includes such states as Massachusetts and Rhode Island. The west coast, too, is liberal leaning, especially in the Californian cities of Los Angeles and San Francisco. All this has implications for governing, as well as for political parties and for elections.



Figure 1.2 The 48 contiguous states of the USA

The historical setting of the Constitution

How did it all start? Students of US government and politics need to know something of the origins of the country. The 13 original British colonies were strung out along the eastern seaboard of America from Maine in the north to Georgia in the south. Some were the creations of commercial interests, others of religious groups. All had written charters setting out their form of government and the rights of the colonists. Democracy was limited. Although each colony had a governor, a legislature and a judiciary, each also had a property qualification for voting from which women and black people were excluded. And then, of course, there was slavery. Yet, despite their shortcomings, the colonies provided a blueprint of what was to come.

In the view of the British government, the American colonies existed principally for the economic benefit of the mother country. The colonists were obliged to pay tax to Britain, but they had no representation in the British Parliament. This led to a growing resentment. Bostonian patriot James Otis declared: 'Taxation without representation is tyranny!' As Britain tried to tighten its grip on the colonies' economic affairs in the 1770s, revolution became inevitable. The War of Independence began in April 1775.

Box 1.2

Extract from the Declaration of Independence

'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.'

The Declaration of Independence stated that 'all men are created equal' (see Box 1.2). But what did it mean for Jefferson and his co-authors to say this and, what was more, to claim that this was a 'self-evident' truth? Because the Declaration had talked only of 'men', and because most blacks in the about-to-be-created nation were held in slavery, and the poor were to be denied voting rights, then perhaps it could be argued that the Declaration was assuming, to quote George Orwell, that 'some are more equal than others'. Was it not self-evident that the framers of the Declaration were saying that only white wealthy men were endowed with these rights?

But they were saying no such thing, for two very good reasons. First, it is easily forgotten that until comparatively recently the words 'man' or 'men' were used interchangeably to refer to human beings in general with no reference to gender. It really is not that long ago when most people talked of the principle of 'one man, one vote' to mean that every adult — regardless of gender — should have the right to vote. Furthermore, the Declaration of Independence uses the words 'men' (twice) and 'people' (eight times) synonymously.



John Trumbull's painting *Declaration of Independence*

Second, it is important to distinguish between asserting a right and claiming that everyone is already enjoying it. The denial of a right in practice is surely not the denial of a right in principle. As Abraham Lincoln would later explain just before he became president, the authors of this document 'did not mean to assert the obvious untruth, that all were then actually enjoying that equality, nor yet, that they were about to confer it immediately upon them, but they meant simply to declare the *right*, so that the *enforcement* of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit'.

Jefferson then went on to announce some of the rights that all citizens should enjoy. This was clearly not meant as a comprehensive list, for the three mentioned — life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness — are preceded with the phrase 'among these are'. Because all are entitled to these rights simply by virtue of being human, they are often referred to as **natural rights**. Yet even in a democratic society, the government must regulate these natural rights through law. Thus, the right to life does not give one the right to use deadly force against any person who breaks into your home. The right of liberty would doubtless include the right to travel, and while no democratic government would prohibit its citizens from travelling within its borders, it does regulate that freedom through the laws it enacts regarding such matters as speed limits, traffic lights and car licensing requirements.

While Jefferson was announcing these high principles, the less well-remembered Richard H. Lee was offering his 'plan of confederation' for post-colonial government. The **Articles of Confederation** were eventually ratified by the 13 independent states by March 1781, although the hostilities with Great Britain were not formally concluded until the Treaty of Paris in 1783. These articles set up a **confederacy** — a 'league of friendship', a loose collection of independent states — rather than a national government. Having just fought for — and won — their independence from Great Britain, the Virginians, New Yorkers and the rest were not going to give it away again to some new centralised government. Virginians wanted to govern Virginia. New Yorkers wanted to govern New York. The national government was a feeble affair with no executive branch, no judiciary and a legislature that was little more than a talking shop. The most significant fact about the government created by the Articles of Confederation was that it was weak. Thus, the ex-colonists had succeeded in gaining their independence but had failed to form a nation, and by this failure they almost turned their victory into defeat. What ensued was a shambles.

Many of the leaders of the Revolutionary War, such as George Washington and Alexander Hamilton, believed that a strong national government was essential. As the states squabbled over currency, commerce and much else, they began to fear the reappearance of the British and the loss of all they had so remarkably achieved. A small group of men with such fears met at Annapolis, Maryland, in September 1786. Attendance was poor, so another meeting was called in Philadelphia in May 1787 with the declared purpose of strengthening the Articles of Confederation. That might have been their purpose, but four months later the attendees had scrapped the articles, written an entirely new Constitution and become the Founding Fathers of the United States of America.

The Philadelphia Convention was made up of 55 delegates representing 12 of the 13 states. (Rhode Island, suspicious of what was planned, refused to send any delegates.) In those four stifling hot months of the summer of 1787 they wrote a new form of government. They quickly concluded that a confederacy was structurally flawed and hopelessly weak, but they saw from political history that

Key term

Natural rights Rights to which all people are entitled as human beings, such as those cited at the beginning of the Declaration of Independence.

Key terms

Articles of Confederation

The compact between the 13 original states that formed the new nation in 1781. It was replaced by the US Constitution in 1789.

Confederacy A league, or loose collection, of independent states in which the national government lacks significant powers.

stronger forms of government led to the trampling underfoot of citizens' rights and liberties. Thus they would have to create an entirely new form of government — one that had a strong centre while still preserving states' rights and individual liberties. The answer was a federal constitution, a bill of rights and an intricate set of checks and balances between the different levels and branches of government.

The convention initially considered two plans: one put forward by New Jersey, the other by Virginia. The New Jersey Plan — favoured by the states with smaller populations — was designed merely to strengthen the Articles of Confederation. The Virginia Plan — favoured by the states with larger populations — was much more radical. But with support equally divided, the convention was deadlocked.

The impasse was broken with what became known as the Connecticut Compromise. The stroke of genius came in the plan's recommendation that the new national legislature should be made up of two chambers. In the lower house (the House of Representatives) the states would be represented proportionally to their population, but in the upper house (the Senate) the states would be represented equally, regardless of population. Other compromises followed, concerning such matters as the method of electing the president. A new **constitution** was born — a constitution we shall study in detail in Chapter 2. But before we do that, we take an overview of the government and politics of the United States.

Key term

Constitution The basic political and legal structures prescribing the rules by which a government operates. It may take the form of a codified document.

The machinery of government

Maybe the best way to get an overview of the machinery of government in the United States would be to visit the nation's capital — Washington DC — and take in the buildings that stand on the 16 blocks of Pennsylvania Avenue between Capitol Hill and Lafayette Square. Our first stop would be at the midway point — number 700 of that famous avenue — at the National Archives Building. Even on the hottest and most humid days of a Washington summer, you will see an orderly, and surprisingly hushed, line of American tourists waiting to enter. As they do, shirts are put on and baseball caps removed.



Looking west down Pennsylvania Avenue from Capitol Hill

Not much in America causes such reverential behaviour. But this is the building that houses the Constitution of the United States of America. Americans are not known for queuing, and they are certainly not known for quietness, but the Constitution demands both.

The Constitution laid out the machinery of government and provided for three branches of the federal government — the legislature (to make the laws), the executive (to carry out the laws), and the Supreme Court (to enforce and interpret the laws) (see Figure 1.3). Walk from the National Archives up Pennsylvania Avenue and you will reach Capitol Hill where stands the Capitol — the building where Congress meets to make America's laws. Here sit the 435 members of the House of Representatives and the 100 members of the Senate. In terms of law making, their powers are pretty much co-equal — though the Senate has other powers that give it greater prestige.

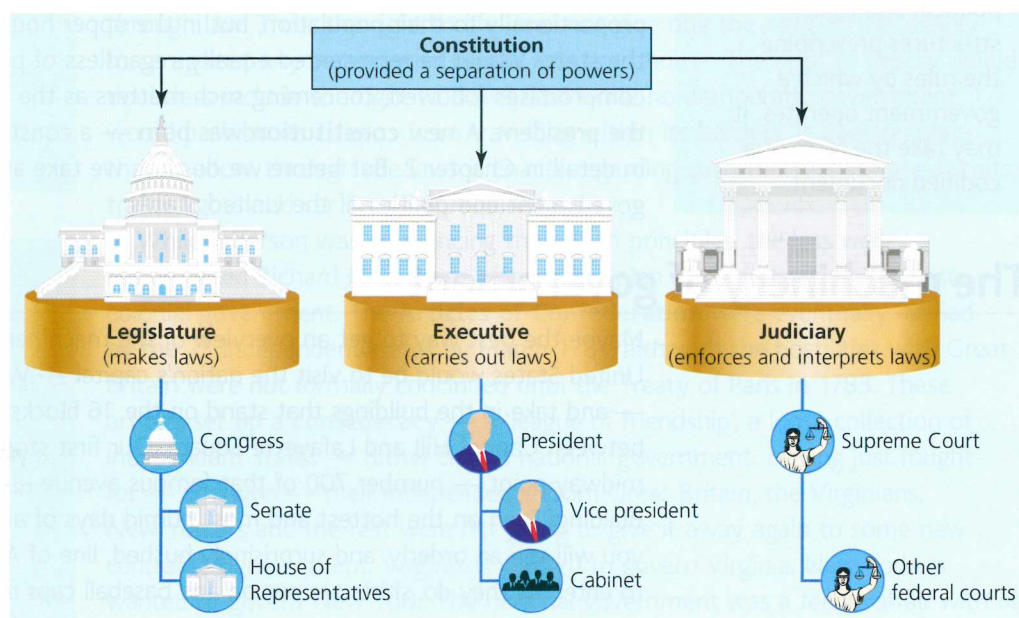


Figure 1.3 The three branches of the US government

From Capitol Hill, look 15 blocks back down Pennsylvania Avenue and you will see the grand building that houses the United States Department of the Treasury — one of the 15 departments that make up the executive branch of government. And just behind that is the White House — the hub of the executive branch of government. The White House is both the official residence of the president and — in the West Wing — the president's workplace. Here also we find the vice president, the room where the president's cabinet meets from time to time, as well as all the offices for the president's closest aides and advisers.

Standing just across the road from the Capitol is the building that houses the Supreme Court. Here nine justices, chosen by the president but confirmed by the Senate, rule on whether the laws that Congress passes and the president signs are compatible with the Constitution. Over recent decades, the Court has found itself having to rule on such issues as gender rights, the rights of racial minorities, restrictions on the ownership of firearms, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, President Obama's healthcare reforms (see Box 1.3), and even who had won the presidential election in 2000 between George W. Bush and Al Gore.

Box 1.3

Obama's healthcare reform (2010)

To see how the three branches of the federal government — Congress, the president and the Supreme Court — are all required to play a part in the governance of the United States, let's see how President Obama's landmark healthcare reform (otherwise known as 'Obamacare') became law, and what happened once it did.

First, both houses of Congress had to pass the healthcare reform bill, in identical forms. This is because both houses have equal legislative power. After almost a year of trying, this finally occurred on 21 March 2010.

Now, in order for this bill to become law, the President needed to sign it. So, just two days later, on 23 March, President Obama signed healthcare reform into law. It was now the job of the executive branch of government to carry out the law by rolling out the provisions it made for healthcare and healthcare insurance.

So thus far, Congress had passed the law and the President had signed it. But some opponents of the new law thought it was unconstitutional — in other words, that part of it was not permitted by the United States Constitution. Resolving that dispute was the job of the courts, and ultimately the United States Supreme Court.

So almost exactly two years after the law became effective, lawyers from both sides argued their case before the nine justices of the Supreme Court. Then, on 28 June 2012, the Court announced its decision, essentially upholding the law's provisions.

Looking at these separate buildings can be somewhat misleading, for it gives the impression that Congress, the president and the Supreme Court are politically separate. True, they are entirely separate when it comes to membership. No one is allowed to be simultaneously a member of more than one branch of government. Thus when in November 2008 senators Barack Obama and Joe Biden were elected respectively president and vice president, both had to resign from the Senate. It would be like the British prime minister having to resign from parliament before taking up residence at 10 Downing Street.

But politically, these three institutions are not separate. As Richard Neustadt famously remarked, they are 'separate institutions, *sharing* powers'. So as Box 1.3 shows, for the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act — otherwise known as 'Obamacare' — to become, and remain, law, all three branches of government had to be in agreement, for each of them has *shared* power. And what's true for law making is true for pretty much everything else. It can make the exercise of political power somewhat problematic, but then that's what the framers of the Constitution wanted. Given their experience of rule from Great Britain, they had learned to distrust unchecked political power. As Thomas Cronin put it: 'Leadership [in America] is difficult precisely because the Framers of the Constitution wanted it to be so.' The Constitution is a power-averse document.

Democracy and participation

In 1787, the American nation's founders chose to set up what they called a republic — what today we call **representative democracy**. In a representative democracy — sometimes called a participatory democracy — the people elect officials who perform the functions of government on their behalf and are periodically accountable to them. This raises the question as to whether these 'elected officials' are merely the people's puppets — mandated always to act in

Key term**Representative democracy**

A form of government in which the people choose their leaders through free, fair and regular elections, and in which elected officials are held accountable.

Key term

Popular sovereignty The principle that all political power derives from the people.

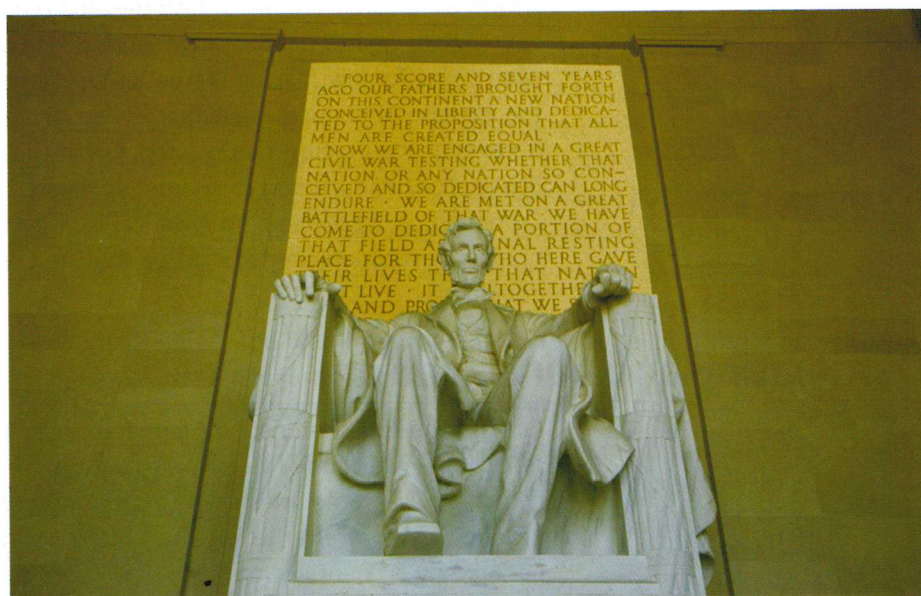
such a way as to gain the approval of those who elected them. In *The Federalist Papers* — a series of essays published by James Madison and Alexander Hamilton in 1787 and 1788 in order to urge acceptance of the new Constitution — Hamilton had this to say on the relationship between these elected officials and the people. They would sometimes, said Hamilton, have to defend the people 'against their own temporary errors and delusions'. It would indeed be important that they were not swayed by every passing fad and fancy of the people, even one supported by a majority. At such times, said Hamilton, elected officials have 'a duty to withstand the temporary delusion in order to give [the people] time and opportunity for more cool and sedate reflection'.

But such a situation would be temporary. For the United States was about to become the first modern nation to base itself on the principle of **popular sovereignty** — the principle that all political power derives from the people. As the Declaration of Independence famously states: 'Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed.'

Box 1.4**Preamble to the US Constitution**

'We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.'

It was this principle that was enshrined in the opening words of the Preamble to the Constitution (see Box 1.4) — 'We the People.' And some seven decades and more later, it was the same principle that was elaborated in those famous words of Abraham Lincoln in his Gettysburg Address (1863) that democracy is 'government of the people, by the people, and for the people'. Thus two essential elements of a representative democracy based on the principle of popular sovereignty are elections and political parties.



The Gettysburg Address, Lincoln Memorial, Washington DC

Elections and voting

Why have elections at all? We have already partly answered this question. There are four main reasons:

- To provide a way for the people to control their government and hold their elected officials to account.
- To elect people to office, as James Madison wrote in *Federalist* no. 57, who have 'the most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue, the common good of society'. What Madison would have made of the elections of 2016 in this regard is a troubling thought.
- To foster the participatory principle of representative democracy by giving people a chance to campaign, attend rallies, donate money, and — these days — join their candidate's Facebook group.
- To stimulate public debate on those policy issues of most pressing importance. Such debate might be corporate or individual, spoken or electronic, supportive or critical.

Elections are much more widespread in American politics than they are in British politics. Both houses of Congress are elected directly by the people — the House of Representatives every two years, and the Senate every six years with one-third of the senators being up for re-election every two years. Thus every two years there are congressional elections for all 435 members of the House and one-third of the 100 senators. Furthermore, these elections are preceded by primary elections in which ordinary voters can have a say as to whom they wish to see as the party candidates in the upcoming general election.



Jimmy Carter campaigning in 1976

Then, once every four years, Americans elect their president. It is the presidential election that receives so much attention from the world's media. Again, this election is preceded by a series of state-based primary elections, allowing ordinary voters to have a say in who the major parties' candidates should be.

Thus Americans have numerous opportunities to vote — both to choose candidates for an upcoming election, and then to choose between the candidates at the election. How and why voters exercise their democratic rights is another aspect of interest to students of politics. I can still recall an incident while campaigning for Jimmy Carter in the Democratic primary in New York in 1976. Outside his home state of Georgia, Carter was a total unknown at the start of the campaign, and he was up against other Democrats who had a much higher national profile. On the streets of Midtown Manhattan we had to ascertain whether or not voters would support Carter in the upcoming primary, and if possible to discover the reason for their decision. An elderly black woman told me she would be voting for Governor Carter. I — unwisely — asked why. 'I know too much about the others,' came back her matter-of-fact reply.

Political parties

The leaders of the former Soviet Union often boasted that they held fairly frequent elections. That was indeed true, but the

reason why most observers in the West would not have considered their political system a democracy was because voters were offered no genuine choice between competing political parties.

It is worth remembering that the USA's Founders disliked political parties, describing them as 'factions' motivated by ambition and self-interest. This was understandable. After all, the success of the newly born nation was still to be guaranteed and Britain was waiting in the wings to take advantage of any internal squabbling. (We did, after all, try to win back the old colonies in the ill-fated — for us — War of 1812.) So it is slightly ironic that today America has what are probably the oldest political parties in the world. One of them, the Republican Party, is even affectionately known as the GOP — the Grand Old Party.

For most of its history, America has had two major competing political parties. From Abraham Lincoln (1861–65) to Barack Obama (2009–17), America had 28 different presidents — 18 Republicans and 10 Democrats. During the same period, these two parties alternated in their control of Congress. Indeed, it has been unusual for anyone who was not either a Democrat or a Republican to be even elected to Congress. So in this sense at least, America really does have a two-party system.

In terms of ideology and policy priorities, the Democratic Party in the United States would be similar to a cross between the Liberal Democrats and 'New Labour' in the UK, while the Republicans look very similar to the UK Conservative Party. Both American parties have become more ideologically cohesive over the past two decades.

Pressure groups

In a participatory democracy, many citizens also belong to groups that attempt to exert influence on those who hold office — in any of the three branches of government. These groups are distinct from political parties because they do not participate directly in elections. They do not seek to win power, merely to influence those who do. Hence they are collectively known as pressure groups or, in America, as 'interest groups' because they represent a specific 'interest'.

Pressure groups seek to:

- broaden citizen participation in politics
- engage in public education on issues that affect their members
- influence the policy agenda of politicians both during and between elections

Pressure groups come in a great many different shapes and sizes. There are economic groups such as business associations and trade unions (in America referred to as labour unions). There are policy groups, political action committees (PACs), Super PACs, think-tanks and foundations. Pressure groups have played, and continue to play, a very significant role in many policy areas including women's rights, gender equality, rights of ethnic minorities, Americans with disabilities, the environment, gun control, healthcare and seniors (the elderly).

The methods they use — including direct lobbying, election-time campaigning, legal action and protest — are sometimes questioned as to whether they are always compatible with the ideals of representative democracy. Their huge discrepancy in size, wealth and influence also causes much debate, as does the clash between what may be in the special interest of a particular group and what may be in the wider interest of society as a whole.

Two representative democracies

Throughout this book we shall also be considering some of the key similarities and differences between the government and politics of the United States and those of the United Kingdom. It is probably true to say that when American government courses are taught in American schools and universities, there are more comparative references to British government than to that of any other country. Likewise, when in this country we teach courses on the government of the United Kingdom, there are more comparative references to US government than to that of any other country. So why is this?

First, as we saw earlier in this chapter, the two nations have close historical and cultural ties. Anyone who visits America from this country will almost certainly have noticed many Americans' fascination with a wide range of so-called 'English customs' and their seemingly insatiable interest in our Royal Family. Once when I happened to be attending a conference in Philadelphia at the same time as Queen Elizabeth II was visiting the city, I was introduced as 'the Queen's representative' and asked detailed questions about the well-being of both Her Majesty and her extended family.



Queen Elizabeth II and President Barack Obama

Second, the governmental and political systems of these two nations are both markedly different but also complementary; hence our focus will be on both similarities and differences. Indeed, I have found it to be the case that, to begin with, students tend to regard the two systems as well-nigh identical. It is only as they learn more about how the two systems actually work that the

Key term**Parliamentary government**

A type of representative democracy in which the people vote for representatives to the legislature and the leader of the largest party becomes chief executive.

Key term**Presidential government**

A type of representative democracy in which the chief executive is independently elected and cannot be dismissed by the legislature except by impeachment.

differences become more apparent. For although both systems are based on the democratic principle, the way they apply this principle is quite different.

Britain has what we call **parliamentary government**. In a parliamentary system, the people vote for their representatives to the law-making body (although in the UK, only to the House of Commons). Whichever party gains a majority in the legislature, its leader — often called the prime minister — becomes head of the executive branch of government, usually referred to as 'the government'. Other legislators from the prime minister's party make up the cabinet and run the executive departments. Thus there are literally dozens of public officials who serve both in the legislature and in high-level executive positions at the same time. The UK, along with many other European countries, has a parliamentary system as do other large democracies such as India, Japan and Australia.

The United States, on the other hand, has **presidential government**. In a presidential system, the chief executive — the president — is independently elected and cannot be dismissed by the legislature. This means that different parties may run the executive and legislative branches at the same time. Furthermore, no public official is allowed to serve in more than one branch at any one time. The president's cabinet is therefore drawn from outside the legislature, or serving legislators who accept a cabinet post must resign from the legislature. Most countries in central and southern America, as well as some in Asia and Africa, have a presidential system.

When studying politics comparatively, we will be focusing on similarities and differences. You need to ask yourself questions such as:

- Why do these similarities/differences exist?
- What are the consequences of any differences?
- Which (of, for example, the two institutions) is more or less powerful?
- Which (of, for example, the two processes) is more straightforward or complicated?
- Which (of, for example, the two systems) is more or less effective?
- What are the possible advantages/disadvantages of these differences?
- Which is more/less democratic?
- Which is more in need of reform?

Indeed, these will doubtless be the way examiners will frame their questions in the end-of-course examination. This means that you will need to go beyond the simple statement that 'X is different from Y', to analyse both the possible underlying *causes* as well as the possible *consequences* and *implications* of these differences.

Three theoretical approaches

Finally, it will be necessary to have a basic knowledge and understanding of three of the different theoretical approaches that we can adopt in our study of comparative politics. These are summarised in Box 1.5 on page 16.

The structural approach

The approach most widely adopted by scholars of comparative politics is called the *structural approach* and focuses on *the institutions* in a political system and the processes within them. A structural approach suggests that political outcomes are largely determined by the formal processes laid out within the political system. Structures create particular relationships, such as between the government and the governed, between employers and employees, between the party establishment and party members, or between pressure groups and their

Key term

Institution Any formal organisation whose members interact on the basis of the specific roles they perform.

members. As a consequence, the lives of individuals and groups within a society are largely determined by their position within a structure.

As institutions are such an important part of representative democracies, any study of comparative politics focusing on the USA and the UK must in large part be a comparative study of institutions. In its narrowest meaning, an **institution** is 'any formal organisation whose members interact on the basis of the specific roles they perform' (Hague and Harrop, 2010). Hence, in this narrow sense, a study of comparative politics through an institutional approach would focus on legislatures, executives and judiciaries. But in a wider sense, a structural approach to comparative politics would also focus on such things as constitutions, class structures, electoral systems, political parties, pressure groups and the media as being important 'structures' and 'processes' within a representative democracy.



Theresa May and Donald Trump meet at the White House, January 2017

The rational approach

A second possible approach is what political scientists call the *rational* or *rational choice approach*. This approach focuses not on institutions but on *individuals*. It assumes that individuals act in a rational, logical way in order to maximise their own self-interest. They choose what rationally will be best for themselves — hence the term 'rational choice'. This approach presumes that each individual has their own set of political goals — be they social, economic, cultural, environmental, or whatever — and they will make decisions based on the best way to achieve those goals. A rational approach suggests that individuals will act rationally, choosing to act in a particular way so as to give them the most beneficial outcome.

This approach seems especially appropriate in studying voting behaviour and the way people operate within political parties and pressure groups. When Ronald Reagan in his televised debate with President Jimmy Carter in 1980 posed the question to voters, 'Are you better off than you were four years ago?' he was appealing to their rationality. Reagan knew that most Americans did not feel they had become better off under Carter's four years in office and so that question would focus voters on their self-interested need for change. That said, this approach is not without its critics, who believe that it overestimates

Key term

Culture A shared, learned and symbolic system of values, beliefs, ideas and attitudes that shapes and influences people's perceptions and behaviour.

human rationality — take, for example, the woman in New York voting for Jimmy Carter — and ignores the difficulty of the ordinary individual gaining the accurate information required to make such 'rational' choices.

The cultural approach

A third possible approach is called the *cultural approach* and focuses neither on institutions nor on individuals, but on *ideas*. Thus a study of comparative politics through a cultural approach focuses on the prevailing political, social, economic and religious ideas within each nation. **Culture** can be defined as a shared, learned and symbolic system of values, beliefs, ideas and attitudes that shapes and influences people's perceptions and behaviour. It tells us who we are collectively, what is important to us, and how we should behave — as Americans or as citizens of the UK. Culture must be collective; there is no such thing as a culture of one. By definition, culture is shared among members of a community. So a cultural approach to politics suggests that shared ideas, beliefs and values often determine the actions of individuals and groups within them.

But again, this approach has some rather obvious pitfalls. While we can usually identify the *majority* view of these national values and expectations, we must realise that any country as large and as socially complex as the USA or

Box 1.5

Summary of the three theoretical approaches

Structural approach

- Focuses on *institutions* in a political system and the processes within them.
- Suggests that political outcomes are largely determined by the formal structures and processes laid out within a political system.
- Suggests that the lives of individuals and groups within a society are largely determined by their position within a structure.
- *Especially relevant when comparing legislatures, executives, judiciaries and constitutions, but also electoral systems, political parties and pressure groups.*
- For example, the structural differences between the US and UK constitutions, being respectively codified and uncoded, lead to differences of outcome.

Rational approach

- Focuses on *individuals* within a political system.
- Suggests that individuals act rationally, choosing to act in a particular way out of self-interest, and as a way to give themselves the most beneficial outcome.
- Suggests that individuals have a set of political goals and that they will make decisions based on the best way to achieve those goals.
- *Especially relevant when comparing legislators, members of the executive branch, voters, as well as members of political parties and pressure groups.*
- For example, the different choices made by the affluent and the poor when voting in elections — each attempting to achieve their desired policy goals.

Cultural approach

- Focuses on shared *ideas* within a political system or group.
- Suggests that these shared ideas, beliefs and values of a group within society often determine the actions of that group.
- Culture tells us who we are collectively, what is important to us, and how we ought to behave.
- For example, the different relationships between the state and organised religion in the USA compared with UK being accounted for by the cultural history of each nation.

the UK will contain a number of sub-cultures that will be much more difficult to identify. There must therefore be a danger that 'culture' becomes something of a set of sloppy generalisations — the kind of thing one might read in a tourist book about what 'Americans' are like and how they behave. There is also a debate about whether or not culture is shaped — and announced — by the nation's elite and therefore merely reflects the cultural ideas of those elite groups. In the main, the United States was originally the creation of White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPS). As a result, a view of American culture arose that equated 'Americanism' with the values of WASPS. Blacks, Catholics, Jews and later Hispanics were seen as sub-cultures. But even among the majority American community, there are significant differences with regard to American culture. Take, for example, views on such issues as pornography, homosexuality, right to life, or prayer in public (i.e. state-run) schools. Hence, during the 1990s, we had what were often referred to as the 'culture wars', in which Americans disagreed profoundly and angrily about what constituted American culture.

But culture can explain why individuals and societies act and behave in certain ways. It can explain how they react to safeguard what they see as the fundamental rights and liberties of their nation — to safeguard 'their way of life'. It can explain why people vote in a certain way, take to protest marches or movements, or fight for causes. Culture has a power to motivate people and to shape society, to create far-reaching change or to preserve the status quo.

So to summarise, comparative politics is rooted in *institutions*. It stresses the role institutions and processes play in shaping and constraining the behaviour of individuals. Indeed, the fundamental idea in comparative politics is that institutions and processes matter. The rational choice approach, on the other hand, assumes that *individuals* are out to maximise self-interest and engage in political action to receive benefits — for themselves — at a minimal cost. And although cultural explanations of politics are often vague, *ideas* also matter — both shared ideas that shape a nation's self-portrait and underpin its society, and shared ideas within a group that underpin its actions and beliefs. So the study of comparative politics is the study of the 'three Is' — institutions, individuals and ideas.

References

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