

Comparing Foreign Political Systems Focus Questions for Unit 1

Any additions or revision to the draft version of the study guide posted earlier in the term are noted in bold.

Why should we bother comparing how different governments work?

- Some key definitions: What is politics? What are: states, nations, and nation-states? What are regimes? What are governments? These are reviewed in your *Essentials* (vs. the cases book) chaps. 1 and 2.
- This is a political science class, so why is it important to study culture, history, and economics in a class that is primarily focused comparing the way that political systems and political actors operate across different types of countries?
- In what sense does political science try to be “scientific”? What “generalizable” principles can we learn by carefully looking at the way government works in a fairly small number of other societies? What countries will we be looking to understand variations in democracy? Ways that advanced countries tax and spend? Deal with revolutions and the desires of non-democratic governments stay in power?
- Roughly, how many countries are there in the world today? Why are there more than there used to be? Why does your professor (and your textbooks and most comparative political scientists) think you can learn a lot about the world by just studying a relatively small number of places carefully and comparing them? What are some of the most useful variables to look at when comparing countries, and what can a country’s population, GDP per capita, life expectancy, etc. tell us that is important about the likely priorities of a given country’s government?
- Why are “most similar” and “most dissimilar” strategies frequently used when comparing countries? What can we learn from systematically comparing multiple countries that we couldn’t learn by studying any single country, even if we studied it in great detail?

What useful comparisons can we make among the advanced industrial democracies?

- Based on a strong understanding of your textbook chapter, “Democratic Regimes,” as well as the article by Karl and Schmitter, what procedures and principles characterize all modern democracies? What bare minimum set of procedures and protections are essential for a country to be considered a full-fledged democracy? What decision-making institutions, mechanisms, and processes can vary across democracies? Do all democracies have written constitutions, checks and balances, or courts that have judicial review to strike down unconstitutional laws? Does every democracy have direct elections for the person that has as much or more power than American presidents? Why do even very robust democracies have some critical policy areas where the people don’t have any direct say?
- What are some of the major differences between America’s tax and spending priorities and those in Europe’s advanced industrial democracies? To what extent do Americans differ and where are they similar to other democratic peoples with respect to what they want government to do?
- Why do the AIDs (advanced democracies) have vastly different democratic institutions even though they all deeply value democracy? What important outcome and process tradeoffs do democracies have to make when choosing how to make democracy work in different settings (e.g., being quickly and fully responsive vs. being deliberative and more representative)? Why have democracies like the US, Britain, and Germany made such different choices

in what aspects of democratic decision-making are emphasized in their decision-making processes and mechanisms?

- You need to be very familiar with main choices democracies make in with respect to their main political institutions and electoral systems (See your textbook chapter, “Democratic Regimes”). What are the defining characteristics and main differences among presidential, parliamentary, and semi-presidential systems? What are the main advantages and disadvantages to each type of government?
- What are the defining characteristics and main differences among the electoral systems most widely used in the advanced democracies, specifically single-member district systems (aka: SMD and “first-past-the-post”), proportional representation (aka PR elections that use multimember districts), and mixed systems that use both of these at the same time. What are the main advantages and disadvantages to each?
- How do the advanced democracies vary with respect to how detailed their constitutions are, state-national government relations (i.e., federalism), and the power of supreme courts to strike down laws of national leaders (e.g., “judicial review” and “abstract review”)? How do they vary with respect to how the national leader is selected and how new elections can be triggered (e.g., “have a vote of no confidence”)? How do they vary with respect to how and when the government can ask the people to directly decide important policy issues (i.e., hold a “referendum”) and when the people can demand this opportunity for themselves (i.e., hold an “initiative”)
- Tying the last two blocks of questions together, what key institutional choices do democracies make if they want to emphasize deliberative and consensus-driven democracy? If they want to protect minority voices and make sure most voices are heard? If they want a highly responsive government that quickly acts? If they want voters to be able to assign blame correctly when things go wrong? If they want most citizens in most places to have treatment by government? If they want government to look quite different across various regions in a country? If they want voters to be able to choose among many parties that closely represent their issues? If they want just a few, centrist political parties that are relatively moderate? If they want to give their elected official maximum flexibility in dealing with unforeseen crises? If they want government to be restricted in its behavior no matter what the situation?
- What economic, cultural, and political features do *all* of the advanced democracies share in the 21st century? Where do they differ most? What major changes and “crises” are all of the advanced industrial democracies facing, and what are the main causes of these crises? Why might we expect advanced industrial democracies to respond differently to similar challenges?
- How do the UK, the US, and Germany compare to OECD averages for: levels of poverty? The rate at which children live in poverty? How much they spend—both with and non-public funds—on health care? How much do their tax rates (as a share of GDP) vary? What other countries are closest to the US with respect to how much they allocate to higher education and healthcare?
- What exactly is “globalization,” and how is it impacting the way that the advanced democracies’ governments and economies operate? Thinking about the textbook chapter you have read on the “Advanced Democracies,” how is globalization linked to “post-materialism” and “post-industrialism”?
- From the perspective of your short reading from the Economist what are the positives and negatives of economic globalization—the free movement of trade, capital, and production—and why does the Economist believe that decreasing interdependence and capital mobility would have serious consequences? That being the case, why do so many people want to reverse globalization?

- Why is populism, extremism, and anger toward government increasing across the advanced industrial democracies? You will find it helpful to review the chapter on “The Advanced Democracies” and to carefully summarize the main ideas in the Economist and Kupchan articles on the “malaise” we are seeing across Europe and the US. Looking at different generations in Europe and the US, to what extent are younger generations more or less supportive of democratic institutions—and democracy in general—when compared to older generations?
- Drawing from your readings on British and German economic and social policy, what evidence is there to suggest that different advanced democracies are responding to the pressures of globalization in distinct ways? How are these different policy responses linked to these countries’ major political institutions? Which government has been more successful (at least for now) and why?

What can Britain tell us about democratic choices and policy outcomes?

- What historical moments and processes led to power becoming so centralized in Britain when compared to most advanced democracies? What tradeoffs of democracy does the British system emphasize and why? What are the major advantages and risks to the type of democracy Britain has established? Would this system work as well in other types of societies, including the US or Germany?
- What is the difference between an electoral system that uses single member districts (aka first-past-the-post, winner-take all, or plurality elections) **like the US and the UK**, and systems using proportional representation (aka “**PR**” electoral systems) elections (**like Germany does for part of its Bundestag elections**)? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each type of system? (Thinking ahead to Germany, how well do governments work that combine both types of systems?)
- Why has Britain—like the US—historically had just two dominant political parties? What are these parties, and what are the main ideological differences between them? Why are neither especially radical, and why did British parties become more like each other over time? How does the structure and working of parties in Britain differ from those of the US (i.e., **why are party leaders so much more powerful in the UK**)? What is it about the way that the Prime Minister system and their electoral system works that have usually made their parties more ideological than those of the US?
- **Why did Theresa May call an early election in 2016, and how does that work in a parliamentary system versus the US’s “fixed” elections? What is a “hung” parliament, why are they rare in Britain, and what does it mean for the connection between what voters have said in an election and what happens afterwards? Why do small, less popular and more extreme parties benefit from “hung” parliaments?**
- What are the key differences between a parliamentary system and a presidential one? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each type of government? What, if any, features of Britain’s parliamentary system are unique **when compared to most parliamentary systems**? How is it different from Germany’s parliamentary system? Drawing on Uri Dadush’s article, how did the structure of the British political system impact its response to the global recession and that of the United States?
- Many parliamentary systems (but not Germany’s) allow for a change the government’s leadership (e.g. the UK’s Tories replaced David Cameron with Theresa May) without any election involving the public. Most parliamentary systems also allow the sacking of the government (by a vote of no-confidence), which triggers new elections. Also, most parliamentary systems allow the government to call early elections whenever doing so is to its advantage or when it thinks it can’t govern. What are the merits and problems with these political arrangements? How and why

does Germany and especially the US make it so much harder to change leaders between regularly scheduled elections even when our top leaders is very unpopular?

- How has the power of the House of Lords and its selection process changed over time? What additional changes are contemplated? Is there any legitimate or important role for unelected actors—the monarchy and House of Lords, in particular—to play in modern British politics? **What kind of problems would it create if the Queen were replaced by a directly elected president?** How has the presence of a second democratically elected chamber in American politics, rather than the equivalent of the Lords, impacted our government's ability to get things done?
- How did political power in Britain change after Labour came to power in the mid-1990s? Is it fair to say that a constitutional “revolution” of sorts has taken place? What specifically did Blair's “Third Way” do to Britain's political system to make it more democratic? What say have the people and political forces outside of the governing party had in remaking British institutions in recent years (i.e., key referenda)?
- How successful have recent British governments been in addressing the pressures of globalization with their social and economic policies? How and why did David Cameron's government pursue a much more radical version of austerity than the state-level pullback in government the US had during the recent global recession? Using that experience as an example, what are the main advantages and disadvantages to how British democracy deals with crises?
- How does the outcome of Scottish referendum—and the fact that it occurred in the first place— fit into the larger challenges the AIDs are facing with globalization? **What about the Brexit vote and the most recent elections?**

What can Germany tell us about institutional choices and policy outcomes in the advanced democracies?

- What historical factors led to the distribution of power in today's Germany? Which historical event—the failure of Weimar Republic or Hitler's rise—appears to have been more important in shaping the present form of government? To what extent can we see lessons from both key periods in the current set up of German democracy? In what sense can we say that both events were as or more important to the current structure of German government than was US occupation after WW2?
- How is the German Constitution different from that of the US and especially Britain? How difficult is it to change and what role does the German supreme court play? How is the German Supreme court selected, and in what key ways does its configuration make it different from the US model?
- How does Germany's parliamentary model deviate from most other democracies with a parliamentary government? (**Specifically, why/how is the power of the German government more limited and typically more stable?**). How does the power of Germany's Chancellor compare to that of the British PM or an American president? What mechanisms does a German Chancellor have to help create stability in what is usually a coalition government rather than one made up of a single party as usually is the case with American presidents or British PMs.
- What unusual role does the German upper legislative house (the Bundesrat) play in politics? In what ways is the Bundesrat weaker than the US Senate, but much stronger than the UK's House of Lords? How does the selection process of its members differ from the US or UK upper-houses, and how does that figure into how much power the Bundesrat can wield?
- What role does the German president have and how is/she elected? Who is more powerful, a German president, the US President, or the British monarch?

- What is federalism? Why does Germany have such strong state (Länder) governments, while Britain has not had any subnational governance at all until very recently? What role do state governments play in the way politics works in Germany? What are the main advantages and disadvantages to having a federalist system rather than a unitary one?
- What is Germany's "two-plus" party system, and why is it used in the very powerful Bundestag? How do the Bundestag's elections work, and typically how many parties participate in governing the country? Are there any advantages to their electoral system over ours?
- Why are small parties—even extreme ones—so much more powerful in a parliamentary system than they usually are in presidential systems, especially those that use single member districts like the US? Considering the larger role that extreme parties are now playing in German politics, are there any major disadvantages to having a system that encourages the participation of numerous small parties whose post-electoral support is frequently required to form a majority? How does the German system limit the amount of power that smaller parties yield (**i.e., how does the Chancellor govern in a multiparty system without being at the whim of the small parties**).
- What are the two political parties that have dominated German politics for of its democratic history? What is their ideological focus? How centrist are they? Why is the two-party system appear to be breaking down in Germany and what characteristics best define the smaller parties that are now playing a larger role in the German system.
- What are the most important economic and/or political challenges facing the German government today? How well is the government responding to them and why? Why is the German government currently made up of a coalition that has brought the two major parties—the CDU and the SPD—together to govern?