

COMPARING FOREIGN POLITICAL SYSTEMS

Unit 2 Focus Questions

- What are main differences between democratic regimes and nondemocracies? What distinguishes totalitarian regimes from other types of autocratic states? What are the defining features of each of these models of non-democracy: personal and monarchical, military, one-party, theocratic, and illiberal/hybrid?
- Other than coercion, what means do non-regimes use to retain political power? In this respect, how are totalitarian regimes typically different with respect to popular political participation? Why are nondemocracies facing more problems maintaining control in the 21st century than was previously the case, and what steps are autocrats taking to resist the growing pressures to liberalize? Why do many authoritarian regimes happily hold elections and encourage people to vote?
- What are “revolutions” and what are the main causes of them? Why did Karl Marx think that revolution was inevitable in all capitalist societies, and how accurate were his predictions regarding where revolutions would most likely occur?
- What are the central assumptions of Marxism? Why did Karl Marx believe that capitalist states would inevitably become communist societies? What critical role did he think that government (and other elements of “the superstructure” and “false consciousness”) play in protecting capitalist societies against the “inevitable forces” he believed would sooner or later lead all capitalist societies to ultimately fail? How did he think everyday life and the role of government would be different under communism, and what role did he see for government in the transition from capitalism to communism?
- What kind of states have actually turned out to be the most vulnerable to revolutions? What conditions make it more likely that a revolutionary movement will succeed in bringing down the old political system? When are citizens most likely to support revolutionary groups? Under what conditions are everyday citizens themselves most likely to take up arms and revolt (on this last point, be familiar with the “j-curve” and the theory of relative deprivation)? How well do these theories about the causes of revolution explain the Russian and Iranian revolutions??
- Why did Russia’s Vladimir Lenin think that Marx’s predictions of world-wide revolution, beginning in the US and in the most economically advanced nations of Western Europe, had not been realized by the end of the 19th century? Why did Lenin believe that peripheral economies like Russia’s would be more fertile ground for communist revolutions than the advanced capitalist states? What did Lenin mean when he wrote of the importance of “imperialism,” “democratic centralism,” and “vanguard parties” (the Bolsheviks) in creating communist societies in places like Russia?
- Thinking about the USSR and the other communist states discussed in the O’Neil textbook, how correct were Marx’s predictions about the benefits of communist revolution for most people and the type of societies likely to emerge through revolution? Is life better or worse in post-Soviet states than when the USSR was still a country? What factors have allowed some post-Soviet countries to do much better than others?
- Thinking about communist states and when Russia was the dominant region of the USSR, what are command economies, what supposed shortcomings of capitalism are they supposed to fix, and

why do they typically run into profound problems over the long haul? What does the typical communist government look like (e.g., what common institutions are present, what role does the *nomenklatura* play, and what is the relationship between the party and the state)? Does the “state wither away” in a communist society after a short “dictatorship of the proletariat” as Marx suggested would happen? Do these systems have elections, legislatures, or any other institutions similar to those found in democracies? What means, other than violence, do these systems use to stay in power?

- At what point—if any—did governance in Russia and Iran shift from totalitarianism to authoritarianism? Why and when do these transitions occur, and how does political life change as a state moves from totalitarian to authoritarian rule? Why do totalitarian regimes tend to be short-lived when compared to authoritarian governments? Why is it unrealistic to expect societies that have recently experienced either extremely brutal authoritarian rule or totalitarianism will quickly become democracies?
- What factors were most important in causing Russian communism to collapse in the 1980s? Why did Glasnost, Perestroika, and limited political competition in the USSR not produce the intended effect of reforming rather than ending communism?
- Why are Russia (and many of the post-Communist regimes in Eastern Europe) having such a hard time developing either democratic governments or a successful market economies? What do everyday citizens think about democracy in these societies? Why didn't the end of communism spark more enthusiasm for democracy?
- Both poorly constructed political institutions and non-democratic leadership have played central role in post-Soviet Russia's failure to become anything like a truly liberal democracy. What's wrong with the way the country's main political institutions—the presidency, the Duma, and political parties—work from a democratic perspective? What was the process by which Russians came to possess their post-Soviet constitution and political institutions, and how did that impact the quality of their democracy from the start?
- How and why did Vladimir Putin come to power in Russia? What is his background and whose interests does his political faction represent? How was he able to displace the power of other political parties and economic interests—especially Russia's oligarchs—to consolidate power? How has he played Russia's political and electoral institutions to his advantage over the years?
- Why are Vladimir Putin and those who closely surround him able to govern with impunity even though Russia has all of the institutions that most established democracies have? How and why are Russia's political leaders regularly rigging elections?
- Lilia Shevtsova, among other scholars, see Putin's leadership as unsustainable over the long run. Why does she believe that Russians won't put up with the looting of their country and soft authoritarianism forever? Why haven't opposition parties more effectively challenged Putin to date? What steps has the Russian government taken since major street protests in 2011 to ensure that they will remain in power?
- What were the main causes of the Iranian revolution in 1979? Why did anti-Americanism play a central role in the ideology and mass mobilization promoted by Ayatollah Khomeini's followers as they seized control of the country?

- Why does it matter that Iran is mostly populated by Shi'as rather than Sunnis? Why did Iran's Shi'a clerics (the mullahs) emerge as the dominant political force in post 1979 Iran, and how have they managed to stay in power for so long?
- Iran's theocracy includes both elected components and elements of divided government. Why can't it be accurately called a democracy? What roles do the Supreme Leader, the Assembly of Experts, and the Guardian Council play in Iran's governmental structure? What is the role of the Iranian president and the legislature? Of these various political actors, which are elected and who can run for these offices? How supportive are any of these elements to either allowing more democracy in Iran or increasing the influence of traditional political institutions and decreasing the power of Iran's unique theocratic institutions?
- Thinking back to your readings at the start of this unit and applying them to Iran, what kind of "illiberal" democratic mechanisms does the Iranian government use? On the whole, is there more or less potential for the Iranian political system (i.e., the layout of its institutions) to be run in a democratic way than is the case in Russia? What would have to change for Iran to function as liberal democracy like, in say, India or one of the advanced industrial democracies?
- Looking at economic development, various demographic changes, and the effects of international sanctions in Iran over the last decade, how well has the country been led during this period? What are the most important difficulties currently facing Iran domestically, and why does the think that "The Revolution is Over"? Is there any evidence to suggest that political power in Iran may finally be starting a shift from religious leaders to political leaders who have been elected by the people? Who (not names, but rather what forces) are Iran's reformists who might lead changes and who are the hardliners who will resist it? What specific "paradoxes (i.e., the Journal of Democracy article) have faced the Iranian government's efforts to impose authoritarianism since 1979 (it may be helpful to think carefully about the differences between what Iranians think about protest and strong leadership versus what surveys find with the typical Russian).
- How stable is Iranian politics (why does the *Economist* believe change is imminent and why does Iran's supreme leader think that a USSR-like collapse is unlikely)? Why and how have fundamentalist forces held their ground recently in Iran, and what consequences does this have for any possibility of democracy in Iran? Why is the continued centrality of the supreme leader's role in Iranian politics so problematic for Iran foreign relations?