

CHAPTER 2

Comparing Political Systems

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 2.1** Explain the reasons for using the comparative method to study politics and the goals of description, explanation, and prediction.
- 2.2** Define the components of a political system and discuss the ways domestic and international environments can affect it.
- 2.3** List six types of political structures, and provide a few examples of how a similar structure functions differently in Britain than it does in China.
- 2.4** Discuss how the functions of Russia's political structures changed after the collapse of communism.
- 2.5** Describe the roles of conditions, policies, and outcomes in evaluating a political system.

Why We Compare

- 2.1** Explain the reasons for using the comparative method to study politics and the goals of description, explanation, and prediction.

The great French interpreter of American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville, while traveling in America in the 1830s, wrote to a friend explaining how his own ideas about French institutions and culture entered into his writing of *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville wrote, "Although I very rarely spoke of France in my book, I did not write one page of it without having her, so to speak, before my eyes."¹ Tocqueville taught us that the only way we can fully understand our own political system is by comparing it to others. Comparing our experience with that of other countries deepens our understanding of our own politics and permits us to see a wider range of alternatives. It illuminates the virtues and shortcomings of our own political life. By taking us beyond our familiar arrangements and assumptions, comparative analysis helps expand our awareness of the potentials, for better or worse, of politics.

On the comparative method, Tocqueville offered this comment: "Without comparisons to make, the mind does not know how to proceed."² Tocqueville was telling us that comparison is fundamental to all human thought. It is the methodological core of the humanistic and scientific methods, including the scientific study of politics. Comparative analysis helps us develop and test explanations of how political processes work or when political change occurs. The goals of the comparative methods used by political scientists are similar to those used in more exact sciences such as physics. But political scientists often cannot design experiments, a major path to knowledge in many natural sciences. We cannot always control and manipulate political arrangements and observe the consequences. We are especially limited when dealing with large-scale events that drastically affect many people. For example, researchers cannot and would not want to start a war or a social revolution to study its effects.

We can, however, use the comparative method to describe the political events and institutions found

BOX
2.1

Aristotle's Library

There is historical evidence that Aristotle had accumulated a library of more than 150 studies of the political systems of the Mediterranean world of 400 to 300 bc. Many of these had probably been researched and written by his disciples.

While only the Athenian constitution survives from this library of Aristotelian polities, it is evident from the references to such studies that do survive that Aristotle was concerned with sampling the variety of political systems then in existence, including the "barbarian" countries, such as Libya, Etruria, and Rome: "[T]he references in

ancient authorities give us the names of some 70 or more of the states described in the compilation of 'polities.' They range from Sinope, on the Black Sea, to Cyrene in North Africa; they extend from Marseilles in the Western Mediterranean to Crete, Rhodes, and Cyprus in the East. Aristotle thus included colonial constitutions as well as those of metropolitan states. His descriptions embraced states on the Aegean, Ionian, and Tyrrhenian Seas, and the three continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa."

Source: Ernest Barker, ed., *The Politics of Aristotle* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), 386.

in different societies and to identify their causes and consequences. More than two thousand years ago, Aristotle in his *Politics* contrasted the economies and social structures of Greek city-states in an effort to determine how social and economic environments affected political institutions and policies (see Box 2.1). More contemporary political scientists also try to explain differences between the processes and performance of political systems. They compare two-party democracies with multiparty democracies, parliamentary with presidential regimes, poor countries with rich countries, and elections in new party systems with those in established democracies. These and many other comparisons have greatly enriched our understanding of politics.

How We Compare

We study politics in several different ways: We describe it, we seek to explain it, and sometimes we try to predict it. These are all parts of the scientific process, though as we move from description to explanation and prediction, our task gets progressively harder. Each of these tasks may use the comparative method. The first stage in the study of politics is description. If we cannot describe a political process or event, we cannot really hope to understand or explain it, much less predict what might happen next or in similar situations.

Description may sound easy and straightforward enough, but often it is not. In order to describe

a political event or institution well, we need to use words and phrases that our audience can understand clearly and in the same way, and which they can apply broadly. In order to describe politics, we thus need a set of concepts, a **conceptual framework**, which is clearly defined and well understood. In other words, we want our concepts to be **intersubjective** (understood and used in the same way by different subjects) and general. The easier our set of concepts is to understand, and the more broadly it can be applied, the more helpful it is to the study of politics. Conceptual frameworks are not generally right or wrong, but they may be more or less useful to the task at hand. The conceptual framework we use is described in more detail later in this chapter.

How We Explain and Predict

Once we are able to describe politics with the help of the conceptual framework that we choose, the next task is to explain it. Explanation typically means answering "why?" questions. More precisely, explaining political phenomena means identifying causal relationships among them, pointing out one phenomenon as the cause or consequence of another.³ It is often important to be able to go beyond description to explanation. For example, we might be interested in the relationship between democracy and international peace (see Box 2.2). Description can tell us that in

BOX
2.2

Statistical Methods

A popular contemporary research program known as *democratic peace research* illustrates the pros and cons of statistical and case study research. International relations scholars studied the diplomatic history of the Cold War period and asked whether democratic countries are more peaceful in their foreign policy than authoritarian and nondemocratic ones. Many scholars took the statistical route. They counted each year of interaction between two states as one case. With roughly half a century of diplomatic history involving a state system of 100 countries or more, they had a very large number of cases, even after eliminating the irrelevant cases. Political scientists Andrew Bennett and Alexander George drew these conclusions after surveying the statistical research:

Statistical methods achieved important advances on the issue of whether a nonspurious interdemocratic peace exists. A fairly strong though not unanimous consensus emerged that: (1) democracies are not less

war-prone in general; (2) they have very rarely if ever fought one another; (3) this pattern of an interdemocratic peace applies to both war and conflicts short of war; (4) states in transition to democracy are more war-prone than established democracies; and (5) these correlations were not spuriously brought about by the most obvious alternative explanations.

Although much was learned from the statistical studies, they were not as successful at answering "why" questions. Case studies make clinical depth possible, revealing causal interconnections in individual cases. Careful repetition of these causal tracings from case to case strengthens confidence in these relationships. Thus, Bennett and George concluded that the best research strategy uses statistical and case study methods together, with each method having its own strengths.

Source: Andrew Bennett and Alexander George, "An Alliance of Statistical and Case Study Methods: Research on the Interdemocratic Peace," *Newsletter of the APSA Organized Section in Comparative Politics* 9, no. 1 (1998): 6.

the contemporary world, peace and democracy tend to go together. Democratic states are mostly (though not always) peaceful, and many peaceful states are democracies. But we do not fully understand why this is so. Are democratic states more peaceful because they are democratic, are they democratic because they are peaceful, or are they perhaps both peaceful and democratic because they are more prosperous than other states, or because they have market economies, or because their citizens have values (a political culture) that support both democracy and peace? A good explanation helps us find the right answer to such questions. Ideally, we want to put many political relationships in causal terms, so we can say that one political feature is the cause of another, and the latter is an effect of the former.

Theories are precisely formulated and well-supported statements about causal relationships among general political phenomena—for example, about the causes of democracy, war, election victories, or welfare policies. Theories need to be testable, and a good theory is one that holds up after continued tests, preferably after a series of concerted efforts to prove it wrong. **Hypotheses** are causal explanations

that have not yet been proven. In other words, they are candidate theories that have not yet been adequately tested or confirmed. Yet scientific theories are always tentative; they are subject to modification or falsification at any time as our knowledge improves. Theories are often modified and made more precise as we test them again and again with better and better data. A well-tested theory allows us to explain confidently what happens in specific cases or sets of cases—for example, that two countries have a peaceful relationship because they are democracies, or perhaps the other way around (see again Box 2.2).

Political scientists often develop theories as they seek to understand a puzzling case or an interesting difference between two or three political systems. For example, Tocqueville was intrigued by the fact that democracy was so widely supported in the United States, while it was fiercely contested in his native France. Researchers also often generate hypotheses about the causes and consequences of political change by comparing countries at different historical periods. In his other famous study, Tocqueville contributed to a general theory of revolution by comparing prerevolutionary and postrevolutionary France.⁴ More recently,

Theda Skocpol based her explanation of the causes of revolution on a comparison of the “old regimes” of France, Russia, and China with their revolutionary and postrevolutionary regimes.⁵

But for an explanatory hypothesis to become a useful theory, we generally want it to explain not only the case(s) on which it was based but also other cases (revolutions, wars, elections, etc.) that fall into the same set. Hypotheses are therefore tested against many different kinds of political **data**. Researchers in political science distinguish between studies based on large numbers (large n) and small numbers (small n) of cases or observations. In large- n studies, particularly when the number of cases is beyond twenty or thirty, it is often possible and helpful to use statistical analysis. Such studies are usually referred to as *statistical studies*; small- n studies are usually called *case studies*. Many small- n studies examine only a single case, whereas others compare two or three or four (or occasionally more).

Statistical analysis enables us to consider possible alternative causes at the same time, accepting some and rejecting others. Large- n studies often have a sufficient number and variety of cases to enable the researcher to examine the relation among the variables associated with each case. **Variables** are the features in which our cases differ—for example, “religious heritage: Christian, Muslim, or Buddhist” or “rank in the United Nations quality of life index,” or “income per capita.” Large- n statistical studies thus allow us to be more certain and precise in our explanations. On the other hand, we need the depth that case studies provide. Small- n studies permit investigators to go deeply into a case, identify the particularities of it, get the clinical details, and examine each link in the causal process. They encourage us to formulate insightful hypotheses for statistical testing in the first place. They allow us to trace the nature of the cause-and-effect relations (sometimes called “causal mechanisms”) better than large- n studies. In this manner, political scientists may come to know not only whether democracies are more peaceful than dictatorships but more precisely why democratic leaders behave in the way that they do. Most researchers recognize that these methods are complementary (see again Box 2.2).

The final and most challenging task in the scientific process is prediction. Prediction is testing hypotheses against data that were not known by the researchers who developed these explanations, often

because the events had not yet happened. It is generally far more difficult to formulate predictions about events that have not yet happened than to explain events whose outcome we already know. This is both because we never know whether we have captured all the relevant factors that might affect the future and because the world itself may change as we try to understand it. Often, political actors learn from the mistakes of the past, so that the same patterns do not necessarily repeat themselves. Yet political scientists have made improvements in the act of prediction as well as in description and explanation. Many researchers have, for example, observed the close relationship between economic conditions and the results of U.S. presidential elections. When economic conditions are good (low inflation and unemployment, high growth), the candidate of the incumbent party tends to win; when times are bad, the opposition party tends to prevail. This theory is sufficiently strong that it allows researchers to make fairly precise and reliable predictions about the electoral result after observing economic conditions a few months before the election. Yet sometimes the predictions get it wrong, as they did in the 2000 presidential election, when most researchers predicted that Democratic candidate Al Gore would win handily. Such failed predictions imply the need to revise the theory to take additional factors into account. Successful predictions greatly increase our confidence in a theory, as well as being interesting for their own sake or to guide policy.

An example may suggest how you might go about theorizing in comparative politics, going beyond “just mastering the facts.” It is well known that rich countries are more likely to be democracies than are poor countries; democracy and economic development are strongly associated. (See Figure 1.4. and the discussion of it.) But there are many possible reasons for this association. Some persons have suggested that this relationship comes about because democracy encourages education and economic development. Others have argued that as countries develop economically, their new middle classes or their emerging working classes are more likely to demand democratization. Yet others have seen that both democracy and economic development are commonly found in some regions of the world, such as Western Europe, while both tend to be scarce in the Middle East and Africa. This fact suggests that certain cultures may encourage or discourage both of them.

Yet the causal nature of this association is important, for reasons of both science and policy. Fostering economic development and securing democracy are two of the significant political challenges that we discussed in Chapter 1. Adam Przeworski and his associates examined democracies, nondemocracies, and transitions between them from 1950 until 1990.⁶ From their statistical analysis, they concluded that the association between democracy and prosperity did not reflect regional histories or superior economic growth under democracy. Moreover, countries at any level of development seemed able to introduce democracy, although economically developed countries were somewhat more likely to do so. Instead, these researchers argued that the key to the relationship lies in the greater fragility of democracies in economically poor societies. Democracy can be introduced in poor societies, but it is often replaced by some kind of dictatorship. In rich countries, in contrast, democracy tends to survive once it begins. These democratic failures in poor countries produce a strong association between development and democracy. We still need to understand exactly why democracy is more precarious in less developed societies, but we are making progress in understanding the causal relationship between development and democracy.

Comparative analysis is a powerful and versatile tool. It enhances our ability to describe and understand political processes and political change in any country. The comparative approach also stimulates us to form general theories of political relationships. It encourages and enables us to test our political theories by confronting them with the experience of many institutions and settings.

Political Systems: Environment and Interdependence

2.2 Define the components of a political system and discuss the ways domestic and international environments can affect it.

We began this book by discussing governments, but governments are only one part of a larger political system. Since the term **political system** is a main organizing concept of this book, it deserves a full

explanation. A system by definition has two properties: (1) a set of interdependent parts and (2) boundaries for its environment.

A political system is a particular type of social system that is involved in the making of authoritative public decisions. Central elements of a political system are the institutions of **government**—such as legislatures, bureaucracies, and courts—that formulate and implement the collective goals of a society or of groups within it. The decisions of governments are normally backed up by legitimate coercion, and governments can thus typically compel their citizens to comply with their decisions. (We discuss legitimacy at greater length in Chapter 3.)

Political systems also include important parts of the society in which governments operate. For example, political organizations, such as political parties or interest groups, are part of the political system. Such organizations do not have coercive authority, except insofar as they control the government. Likewise, the mass media only indirectly affect elections, legislation, and law enforcement. A whole host of institutions—beginning with the family and including communities, churches, schools, corporations, foundations, and think tanks—influence political attitudes and public policy. The term *political system* refers to the whole collection of related, interacting institutions and agencies.

The political systems that we compare in this book are all independent states (we also more casually refer to them as *countries*). They represent some of the most politically important countries in the contemporary world. At the same time, they reflect the diversity of political systems that exist today. A state is a particular type of political system. It has sovereignty—**independent legal authority** over a population in a particular territory, based on the recognized right to self-determination. Sovereignty rests with those who have the ultimate right to make political decisions.

Figure 2.1 tells us that a political system exists in both an international environment and a domestic environment. It is molded by these environments, and it tries to mold them. The system receives **inputs** from these environments. Its policymakers attempt to shape them through its **outputs**. In the figure, which is quite schematic and simple, we use the United States as the central actor. We include other countries as our environmental examples—Russia, China, Britain, Germany, Japan, Mexico, and Iran.

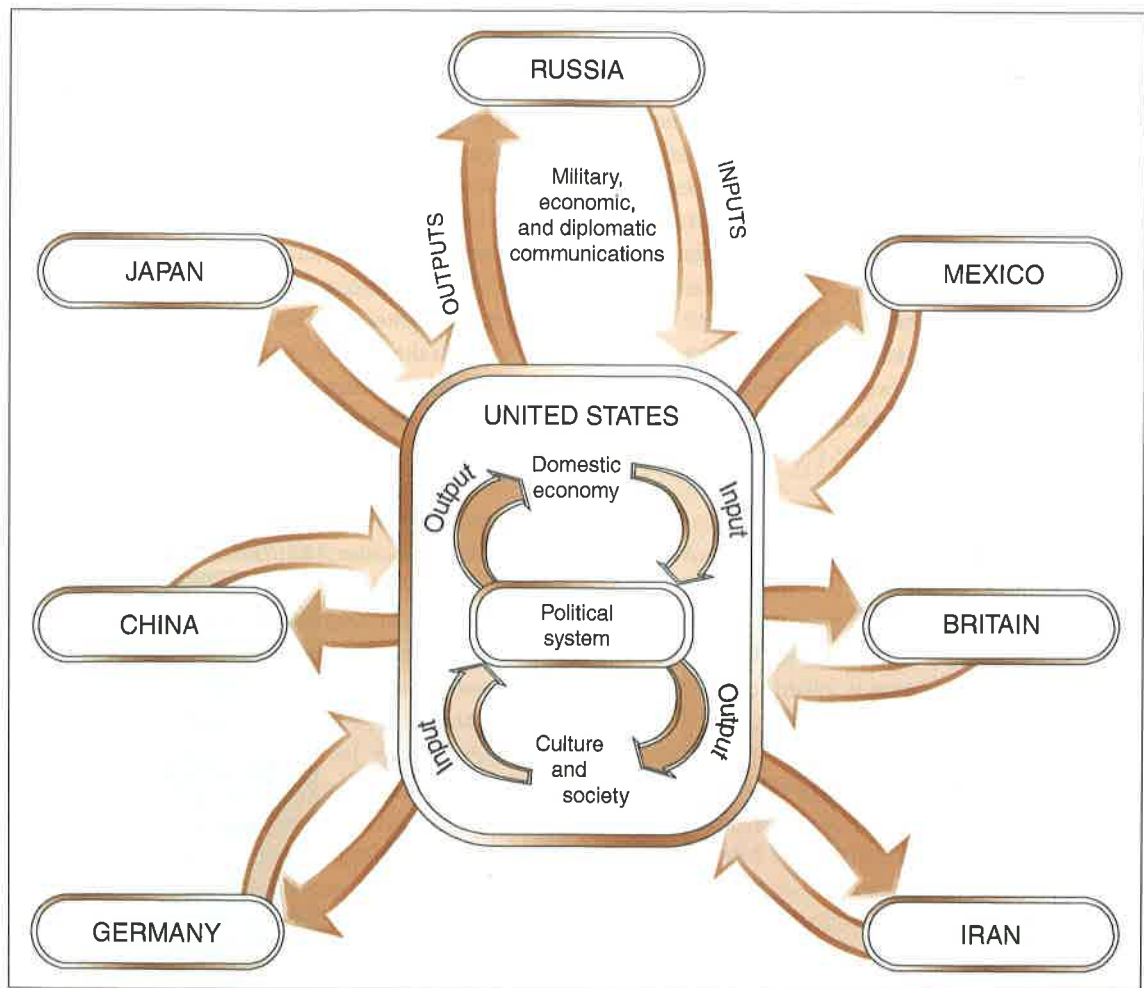


FIGURE 2.1

Political System and Its Environments

The political system of the United States interacts with domestic and international environments.

Exchanges among countries may vary in many ways. For example, they may be “dense” or “sparse.” U.S.-Canadian relations exemplify the dense end of the continuum in that they affect many of the citizens of these countries in significant ways, while U.S.-Nepalese relations are far sparser.

Relationships among political systems may be of many different kinds. The United States has substantial trade relations with some countries and relatively little trade with others. Some countries have an excess of imports over exports, whereas others have an excess of exports over imports. Military exchanges and support with such countries as the NATO nations, Japan, South Korea, Israel, and Saudi Arabia have been of significant importance to the United States.

The interdependence of countries—the volume and value of imports and exports, transfers of capital, international communication, and the extent of foreign travel and immigration—has increased enormously in recent decades. This increase is often called **globalization**. We might represent this process as a thickening of the input and output arrows between the United States and other countries in Figure 2.1. Fluctuations in this flow of international transactions and traffic attributable to depression, inflation, protective tariffs, international terrorism, war, and the like may wreak havoc with the economies of the countries affected.

We often think of the world as a patchwork of states with sizable and contiguous territories, and a common identity shared by their citizens. A nation is a group of

people, often living in a common territory, who have such a common identity. In **nation-states**, national identifications and sovereign political authority largely coincide—the state consists of individuals who share a common national identity. We have come to think of nation-states as the natural way to organize political systems, and often as an ideal. The national right to self-determination—the idea that every nation has a right to form its own state if it wants to do so—was enshrined in the Treaty of Versailles at the end of World War I.

Nation-states are often a desirable way to organize a political system. The national right to self-determination, however, is a relatively modern invention born in late

medieval Europe. Until the end of the Middle Ages, Europe consisted of many very small political systems and a few very large ones, whose territorial possessions were not always very stable or contiguous. Nor did states always consist of people with the same national identity. But gradually, a set of European nation-states evolved, and the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia established nation-states as the standard for the political organization of Europe. The nation-state thus emerged as the dominant political system during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe.

When the United States declared its independence in 1776, most independent states were European (see Figure 2.2). Much of the rest of the world existed as

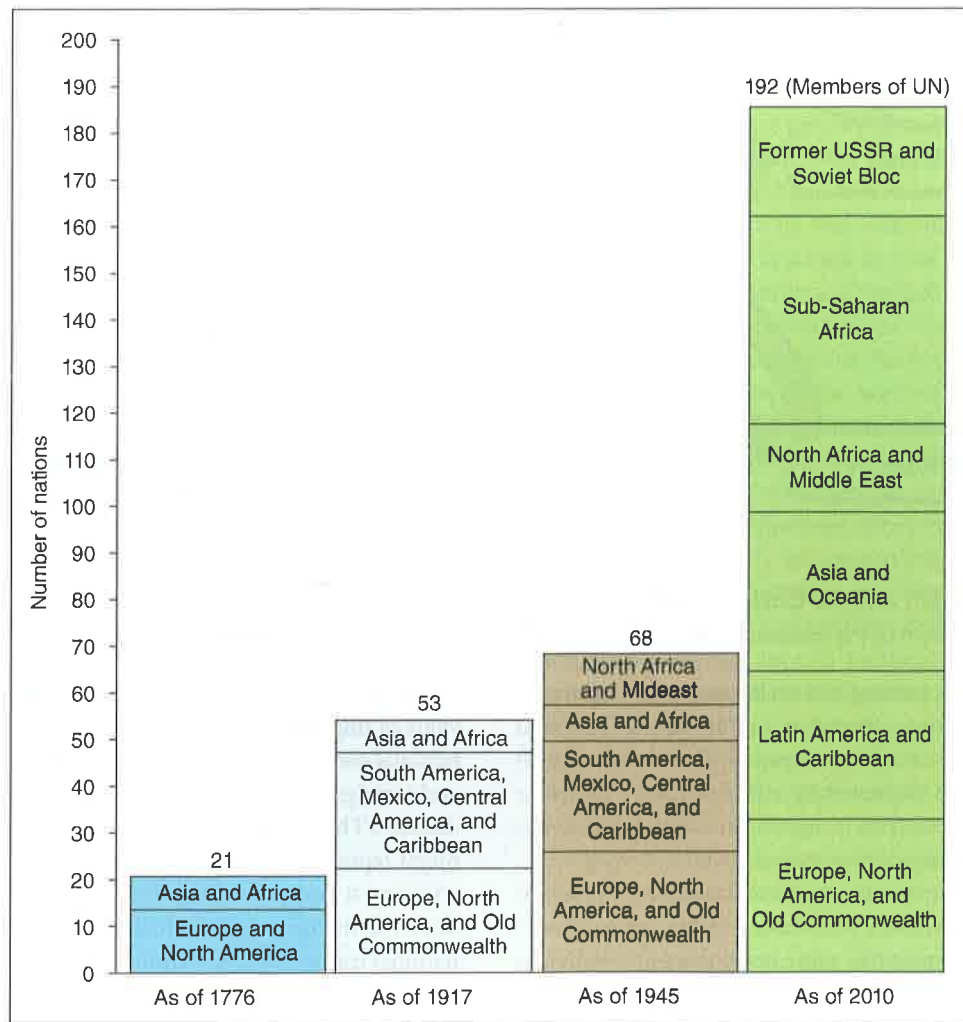


FIGURE 2.2
Formation of States since 1776

Most states emerged during the twentieth century.

Source: For Contemporary Members, Information Office, United Nations. Data to 1945 from Charles Taylor and Michael Hudson, *World Handbook of Political and Social Indicators* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 26ff.

colonies to one of the European empires. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the number of states increased, principally in Latin America, where the Spanish and Portuguese empires broke up into twenty independent states. In Europe, newly independent countries emerged in the Balkans, Scandinavia, and the Low Countries.

Between the two world wars, new states came into being in North Africa and the Middle East, and Europe continued to fragment as the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires broke up. After World War II, the development of new states took off, especially with the independence of India and Pakistan in 1947. By 2010, 126 new countries had joined the 68 states that existed in 1945. The largest group of new states is in sub-Saharan Africa. More than twenty new countries formed in the 1990s—mostly the successor states of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia. Four states have joined the UN since 2000—most notably Switzerland, which until 2002 had stayed out because of its strict neutrality policy—but there have been few newly independent countries over the past decade.

The interaction of a political system with its domestic environment—the economic and social systems and the political culture of its citizens—is also depicted in Figure 2.1. Europe did not transform itself into distinct nation-states accidentally—indeed, the governments of the emerging nation-states had a great deal to do with it. In response to both internal and international pressures, they sought to instill a common national identity among the peoples they controlled. They did so, often heavy-handedly, by promoting a common language, a common educational system, and often a common religion. While this process of nation building was often harsh and conflictual, it produced a Europe in which the inhabitants of most states have a strong sense of community.

Many societies in the developing world today face similar challenges. Especially in Africa, the newly independent states that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s had very weak national identities. In many parts of Africa, large-scale national communities simply had not existed before these areas were colonized by Europeans and others. Even where such national identities did exist, they were rarely reflected in the boundaries that the colonial powers (such as Britain, France, and Portugal) drew between their possessions. After independence, many new states therefore faced huge nation-building tasks.

At the same time, in many countries, the globalization of the economy leads to demands from firms and

workers in some industries for protection of their jobs. Natural disasters, such as the hurricane that devastated New Orleans in 2005, spur calls for the national government to lead reconstruction. Man-made disasters, such as the huge oil spill that contaminated the beaches of the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, also stimulate calls for government action to limit the environmental and economic damages and prevent future disasters. Local issues are seen as the responsibility of the entire country. People live longer. An aging population demands that governments do more to help with medical benefits. In input/output terms, socioeconomic changes transform the political demands of the electorate and the kinds of policies that it supports.

Thus, a new pattern of society results in different policy outputs: different kinds and levels of taxation, changes in regulatory patterns, and changes in welfare expenditures. The advantage of the system-environment approach is that it directs our attention to the **interdependence** of what happens between and within countries. It provides us with a vocabulary to describe, compare, and explain these interacting events.

If we are to make sound judgments in politics, we need to be able to place political systems in their domestic and international environments. We need to recognize how these environments both set limits on and provide opportunities for political choices. This approach keeps us from reaching quick and biased political judgments. If a country is poor in natural resources and lacks the capabilities necessary to exploit what it has, we cannot fault it for having a low industrial output or poor educational and social services. Each country chapter in the second half of this book begins by discussing the current policy challenges facing the country and its social and economic environment.

Political Systems: Structures and Functions

2.3 List six types of political structures, and provide a few examples of how a similar structure functions differently in Britain than it does in China.

Governments do many things, from establishing and operating school systems, to maintaining public order, to fighting wars. In order to carry on these disparate activities, governments have specialized **structures**

(which we may also refer to as *institutions* or *agencies*), such as parliaments, bureaucracies, administrative agencies, and courts. These structures perform **functions**, which in turn enable the government to formulate, implement, and enforce its policies. The policies reflect the goals; the agencies provide the means to achieve them.

Figure 2.3 locates six types of political structures—political parties, interest groups, legislatures, executives, bureaucracies, and courts—within the political system. These are formal organizations engaged in political activities. They exist in most contemporary political systems. This list is not exhaustive. Some structures, such as ruling military councils or governing royal families, are found in only a few countries. Some, such as Iran's Council of Guardians, are unique to one country's political system.

We might think that if we understand how such structures work in one political system, we can apply this insight to any other system. Unfortunately, that is not always the case. The sixfold classification in Figure 2.3 will not carry us very far in comparing political systems with each other. The problem is that similar structures may have very different functions across political systems. For example, Britain and China have all six types of political structures. However, these institutions are organized differently in the two countries. More important, they function in dramatically different ways.

The political executive in Britain consists of the prime minister and the Cabinet, which includes the heads of major departments and agencies. These officials are usually selected from among the members of Parliament. There is a similar structure in China,

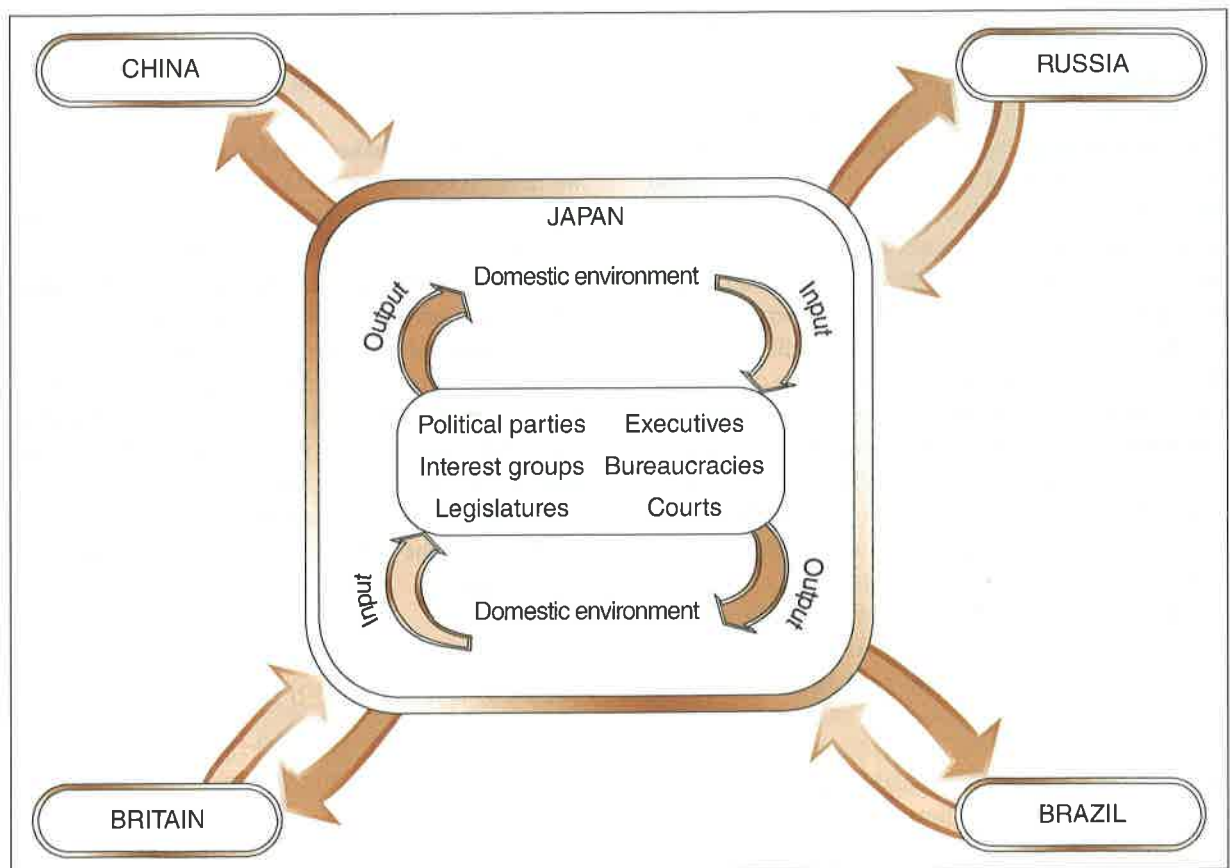


FIGURE 2.3

The Political System and Its Structures

Six types of political structures perform functions in the Japanese political system.

called the State Council, headed by a premier and consisting of the various ministers and ministerial commissions. But while the British prime minister and Cabinet have substantial policymaking power, the State Council in China is closely supervised by the general secretary of the Communist Party, the Politburo, and the Central Committee of the party, and has far less influence over public policy.

Both Britain and China have legislative bodies—the House of Commons in Britain and the National People's Congress in China. Their members debate and vote on prospective public policies. While the House of Commons is a key institution in the British policymaking process, the Chinese Congress meets for only brief periods, ratifying decisions made mainly by the Communist Party authorities. Usually, the Chinese delegates do not even consider alternative policies.

There are even larger differences between political parties in the two countries. Britain has a competitive party system. The members of the majority party in the House of Commons and the Cabinet are constantly confronted by an opposition party or parties, competing for public support. They look forward to the next election when they may unseat the incumbent majority, as happened in 1997, when the Labour Party replaced the Conservatives in government, and in 2010, when the Labour Party was in turn replaced by a coalition of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. In China, the Communist Party controls the whole political process. There are no other political parties. The principal decisions are made within the Communist Party. The governmental agencies simply implement these policies.

Thus, an institution-by-institution comparison of British and Chinese politics that did not spell out the functions that the various agencies perform would not bring us far toward understanding the important differences in the politics of these two countries. Each country study in this book therefore includes a figure that shows how some of the major structures

select and control each other. Another figure illustrates how they fit into the policymaking process.

Figure 2.4 shows the functions of the political process that we can use to compare all political systems. The center of Figure 2.4 under the heading “**process functions**” lists the distinctive activities necessary for policy to be made and implemented in any kind of political system. (We discuss each concept in greater detail in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.) We call these *process functions* because they play a direct and necessary role in the process of making policy.

- **Interest articulation** involves individuals and groups expressing their needs and demands.
- **Interest aggregation** combines different demands into policy proposals backed by significant political resources.
- **Policymaking** is deciding which policy proposals become authoritative rules.
- **Policy implementation** is carrying out and enforcing public policies; **policy adjudication** is settling disputes about their application.

Before policy can be decided, some individuals and groups in the government or the society must decide what they want and hope to get from politics. The political process begins as these interests are expressed



Chinese National People's Congress

Delegates applaud below a screen that displays the very lopsided results of voting on the final day of the National People's Congress in Beijing's Great Hall of the People, March 16, 2007. This photo shows the importance of a structural-functional perspective, as votes in this “legislature” have little influence on policymaking. There is no real choice between alternatives.

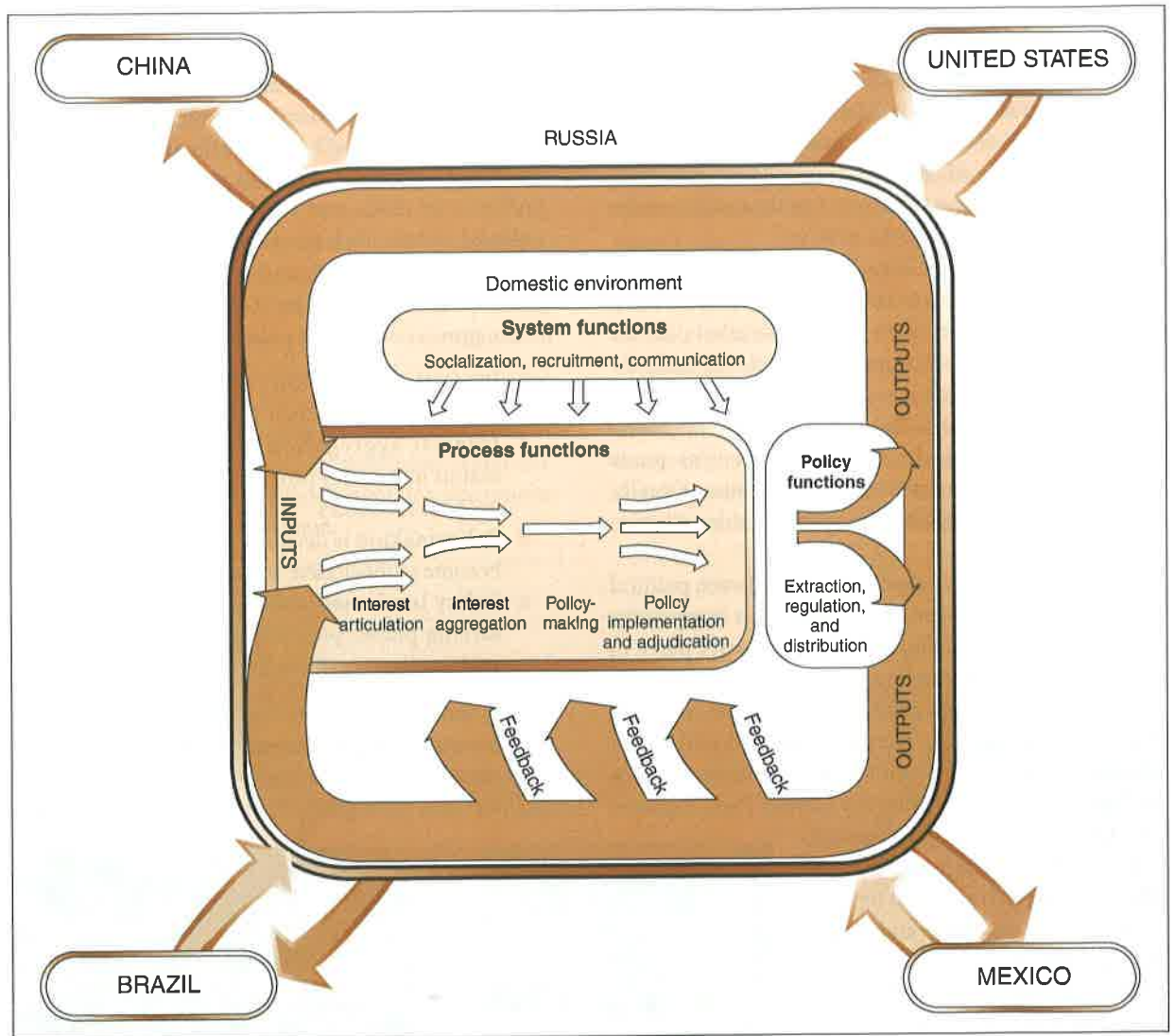


FIGURE 2.4

The Political System and Its Functions

System, process, and policy functions convert inputs into outputs.

or articulated. The many arrows on the left of the figure show these initial expressions. To be effective, however, these demands must be combined (aggregated) into policy alternatives—such as lower taxes or more social security benefits—for which substantial political support can be mobilized. Thus, the arrows on the left are consolidated as the process moves from interest articulation to interest aggregation. Governments then consider alternative policies and choose between them. Their policy decisions must then be

enforced and implemented, and if they are challenged, there must be some process of adjudication. Any policy may affect several different aspects of society, as reflected in the three arrows for the implementation phase.

These process functions are performed by such political structures as parties, legislatures, political executives, bureaucracies, and courts. The **structural-functional approach** stresses two points. One is that *in different countries, the same structure*

may perform different functions. A second is that while a particular institution, such as a legislature, may specialize in a particular function, such as policymaking, institutions often do not have a monopoly on any one function. Presidents and governors may share in the policymaking function (and in the extreme case, each may be a veto power), as may the higher courts (especially in states that feature judicial review of statutes for their constitutionality).

The three functions listed at the top of Figure 2.4—socialization, recruitment, and communication—do not directly concern the making and implementation of public policy but are of fundamental importance to the political system. We refer to them as **system functions**. In the long run, they help determine whether the system will be maintained or changed. For example, will the military be able to maintain its dominance of policymaking, or will it be replaced by competitive parties and a legislature? Will a sense of national community persist, or will it be eroded by new experiences?

The arrows leading from these three functions to all parts of the political process suggest their crucial role in underpinning and permeating the political process.

- **Political socialization** involves families, schools, communications media, churches, and all the various political structures that develop, reinforce, and transform the political culture, the attitudes of political significance in the society (see Chapter 3).
- **Political recruitment** refers to the selection of people for political activity and government offices. In a democracy, competitive elections play a major role in political recruitment. In authoritarian systems, recruitment may be dominated by a single party, as in China, or by unelected religious leaders, as in Iran.
- **Political communication** refers to the flow of information through the society and the various structures that make up the political system. Gaining control over information is a key goal of most authoritarian rulers, as shown in the elaborate efforts of Chinese leaders to control content on the Internet.

Understanding the performance of the system functions is essential to understanding how political systems respond to the great contemporary

challenges of building community, fostering economic development, and securing democracy that we discussed in Chapter 1.

The right side of Figure 2.4 illustrates the consequences of the policy process. The outputs are the ways in which policy decisions affect the society, the economy, and the culture. They include various forms of **extraction** of resources in the form of taxes and the like, **regulation** of behavior, and **distribution** of benefits and services to various groups in the population. The **outcomes** of all these political activities reflect the way the policies interact with the domestic and international environments. Sometimes, these outcomes are the desired results of public policies. But the complexities of policy and society sometimes result in unintended consequences. Among these may be new demands for legislation or administrative action, or increases or decreases in the support given to the political system and incumbent officeholders. We will return to the policy level after providing an example of a structural-functional comparison. The functional concepts shown in Figure 2.4 describe the activities carried out in any society regardless of how its political system is organized or what kinds of policies it produces. Using these functional categories, we can determine how institutions in different countries combine in making and implementing public policy.

An Illustrative Comparison: Regime Change in Russia

2.4 Discuss how the functions of Russia's political structures changed after the collapse of communism.

One way to better understand this framework is through a concrete example. Figures 2.5 and 2.6 offer a simplified graphic comparison of structures and functions in Russia before and after the breakdown of communist rule in the Soviet Union.⁷ The figures use our comparative method to illustrate the way this political regime changed significantly in a short period of time. The point is to illustrate how we can use the tools of political analysis, rather than provide the details of the Russian case (which is discussed in depth in Chapter 12).

The figures depict the changes in the functioning of the major structures of the political system brought about by the collapse of communism. These include

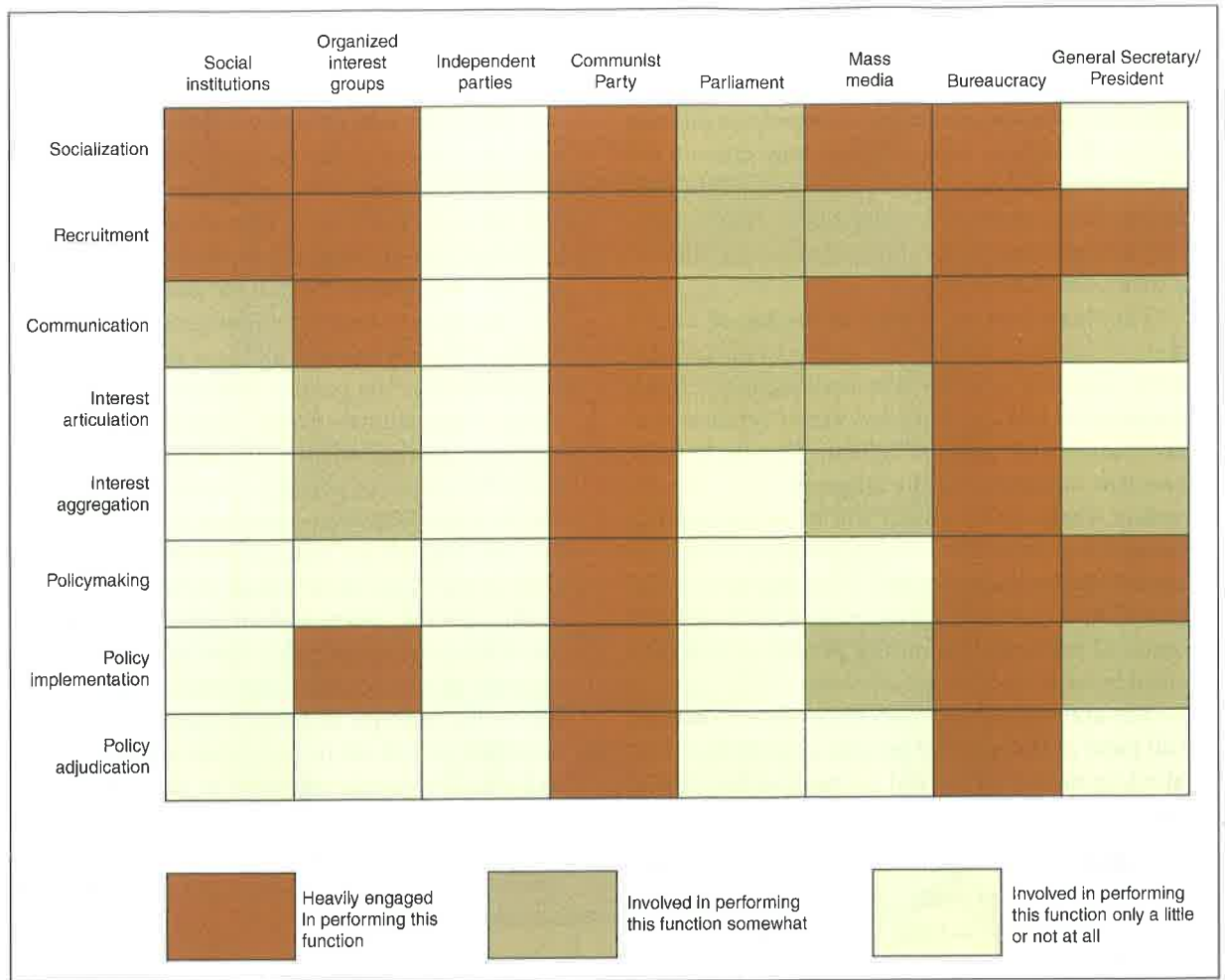


FIGURE 2.5
The Soviet Political System in 1985

The Communist Party and the state bureaucracy dominated all functions in the Soviet Union.

two revolutionary changes. One is the end of the single-party political system dominated by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which held together the vast, multinational Soviet state. The other is the dissolution of the Soviet Union itself into its fifteen member republics. As a result of these two remarkable events, Russia, the republic that was the core republic of the old union, became an independent noncommunist state.

Figure 2.5 therefore shows how the basic functions of the political system were performed in 1985, when the Soviet Union was a communist state. The Communist Party was the dominant political institution, overseeing schools and media, the arts and

public organizations, the economy, and the courts through a massive state bureaucracy. For this reason, all the cells of the chart in the column marked "Communist Party" are shaded dark, as are the cells under the column marked "Bureaucracy." Although social institutions—such as the family, workplace, arts, and hobby groups—exercised some influence over such system-level functions as socialization, recruitment, and communication, it was the Communist Party and the state bureaucracy that dominated process-level functions. Under their tutelage, the mass media in 1985 were a key agent of communist political socialization and communication. Parliament was a compliant instrument for ratifying decisions made

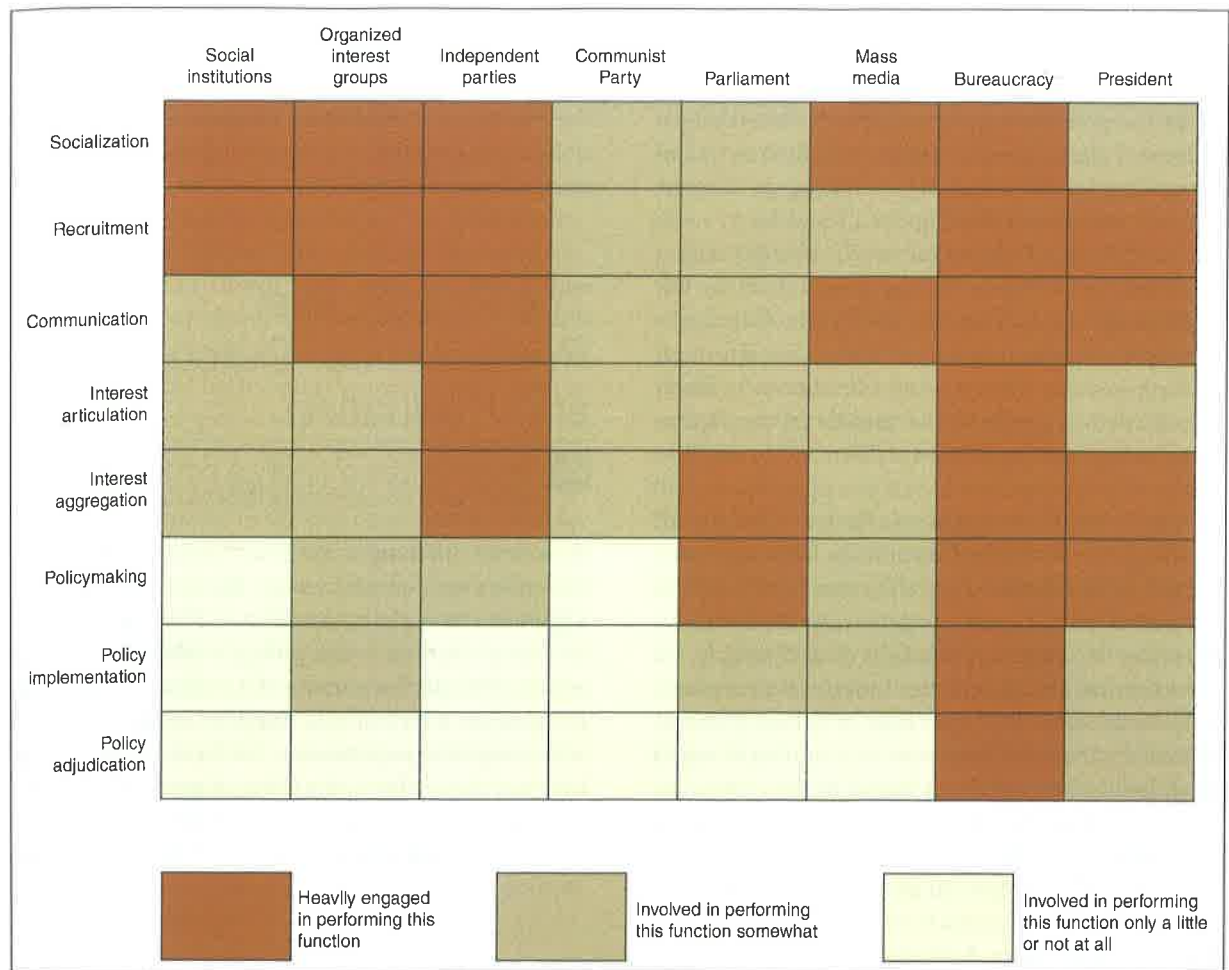


FIGURE 2.6

The Russian Political System in 2000

Many more structures played important roles in policymaking in Russia in 2000.

by the party and bureaucracy. By law, no parties other than the Communist Party were allowed. The only organized interest groups were those authorized by the party. The party's general secretary was the most powerful official in the country.

By 2000, the political system had undergone fundamental changes, as shown in Figure 2.6. Many more structures played a role in the political process, as is immediately evident by the larger number of cells that are heavily shaded. In particular, Parliament, independent political parties, and regional governments had all acquired important new policymaking powers. The freedom enjoyed by ordinary citizens to articulate their interests and to organize to advance them

had expanded enormously. The Communist Party, no longer an official or monopolistic party, had declined very substantially in power and was reduced to the role of an opposition party in the parliamentary game. The lighter shading for the Communist Party in Figure 2.6 shows its diminished influence. The state bureaucracy remained an important element in the political system, although adapting itself to the new trend of movement toward a market economy by adopting quasi-commercial forms.

The presidency has been a dominant policymaking institution in the new Russia, as shown in Figure 2.6. Parliament, although fairly representative of the diversity of opinion in the country, was frustrated in its

polymaking and oversight roles by the inertia of the vast state bureaucracy, by its inability to compel compliance with its laws, by its weak links with the voters, and by the president's political power. Nevertheless, Parliament played a much greater role than before in aggregating interests and policymaking, as demonstrated by a comparison of Figures 2.5 and 2.6.

An updating of Figure 2.6 would show the eclipse of parties, Parliament, and the mass media by the president and the bureaucracy after 2000. This movement in a more authoritarian direction, although not back to communism, would be shown by fewer dark-shaded columns in the middle of the figure. These further developments are discussed in detail in Chapter 12.

These brief comparisons illustrate the use of the structural-functional approach. This approach enables us to examine how the same functions are performed in different countries, or in the same country at two different points in time. Similarly, we may examine changes in the functions performed by the same structures over time or across different political systems. In a country undergoing as rapid and dramatic a transition as Russia in the 1990s, this framework demonstrates substantial changes in the distribution of power.

Neither the analysis of structures nor that of functions is complete without the other. A structural analysis tells us the number of political parties, or the organization of the legislature. It describes how the executive branch, the courts, the bureaucracy, the mass media, interest groups, and other structures of a political system are set up and by what rules or standards they operate. A functional analysis tells us how these institutions and organizations interact to produce and implement policies. This kind of analysis is especially essential when we are comparing very different kinds of political systems.

The country-specific chapters in this book do not present formal structural-functional sketches like Figures 2.5 and 2.6. But at the core of each chapter is a set of

discussions of these functions and the structures that perform them. We can see these in the section headings of the country studies and in the analytic guide at the beginning of this book. These tools make it possible to compare the workings of the very different political systems in this book.

The Policy Level: Performance, Outcome, and Evaluation

2.5 Describe the roles of conditions, policies, and outcomes in evaluating a political system.

Now, what differences do these variations in political structures and functions make for the citizens of the different states that we analyze? This question directs our attention to the **policy level** of the political system. We call the outputs of a political system—its extractions, distributions, regulations, and symbolic acts—its *policy performance*. We have to distinguish between these efforts, the things a government does, and the actual outcome of these efforts. Governments may spend equal amounts on education and health, or



Climbing the Wall

The wall dividing California and Mexico illustrates the input-output model of comparative politics. The two men are trying to escape from the poverty of the Mexican economy. The wall is part of the output of the American political system, intended to frustrate illegal immigrants. The two figures show that outputs do not necessarily produce the intended outcomes.

defense, but with different consequences. Government efficiency or corruption plays a role in the effectiveness of politics. But so do the underlying cultural, economic, and technological conditions.

Americans spend more per capita on education than any other people in the world. But their children perform worse in some subjects, such as mathematics, than do children in some other countries that spend substantially less. The United States spent enormous sums and many lives on the war in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, as did the Soviet Union on its war in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Yet both countries were held at bay by far less well-equipped armed forces or guerrilla groups resolved to resist at all costs. Because of these costly failures, the United States and the Soviet Union were weakened internally. In the latter case, the costs of the war in Afghanistan contributed directly to the downfall of the communist regime. The outcome of public policy is thus never wholly in the hands of the people and their leaders. Legislatures may vote to wage a military conflict, but neither their votes nor the promises of political leaders can guarantee success. Conditions in the internal environment, conditions and events in the larger external world, and simple chance may frustrate the most thoughtfully crafted programs and plans. Each country study in this book concludes with a discussion of the country's performance, describing both policies and their outcomes.

Finally, we must step even further back to evaluate the politics of different systems. Evaluation is complex because people value different things and put different emphases on what they value. We will refer to the different conditions, outputs, and outcomes that people may value as political "goods." In Chapter 7, we outline a typology of various kinds of political goals and political goods. These include goods associated with the system level, such as the stability or adaptability of political institutions, and goods associated with the process level, such as citizen participation in politics. Finally, we consider and describe goods associated with the policy level, such as welfare, security, fairness, and liberty. To evaluate what a political system is doing, we assess performance and outcomes in each of these areas. We must also be aware of how these broad outcomes affect specific individuals and groups in the society, which may often be overlooked if we simply consider national averages.

A particularly important problem of evaluation concerns building for the future as well as living today. The people of poor countries wish to survive and alleviate the suffering of today but also to improve their children's lot for tomorrow. The people of all countries, but especially rich ones, must deal with the costs to their children of polluted and depleted natural resources as the result of the thoughtless environmental policies of the past.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

- How do the main elements in the environment of a political system affect the way it performs?
- Why are we unable to compare political systems simply by describing the different structures we find in them?
- What are the functions performed in all political systems as policies are made?
- What is the difference between outputs and outcomes of policy?
- How do we use theories to explain political events?

KEY TERMS

conceptual framework
data
distribution
extraction

functions
globalization
government
hypotheses

inputs
interdependence
interest aggregation
interest articulation

intersubjective
nation-states
outcomes
outputs