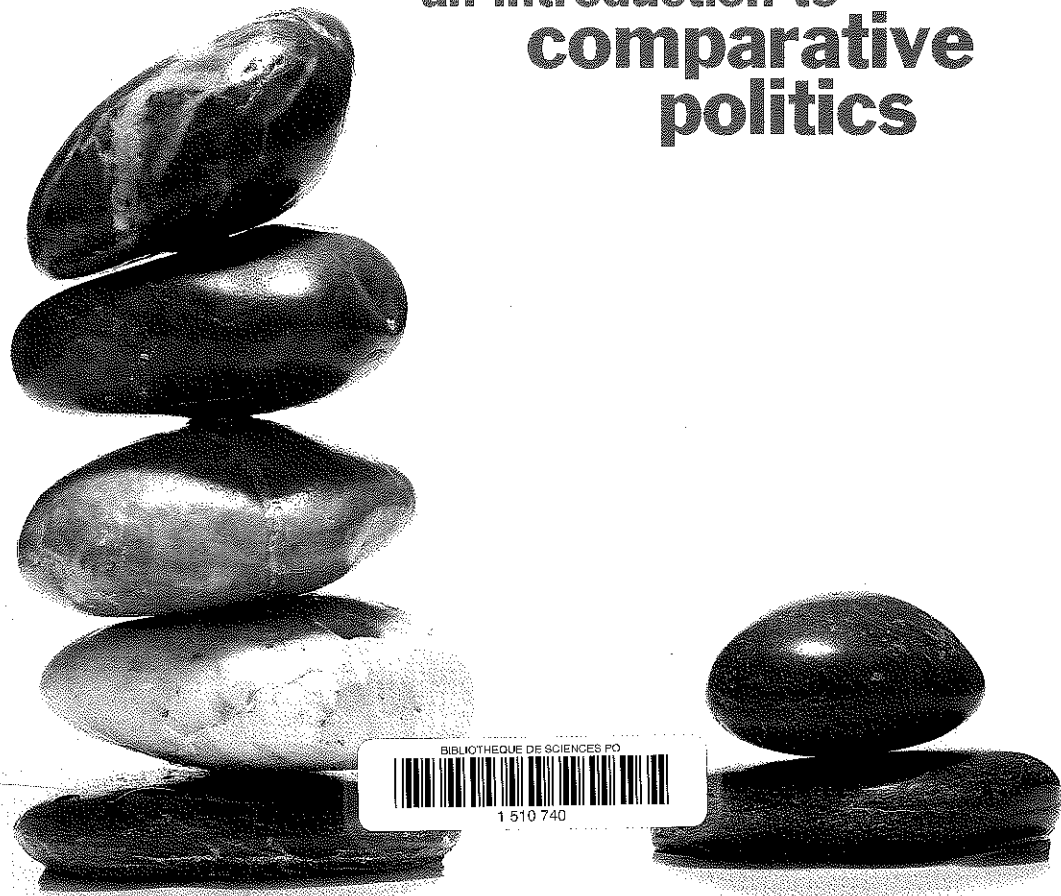


the good society

second edition

an introduction to
comparative
politics



alan draper | ansil ramsay

Proceeding systematically gives us a procedure to validate whose intuition is correct when people disagree. What is more, judgments relying upon common sense are sometimes flat-out wrong because they do not incorporate controls. Relying upon common sense to wean people from ice cream would not have done much to prevent polio. Also, sometimes, what we think we see plainly with our own eyes deceives us. The absence of conflict in a society marked by inequality and discrimination may falsely lead us to believe that those who are its victims accept their fate as fair and legitimate, as opposed to passively tolerating conditions they consider unjust because they are powerless to change them. Finally, doing systematic comparative political analysis can be very satisfying because it poses puzzles to solve. But these are not just ordinary puzzles. They pertain to the quality of people's lives. It is important to solve them, to find the right answer, because people's welfare depends upon it.

We have argued that the value of comparison is that it offers us insight into how countries' political conditions differ and the consequences those differences have for them. It permits us to check our intuitions about a country's politics by examining whether they apply in other circumstances. But comparison is also useful because it permits us to evaluate and form judgments that help us make sense of the world around us. Those judgments may be **empirical** and objective, such as when we say that Sweden spends more on its welfare state (35.7 percent of GDP) than the United States (15.8 percent of GDP) or that Germany has higher turnout in parliamentary elections (77 percent of eligible voters) than Switzerland (48 percent of eligible voters). Or, our judgments may be **normative** and moral, such as when we say that something is better or worse than something else; such as when we say that Sweden is kinder and gentler than the United States because it makes a greater welfare effort, or that democracy is more robust in Germany than in Switzerland because it has higher voter turnout. Comparison permits us to make objective and normative judgments that help us make sense of the world.

This book tries to combine both forms of comparison, the empirical and the normative, in order to probe more deeply into the political life around us. We are interested in how countries govern themselves not only because such knowledge gives us insight into our own circumstances, but also because it helps us make moral judgments about them. The question at the heart of our text is: What constitutes a good society and why are some countries better than others at creating one?¹⁰

This chapter asks what it means to be better governed. We develop some general criteria by which to examine and evaluate government performance in creating a good society. Our argument begins by suggesting that there are some kinds of behavior that are widely condemned throughout the world, whose presence would not meet most people's criteria of a good society. We then discuss why wealth and happiness are inadequate to serve as bases to compare and evaluate government performance. Next, we offer standards to compare the performance of countries and evaluate the degree to which they create the conditions in which people can flourish. Finally, the chapter anticipates and responds to the criticism that it is a form of cultural domination for us to impose our standards of a good society on others.

VISIONS OF THE GOOD SOCIETY: GROSS NATIONAL PRODUCT AND GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS

Few people anywhere in the world would argue that a society based on slavery, where some individuals have no rights and can be bought and sold like cattle, is a good society, especially if one happened to be a slave. Few would agree that a society in which one group of people slaughters fellow citizens from another ethnic or religious group exemplifies good governance, especially if one happened to be part of the persecuted minority. And few would say that a society in which thousands of children die each year of easily preventable diseases is desirable, especially if one of those children happened to be yours.

These are not hypothetical examples. If slavery is defined as "the total control of one person by another for the purpose of economic exploitation," there were an estimated 27 million persons in slavery in the world at the end of the twentieth century.¹¹ These included girls as young as fifteen who were held in brothels in Thailand and children as young as six who made bricks all day in Pakistan. Likewise, ethnic killings are widespread in the world. In 1994, members of the Hutu ethnic group in the central African country of Rwanda killed approximately 800,000 of their fellow citizens, including both Tutsi and moderate Hutus.¹² Finally, millions of infants suffering from preventable diseases die each year.¹³ In the African country of Angola, almost two out of ten babies die before their first birthday.

It would be relatively easy to get widespread agreement that these are undesirable and morally unacceptable outcomes in any country or culture. Our sense of moral outrage might be particularly acute if they were to happen to us. But is it possible to move beyond these specific examples to develop general criteria that can be used to decide what constitutes a good society? In the following paragraphs, we discuss the merit of using wealth and happiness to judge societies.

It is generally and appropriately assumed that the higher a country's level of economic development, the better off its citizens will be. In wealthier countries, few people are held as slaves, large-scale ethnic violence is rare, and few people die from preventable diseases. Economic development is often measured by a country's per capita gross domestic product, which we defined earlier, in which purchasing power is held constant.¹⁴

By this criterion, the small European principalities of Liechtenstein and Luxembourg were some of the most successful countries in the world, with per capita GDPs of \$85,362 and \$78,489, respectively. The least successful was the Democratic Republic of the Congo in Africa, with a per capita GDP of only \$288.¹⁵ Countries with high levels of per capita income to purchase an array of goods and services can afford to have children go to school instead of to work, can satisfy the competing claims of different ethnic groups instead of having them slaughter each other, and can provide health care services to people instead of having them die needlessly.

Yet, political leaders and social scientists are increasingly dissatisfied with this measure of a good society and good governance. In fact, in February 2008, the president of France, Nicholas Sarkozy, was so disgruntled that he

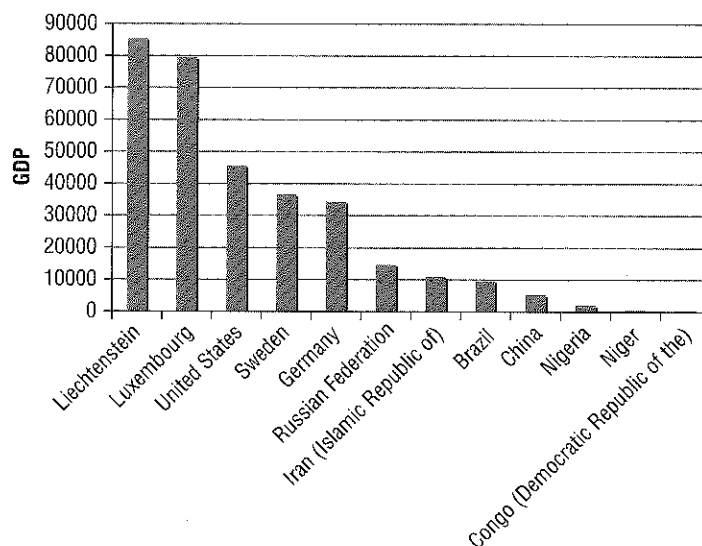
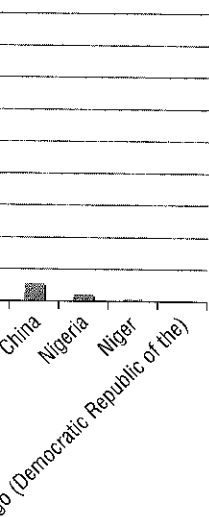


FIGURE 1.2
Countries Ranked by GDP, 2005

Data Source:
GDP per capita (PPP US\$)
Source: Human Development Report 2009,
<http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/Indicators/91.html>

commissioned a group of the world's leading economists, including two Nobel Prize winners, to propose a better alternative.¹⁶ One problem with using wealth or per capita income as the measure of a good society, Sarkozy's commission noted, was that it treats money spent on desirable goods and services as equivalent to money spent on goods and services that most of us would consider detestable. For example, major oil spills from ocean-going tankers contribute to economic growth because of the expense to clean them up. But few of us would regard a coastline ravaged with oil slicks as something that improves people's lives. High crime rates lead people to purchase more locks for their doors and security systems for their homes. But few people would regard such purchases as indicators of a good society. Most of us would see them as indicators of fear and insecurity. Or, to take one final example, GDP treats money spent on prisons as equivalent to money spent on education, but few of us believe that money spent on prisons is as productive for society as that devoted to education. In short, economic growth includes not only "goods" but also "bads."

Moreover, a focus on growth alone may ignore its hidden costs and thus misrepresent the benefits society derives from it. For example, China has achieved remarkable rates of economic growth recently, but this has been achieved at the expense of increasing inequality, environmental degradation and ruinous corruption. High-quality economic growth needs to be distinguished from low-quality growth where the costs to society of achieving it are



great. The kind of growth that occurs is as important to social well-being as the rate of growth.

A second problem with using GDP as a standard is that it omits behavior many of us consider desirable. People who care for their children or aging parents out of selfless devotion do not contribute to the GDP because such work is unpaid. One would better contribute to economic growth by hiring and paying others who have no emotional investment in or attachment to those they care for.¹⁷ GDP only measures what people do for cold, hard cash; what people do out of the goodness of their hearts is irrelevant from this perspective. As Robert F. Kennedy put it: "GDP measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile."¹⁸

Finally, using GDP per capita as a measure of good governance may hide considerable differences in how it is distributed. According to this standard, it makes no difference whether the national income is captured by a few rich people to buy yachts while their fellow citizens cannot afford to eat, or if it is distributed broadly so that all citizens have enough income to purchase necessities. Whether higher per capita incomes increase well-being depends upon how wealth is distributed. Charles Dickens, in his novel *Hard Times*, captured this notion that higher national incomes only contribute to well-being when their benefits are distributed widely. The teacher in Dickens's novel tries to convince students that wealth equaled well-being by telling them to imagine that their classroom is a nation endowed with "fifty millions of money." He then asks whether this didn't make them collectively prosperous, to which one of the students replies: "I couldn't know whether it was a prosperous nation or not . . . unless I knew who got the money and whether any of it was mine."¹⁹

We do not mean to suggest that economic development and the accumulation of wealth is unimportant. It is the only way to raise large numbers of people out of absolute poverty in very poor countries. According to economist Paul Collier, "Growth is not a cure all, but lack of growth is a kill-all."²⁰ Countries that fail to grow economically lack the financial resources to improve citizens' health care, increase their educational opportunities, and insure their safety. Poor countries are also more prone to debilitating corruption and destructive civil wars that threaten people's well-being.

As much as economic growth is desirable, it is only a means to an end; it is not an end in itself. Consequently, some social scientists have proposed happiness as the goal of a good society that wealth can help us achieve. They argue that a country's Gross National Product is only important as much as it contributes to a country's Gross National Happiness (GNH), which is the true measure of the good society. More is better only if it makes us happier.

One country that took happiness seriously as the measure of the good society was the Kingdom of Bhutan, located high in the Himalayan mountains, between China and India. Under a new constitution that Bhutan adopted in 2008, government programs are judged according to the happiness they produce, not the economic benefits they bring.²¹ The government then proceeded to classify happiness in terms of four pillars (economy, culture, environment, and good governance), with nine domains under them, which could, in turn, be measured by seventy-two indicators. The domain of psychological well-being, for example,

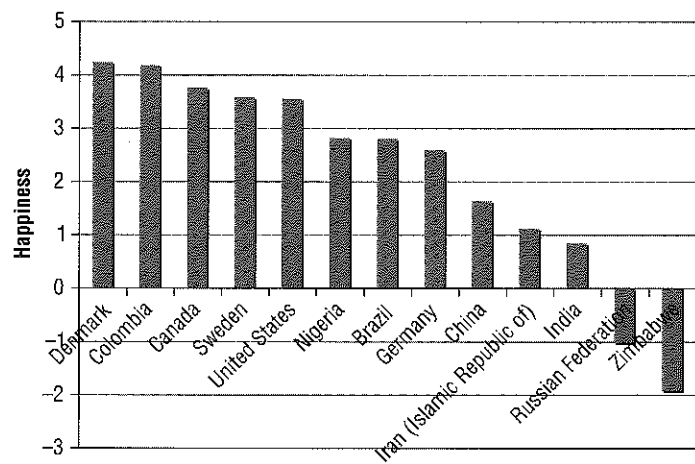


FIGURE 1.3
Countries Ranked by Happiness

Data Source:

Countries Ranked by Happiness

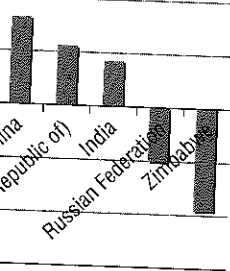
Source: "Despite Frustrations Americans Are Pretty Darned Happy." National Science Foundation Press Release, June 30, 2008. www.nsf.gov/news/newsmedia/pr111725/pr111725.pdf

came under the pillar of culture and was indicated by the frequencies of prayer and meditation, fewer feelings of selfishness and jealousy, and more feelings of calm and compassion.²²

Bhutan developed complex mathematical formulas for measuring happiness. But it is hard to apply these formulas comparatively to other countries. Fortunately, beginning in 1981, the World Values Survey began to investigate how happy people were in different countries, making such comparisons possible. Figure 1.3 above is based on combined World Values Survey data from 1995 to 2005.

According to this survey, Denmark comes closest to being a good society with the highest average score on reported happiness and life satisfaction, with Zimbabwe bringing up the rear. But there are good reasons to be skeptical of happiness as an indicator of the good society.

First, the happiness standard suffers from many of the same flaws that afflict the wealth standard. Just as GDP measures ignore the purpose for which goods and services are produced, so do happiness measures overlook the different ways in which people find satisfaction. Genghis Khan is alleged to have said, "The greatest happiness is to vanquish your enemies, to chase them before you, to rob them of their wealth, to see those dear to them bathed in tears, to clasp to your bosom their wives and daughters."²³ Most people would agree that happiness derived in this fashion perverts its meaning. But people who get pleasure from humiliating others may report the same level of life satisfaction as those who derive pleasure from helping their victims. Just as GDP measures ignore differences between low- and high-quality economic growth that we mentioned previously, so do happiness



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Second, while happiness may be a good thing, it is not the only thing. Indeed, people may desire other worthy goals that require sacrifice and hardship in order to attain them. As Elizabeth Kolbert argues, making sure the environment is sustainable may be more important than trashing it, even if we derive more pleasure from the latter than the former.²⁴

Third, different cultures don't attach the same value to happiness. In some countries, people are expected to be optimistic and exuberant in the face of adversity, while in others the prevailing norm is to be dour and grim. Survey comparisons of happiness across countries may thus be measuring differences in the cultural approval given to happiness as opposed to actual differences in happiness.²⁵ Moreover, happiness may have different meanings to people in different circumstances. People "come to want only what they can have" and be content with this. Consequently, poor people tend to apply lower standards to evaluate their happiness than wealthier citizens.²⁶ Amartya Sen writes that "hopelessly deprived people adjust their desires and expectations to what little they see as feasible . . . [and] train themselves to take pleasure in small mercies."²⁷ While reports of happiness by poor people may be genuine, they are also expressions of acceptance to conditions they would probably change if they had the power to do so.

Happiness is a function of expectations. Where life is hard, people adapt to adversity and find happiness with less. Similarly, when more is available, people expect it and ratchet up their standards for happiness. This may explain why citizens in some developing countries report higher levels of contentment than Americans, even though Americans live better according to most social indicators. It may also explain why crime victims report lower levels of happiness where crime is less prevalent than in those areas where it is more common and why, according to Carol Gable, "freedom and democracy makes people happier, but the effect is greater when they're used to such liberties than

IN BRIEF

Criticisms of GNP and GNH as Measures of the Good Society

GNP

- Treats all spending as the same (of equal value) regardless of the purpose for which it is used.
- Is not sensitive to issues of distribution and equality.
- Devalues activity that is not bought and sold.

GNH

- Is indifferent to the ways people might find happiness.
- Discounts that people's sense of satisfaction may depend more upon their reference group or expectations than upon their actual circumstances.
- Ignores cultural differences in the approval or sanction given to happiness.

when they are not.”²⁸ It appears that happiness depends heavily on one’s reference group.

Neither Gross Domestic Product nor Gross Domestic Happiness is satisfactory as a standard to evaluate government performance and compare quality of life across countries. The question remains: What standard is appropriate by which to measure the good society? We have adopted the capability approach, which has been developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum to answer this question. According to the capability approach a good society “enhances the capabilities of people to pursue the goals important to their own lives, whether through individual or collective action.”²⁹ We suggest that empowering people, giving them the capacity to pursue values of importance to them, rather than wealth or happiness, is the most satisfactory way of assessing individuals’ quality of life and the degree to which countries measure up to the good society.

CAPABILITIES AND THE QUALITY OF LIFE

If the concept of enhancing persons’ capabilities is to be useful in comparative analysis, we need to make it more precise and measurable. The first step is to make it less abstract by suggesting there are four dimensions that are essential to making people free to live the life they choose, which apply in all countries.³⁰ Instead of one dial, such as GDP or GDH, to measure the quality of life in different countries, we propose a dashboard containing different gauges. Just as one dial won’t tell you how well a car is running, so do you need to check various gauges on the dashboard—electricity, gas, temperature, and pressure—to assess how well a car is performing.³¹ In a good society, people are able to

- meet their physical needs;
- make informed decisions;
- live in safety; and
- exercise democratic rights.

Physical Well-Being

Physical well-being includes nourishment, health care, and housing sufficient to support a long life. People cannot lead rich, full lives if they are malnourished, chronically sick, or exposed to the elements because they lack shelter. One way of assessing physical needs is to compare poverty rates across countries. But doing so is problematic. Many countries do not draw a poverty line, an income threshold below which people are considered poor, as the United States does. And a poverty line of \$22,000 (2008–2009) for a family of four in the United States would look like riches to the millions of poor people in the rest of the world whose total income amounts to a dollar a day, even if we were to adjust for living costs. Alternatively, poverty can be defined as including those whose income is 50 percent below the median income in a country. But this measure really compares inequality among countries, not poverty, since the median income differs from one country to the next. People who are below 50 percent

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where the median income is high would live much better than those who were below that threshold where the median income was low.

In order to avoid these problems, we will steer clear of poverty rates entirely. We propose to examine physical well-being across countries by comparing infant mortality rates (see Table 1.1 in the Appendix), the number of children who die during their first year of life. Infant mortality rates provide a revealing window into social conditions because new babies are particularly susceptible to poor diets, deadly diseases, and extreme weather. Some countries do an excellent job of keeping infants alive and healthy, while others do not. In developed countries, such as Sweden and Japan, fewer than three newborn babies die per 1,000 births. In contrast, in the West African country of Sierra Leone there were 154 deaths for every 1,000 babies born in 2006 and in Afghanistan nearly 20 percent of babies died before they reached their fifth birthday.³²

THE GOOD SOCIETY IN DEPTH

Costa Rica—Doing More With Less⁵⁹

People can only develop capabilities if they survive to adulthood, and they are more likely to do so in some countries more than in others. The general pattern is that wealthier countries are healthier, as we saw in Figure 1.1, and that the wealthiest countries have the lowest infant mortality rates. Costa Rica is an exception. This small democratic country of four and a half million people in Central America has one of the best infant mortality records in the world for a country at its income level. More impressively it nearly matches infant mortality rates in the United States, even though its per capita income is only one-fourth as large. In 2003, for every 1,000 infants born alive in Costa Rica, eight died in their first year of life as compared to seven deaths per 1,000 live births in the United States.

Dramatically reducing infant mortality rates does not require expensive, sophisticated medical technology. It does, however, require safe drinking water, adequate nutrition, and basic health care for pregnant mothers and newborns. Costa Rica has done an excellent job of providing these necessities to poor mothers and infants who need them most. The government began to provide safe drinking water in the 1940s. By 1995, safe drinking water was available to over 90 percent of the population. The result was a dramatic drop in infant mortality caused by parasites and diarrhea. In the 1950s, Costa Rica began nutrition programs for poor families to help reduce severe malnutrition, expanding them in succeeding decades. It has also provided basic medical care to mothers by placing teams of doctors, nurses, and trained health care workers in all parts of the country, especially rural areas that traditionally lacked access to health care workers. These health care providers advised pregnant women on nutrition, assisted them in child birth, inoculated infants, and treated them for parasites.

Continued

Costa Rica's success in reducing infant mortality is due, first, to the traditions and vibrancy of its democracy. The country is one of the oldest, most established democracies in the Americas, boasting competitive political parties and high voter turnout by peasants and workers. Second, for most of the latter part of the last century the government was controlled by a political party whose leaders were determined to help the rural poor. Finally, groups opposed to its policies were politically weak. Doctors, hospitals, and insurance companies were publicly controlled and funded, which weakened their ability to oppose the government's policies.

For Further Discussion

1. Why is per capita income an inadequate indicator of a population's health?
2. Nearly half of the public spending that paid for health care services for poor mothers and infants came from payroll, income, and property taxes on other Costa Ricans. Is this appropriate?

Informed Decision Making

Knowledge is Power. In the modern world, the ability to make choices that improve one's quality of life depends on access to information and the skills to understand its meaning. In India, a new right to information law permits poor people to hold the bureaucracy accountable and find out what happened to the money that was budgeted for them. Whereas previously an unresponsive bureaucracy had to be bribed, activists now say that "simply filing an inquiry about a missing ration card, a wayward pension application, or a birth certificate is nowadays enough to force the once stodgy bureaucracy to deliver."³³ But access to information is insufficient without the skills to make sense of it. People need to be literate and numerate so they can negotiate their lives more effectively. People who are illiterate are said to be "blind"; they cannot decipher street signs, understand medical prescriptions, and are handicapped in trying to provide for their families.³⁴ Without literacy and mathematical skills, individuals are excluded from many occupational choices. Their awareness of the ways in which their lives could be improved is limited, and they are vulnerable to others who can take advantage of these limitations. One study found that Americans who lacked basic knowledge about finances and could not do simple calculations were more likely to lose their homes to foreclosure in the recent recession than those who were more financially literate. "The less people know," James Surowiecki writes, "the more they run into trouble."³⁵ Citizens' ability to protect their interests and make thoughtful choices about their lives can be dramatically improved by access to education. For example, in her book, *A Quiet Revolution*, Martha Chen tells the story of how learning to read and calculate changed the lives of poor, illiterate women in a village in Bangladesh. The change began when volunteers working for the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee came to the village to help the women learn to read. Initially, most of the women said they didn't need to learn

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to read and saw no reason to spend their time doing so. However, eventually they realized that literacy and math skills could help them earn money to provide health care, clothes, and food for their children. The new skills, coupled with new women's organizations, also gave them self-confidence, even to the point of defying local religious leaders who threatened to break their legs if they began doing work that had been traditionally reserved for men. Becoming literate not only helped these women earn more income, but also substantially enhanced their ability to improve their lives in ways that were important to them. None of them would ever be satisfied going back to their previous status.³⁶

In order to assess informed decision making, we compare literacy rates across countries (see Table 1.2 in the Appendix). Literacy rates differ among countries and within them. Access to education is often much lower for women than it is for men. In Pakistan, for example, the literacy rate for women in 2003 was only 57 percent that of men.³⁷ In other countries, race can affect one's chances of receiving an education. In South Africa, the literacy rate for whites is 99 percent, while it is only 75 percent for blacks.³⁸ Where these gender and racial inequalities occur, they limit severely the ability of individuals to improve their life prospects.

Safety

People cannot lead a good life if they are in constant fear of being beaten, shot, raped, or tortured. Even if they are not direct victims of assault, living in a place where the probability of assault is very high means they must alter their preferred routines and diminish their lives in order to avoid such threats. The link between insecurity and poor government performance goes in both directions: Insecurity makes it more difficult for governments to create the conditions in which citizens can thrive. Conflict discourages trade and investment and diverts resources from schools and hospitals at the same time poor government performance contributes to instability.

Just as there are substantial differences in the degree to which countries meet their citizens' physical needs, there are also profound differences in the extent to which they meet their citizens' need for safety and security. In order to measure physical safety, we compare homicide rates across countries (see Table 1.3 in the Appendix). Homicide rates avoid different definitions of criminal offenses that might exist in different countries and minimize the different rates at which crimes are reported and recorded by police. Being dead is the same everywhere, and people are more likely to report a murder and the police are more likely to record it than other crimes.

According to this measure, countries differ greatly in their ability to provide a safe environment for their citizens. Residents of Canadian, European, and Japanese cities are less likely than urban-dwelling Americans to be victims of homicide. The differences between Canada and the United States are particularly dramatic because these countries are similar in so many other respects. Both are former British colonies that have become wealthy economically and have strong democracies. Yet Ottawa, Canada's capital city, had only 0.9

homicides for every 100,000 citizens in 2000, while Washington, D.C., had 41.7. A broader, national comparison reveals the Canadian homicide rate (1.5 per 100,000 in 2004) was much lower than the U.S. (5.9 per 100,000) rate.

Where appropriate, we supplement the use of homicide rates to capture our standard of safety by looking also at the incidence of war. People's safety is not only threatened by murderers but by soldiers and the collateral damage that accompanies warfare. Millions of people have died in violent political conflicts between states, and especially in civil wars within them, in places ranging from Bosnia in Europe to the Democratic Republic of the Congo in central Africa. In the Congo, which is about the size of the U.S. east of the Mississippi River, a civil war began in 1998 and officially ended in 2003, although fighting still persists in parts of the country. The International Rescue Committee estimated that more than five million people died as a result of the war, nearly half of them children under five years old. Only a fraction of these deaths was combat-related; most of the loss of life occurred because the war ruined the Congo's economy and health care services, leading to widespread starvation and disease.³⁹

Democracy

The ability "to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; . . . the right of political participation; protections of free speech and association" underpin the other three conditions for a good society.⁴⁰ Without influence over the laws that govern them, people cannot press for improvements in their physical well-being, safety, and education. Nor can they defend gains they have already made, as former slaves discovered in the American South in the aftermath of the Civil War. By the end of Reconstruction, many southern blacks lost access to their farms, lived in fear of being lynched, and sent their children to segregated and inferior schools once they had lost the right to vote.

There have been striking improvements in **civil rights** that the state guarantees to all its citizens, such as the right to public accommodations, **civil liberties**, such as freedom of speech or assembly, that permit people to participate in their society without fear of repression or discrimination by the government, as well as improvements in **political rights**, such as the right to vote or hold office that permit people to participate in the political process. In 1900, "a scant 10% of the world's people lived in independent nations."⁴¹ Most countries in the world were colonies or dependencies of European powers, and even within Europe itself, not a single country had universal adult suffrage. By 2000, in contrast, almost all of the world's people lived in independent countries, and the majority of countries had universal suffrage and multiparty elections.

However, these positive trends hide considerable differences. The former Soviet Union's constitution guaranteed citizens considerable freedom, but their ability to actually exercise that freedom was severely limited. These limits gave rise to the joke in the Soviet Union that Americans did not really understand freedom of speech: "What's important is not freedom of speech, but rather freedom *after* speech." Just because a constitution enumerates rights does not

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mean that they are enforced or that people are free to enjoy them. In many countries, people are unable to exercise their civil and political rights because they are subject to the vindictive power of employers, landlords, urban bosses, or even their relatives. In these circumstances, people are reluctant to exercise their legal rights because it might cost them their jobs, access to land, or even their lives.⁴²

Unlike our other standards, there is no shortage of indexes measuring democracy. Efforts by governments and international agencies to promote democracy led to more efforts to monitor and assess it. For example, the U.S. government's Millennium Challenge Account program uses various data sets on democracy to allocate aid among foreign countries. The problem with democracy indexes is not their frequency but their quality. Some indexes define democracy in such a way that it includes too much while others include too little. According to Gerardo L. Munck, the best of the lot is the Polity IV index (see Table 1.4 in the Appendix) developed by Monty G. Marshall and Keith Jagers, which rates countries from negative 10 (highly authoritarian) to positive 10 (highly democratic).⁴³

Some Caveats

The four categories we have described represent the minimum that people need to fulfill their potential and enhance their quality of life. Several points must be stressed here before we respond to criticisms of these criteria to define the good society. First, it may be that all "good things do not necessarily go together" and trade-offs among physical well-being, safety, education, and democracy may be necessary.⁴⁴ Progress on one dimension of capabilities may require concessions on others. Second, the goal of a good society is to make it possible for each individual in a country to enjoy a high quality of life, and not just for the average quality of life to be high. Third, our approach does not specify a particular set of economic, political, or social institutions that are necessary for a good society. Some argue that good societies can be created only by relying on free markets, private property rights, and a minimal role for states. Others argue that a good society requires institutions that do just the opposite. Finally, our approach does not assert that it is the state's responsibility to ensure that all individuals thrive. It is, however, the role of the state to create conditions in which persons can *choose* a flourishing life. One way of thinking about this difference, Nussbaum suggests, is to distinguish between dieting and starving. People may choose to go on a diet, even if the diet severely restricts their intake of food. By contrast, starvation is not a choice. It is the role of states to provide the circumstances in which people are able to choose to diet if they so desire, but also to ensure that adequate supplies of food are available so they do not starve.⁴⁵ Conversely, a state can help create conditions in which individuals can lead long healthy lives, but citizens who choose to smoke cigarettes, drink excessive amounts of alcohol, and subsist on fast food are unlikely to do so.

IN BRIEF**Operationalizing Capabilities**

- Meeting physical needs: infant mortality rates
- Informed decision making: literacy rates
- Safety: homicide rates
- Democracy: the Polity IV index

**RESPONDING TO CRITICISMS
OF THE CAPABILITY APPROACH**

The capability approach has won widespread support in recent years from eminent scholars and important international organizations. Recently, Peter A. Hall of Harvard and former president of the Comparative Politics section of the American Political Science Association encouraged his colleagues to move beyond their concern with how societies distribute income and to think more broadly “about the distribution of life chances and about the ways in which institutional and cultural frameworks . . . contribute to individual and collective well-being.”⁴⁶ He and a number of colleagues have collaborated on a project that investigates the sources of successful societies.⁴⁷ A number of organizations, such as the United Nations, have also adopted the capability approach. The 2002 Human Development Report issued by the U.N. stated: “Fundamental to enlarging human choices is building capability: the range of things that people can do or be.”⁴⁸ There is even a scholarly journal, *The Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, devoted to work using the capability perspective. Despite support from prominent scholars and influential organizations, the capability approach still has its critics.⁴⁹ A skeptic might dismiss this approach as too idealistic, asserting with some justification that no country can meet these conditions for every single citizen. Not even the wealthiest countries in the world have met these standards, no less the poor countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

While it may be idealistic to assume that every citizen in every country enjoy a high quality of life, it is not idealistic to believe that many countries can do a much better job than they currently do. Some countries already are more successful than others in providing health care to their citizens. Some are safer than others, with much lower rates of homicide and political violence. Some offer better guarantees of civil and political rights. Performance on these standards varies widely among countries that are quite similar to one another in other respects, indicating that there is probably room for improvement.

Other readers will argue that our approach is contrary to “human nature.” Some critics may be sympathetic to the goals of the capability approach but believe that people are too competitive, greedy, and selfish to create the kind of good society we envision. But people are capable of a wide range of

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 greedy, and selfish to create the
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behavior, from the most greedy and selfish to the most altruistic and coopera-
 tive. It is not any more natural to be greedy and selfish than to be caring and
 cooperative. As Amartya Sen reminds us, we do not have to be a Gandhi, a
 Mandela, or a Mother Teresa "to recognize that we can have aims or priori-
 ties that differ from the single-minded pursuit of our own well-being only."⁵⁰
 In addition, insisting that there is a universal human nature makes it hard to
 explain why there are dramatic differences in citizens' capability from one
 country to another. Those who insist that flaws in human nature prevent sub-
 stantial improvements in people's lives cannot explain why Americans kill
 each other more frequently than do Canadians; why Denmark has remark-
 ably little government corruption while it is routine in Nigeria, or why South
 Korea has achieved extraordinary economic growth since 1960, while North
 Korea has plunged into poverty and famine. People behave differently in dif-
 ferent institutional settings. When institutions work well, they enable people
 to act cooperatively to achieve their goals. But when institutions "are weak or
 unjust, the result is mistrust and uncertainty."⁵¹

Another group of critics advances a different line of argument. For them,
 humans are clearly selfish, but this is seen as a desirable trait rather than a
 flaw. Perhaps the best known statement of this viewpoint occurred in the 1987
 movie *Wall Street*, in which an aggressive corporate raider asserted, "The
 point is, ladies and gentlemen, greed is good."⁵² This point of view is not lim-
 ited to movies. A nationally syndicated columnist argues, "You can call it
 greed, selfishness, or enlightened self-interest; but the bottom line is that it's
 these human motivations that get wonderful things done."⁵³

Yet, there are problems with this assertion. The first is that even persons
 who argue that greed can be beneficial do not claim that it achieves wonder-
 ful results under all circumstances. Unrestrained greed and selfishness would
 leave the advocates of greed themselves vulnerable to being cheated, robbed,
 or even killed. Whether the pursuit of self-interest leads to good results for
 individuals depends a great deal on the institutional setting in which that
 pursuit takes place. In the Nigerian context, institutions create incentives for
 people to pursue their self-interest in ways that lead to high levels of corrup-
 tion, poor health, illiteracy, and limited political rights for most citizens. In
 the Danish setting, people pursue their self-interest in ways that yield the op-
 posite outcomes. One of the major goals of this book will be to examine why
 some societies do a much better job than others of creating conditions in
 which an individual's self-interest can be aligned with the self-interest of oth-
 ers to create a good society.

Finally, cultural relativists believe that it is inappropriate to try to estab-
 lish criteria for a good society that apply to all of the world's countries. They
 claim that each society should be evaluated only by using criteria from that
 society.⁵⁴ If some countries choose not to practice democratic politics, that is
 up to them. If some countries do not want female children to be educated,
 that is their prerogative. These are not necessarily practices that we would
 approve of but other countries and cultures have the right to decide upon
 their own rules, just as we do. Cultural relativism is attractive because it

appeals to our desire to be tolerant and open-minded toward people who have different beliefs from our own.⁵⁵

But cultural relativism is not as innocent and impartial as it appears. Cultural relativists simply legitimize the power of those who have triumphed over others in the conflict over prevailing social values. Cultures are seldom, if ever, monolithic in which everyone agrees, but are often filled with different, and sometimes conflicting, interpretations. For example, the extremist Muslim Taliban government in Afghanistan banned education for girls from 1996 until 2001. But this policy was not supported by female teachers or by all women in Afghanistan. Even the male leaders of some fundamentalist Islamic political parties in Afghanistan supported education for girls. Where many different interpretations of a culture's values exist, cultural relativism sides with those who are able to enforce their values on others. To say that Afghani culture should not be condemned for barring girls from being educated accepts the Taliban prohibition on educating girls as representative of the national culture over those who opposed it.

Cultural relativism is difficult to apply with consistency. It is particularly difficult in countries headed by authoritarian governments to find out about internal value differences because citizens are not free to voice differing opinions. Cultural relativism "provides no independent footing" for choosing among competing values within a country.⁵⁶ The approach we use, by contrast, offers a reasoned way to establish standards by which to compare and evaluate societies, one that has been used and accepted by the United Nations Human Development Program. It provides general criteria for evaluation and comparison but does not specify a particular institutional arrangement. Moreover, it gives individuals considerable freedom of choice by creating conditions that permit them to pursue the kind of lives they value. If people want to live frugally they should be free to do so, but they should not have to live that way due to unwanted poverty. If people who are sick choose not to take advantage of health care resources that is their business; but it is quite another matter if sick people cannot take advantage of health care resources because they are unavailable or unaffordable.⁵⁷ This is not to say that our approach is uncontroversial. In many countries, authoritarian leaders who object to giving citizens civil and political rights would certainly oppose our emphasis on them. These rights, however, are not just Western values that are being imposed on other cultures, but are valued by many people around the world.⁵⁸

CONCLUSION

Comparative politics examines why countries are organized in different ways and what consequences those differences may have. It examines differences within countries as opposed to relations between them, which is the domain of international relations, another subfield within political science. Comparative politics is a valuable field of study not only because it makes us familiar with other countries but because it gives us perspective about our own. Comparative politics provides a reference point or standard by which we can make judgments about our government's performance.

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We then proceeded to defend the capability approach, which defines the good society as one in which certain minimal conditions exist that permit people to flourish. These conditions include physical well-being, safety from violence, the ability to make thoughtful choices about one's life, and the possession of civil and political rights.

my pulse kit EXERCISES

Review this chapter using learning objectives, chapter summaries, practice tests, and more.



Analyze recent world affairs by watching streaming video from major news providers.



Learn the key terms in this chapter; you can test yourself by term or definition.



Compare political ideas, behaviors, institutions, and policies worldwide.

1. What principles does your vision of the Good Society reflect? What prerequisites do you think the Good Society should include?
2. We use concepts, such as democracy or freedom, all the time. Or we often say that workers in some country are more class conscious than workers in another, or that ethnic tensions are greater here than there. But operationally defining these concepts so they can be used in comparative political analysis is tricky and takes a great deal of imagination. How would you operationally define these concepts

- (democracy, freedom, class consciousness, ethnic tension) so they can be compared across countries?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the different comparative methods we reviewed: the case study approach that examines one country intensively; a paired country approach that tries to find countries that are similar to each other so that other variables can be held constant; or comparisons that involve many countries so analysts can test their hypothesis against many cases? Which method do you think is best and why?
 4. Even if we accept that wealth (GDP per capita) is not sufficient for the Good Society, do you think it is, at least, necessary?
 5. What criteria do you believe should be used to evaluate how states perform?

KEY TERMS

Comparative Politics	2	Control Variables	4	Civil Rights	18
Comparative Political Analysis	3	Correlation	4	Civil Liberties	18
Hypothesis	3	Causation	4	Political Rights	18
Dependent Variable	3	GDP	4	Cultural Relativism	21
Independent Variable	3	Empirical Analysis	8		
Operationalize Variables	4	Normative Analysis	8		
		The Capabilities Approach	14		

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	Civil Liberties 18
	Political Rights 18
	Cultural Relativism 21

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