

AP Comparative Politics and Government

1. Complete the introductory reading below and complete the accompanying questions.
2. Read “After Decades of Triumph, Democracy is Losing Ground” from the *Economist*. <https://www.economist.com/international/2018/06/14/after-decades-of-triumph-democracy-is-losing-ground>. Complete the questions about the article below. If you don’t have a username/password yet, you can create a free account to read 3 articles per month. I’ll also post the article to Schoology.
3. Complete the current event assignment

AP Comparative Government and Politics

Welcome to Comparative Politics!

This course will do two things at once. First, we'll go over the concepts and terms essential to understanding governments and politics. Then we'll apply those terms to 6 states (our new word for countries) and see how they compare with each other.

Our 6 States (The AP 6) are:

- United Kingdom
- Russia
- China
- Iran
- Nigeria
- Mexico

The College Board picked each of these six for a reason, which we'll talk about on the first day. You don't need to be an expert on any of these states just yet. However, do follow them in the news. If you keep up with their current events, the course content will make a lot more sense. An easy way to do this is to sign up for BBC news alerts on your phone and to check out their website from time to time. The BBC has great international coverage.

Essential Concepts

One of the difficult things in Unit 1 is learning the correct definitions for some common terms. This reading is deceptively short, but don't be fooled. There's a lot of concepts here that we'll need to master before we go on to the states.

Let's start with **politics**. At the center of politics is power. Who has the power to make decisions for the state and how did they get power?

Who are those people who have policy-making power? That's the **government**. The people who are in charge. The leadership of the state. Governments come and go every time there is an election and the people in leadership change.

What about the things that last? There are **institutions**. We'll use this word a lot. Think of anything that lasts in politics even as people come and go. The legislature, the judiciary, and the executive are all institutions. 100 years ago there were different people in the US Senate, but the institution of the Senate persists even as the members change. These are long-lasting organizations that transcend individual people.

The **state** is what you've previously called a country. A state has control over its own borders and what happens within other borders. A somewhat morbid sounding definition is that a state can control the violence in a territory. In other words, the state defines who can and cannot use weapons and force, and it sets the rules as to how violence is used. States often sponsor armies, police, etc. that legitimately use power and sometimes violence, but individual citizens are restricted in their use of force.

In common use, people often use nation and state interchangeably, but they're different things. A **nation** is a group of people with some things in common such as race, language, religion, ethnicity, political identity, and aspirations. It doesn't have independence or sovereignty, but there may be a push to obtain it. Think of the Kurds who are part of other states but would like to have their own, independent state. Another example is Scotland. It's part of the UK, but the Scots see themselves as distinctly different from the English. There's a push for Scotland to become independent.

Each state has a **regime**. People tend to use this word as something negative, but a regime is just the set of rules or norms that regulate the operation of the government. For example, the rules for the US's regime are in the US Constitution. We'll primarily refer to democratic regimes and authoritarian regimes. The government will change anytime there is a change in the leadership in the state. If there is an election and a new Parliament and/or Prime Minister takes office, there is a change in government. Changes in regime require something more radical. It's throwing out the old rules and establish new ones. Think of dramatic changes that overthrow the entire system. For instance, a revolution (when the people overthrow the regime) or a coup d'état (when the military overthrows the regime.)

Legitimacy

Legitimacy refers to whether citizens accept the government's right to rule. Governments are always concerned about how to increase legitimacy. More legitimacy can increase the power of the regime and government.

In democratic and authoritarian regimes, legitimacy can come from elections and the constitution. Other sources of legitimacy include nationalism, tradition, governmental effectiveness, economic growth, ideology, religious heritage and organizations, and the dominant political party's endorsement.

Meanwhile increased corruption, reduced electoral competition, and problems for the citizens (economic problems, protests, etc.) can all undermine legitimacy.

When you see a government do something, always ask yourself – how does this impact legitimacy?

Power, Authority, & Sovereignty

An essential element for a state is **sovereignty**. A state is sovereign when it controls the territory within its borders. It has independent legal authority over its population and can govern without outside interference. For example, the state of Mexico has authority over clearly defined borders and can govern the population without outside interference.

There can be threats to sovereignty, though. We're seeing this play out in real time with the invasion of Ukraine. Threats can come from within the borders, too. Governments have to consider how to maintain sovereignty over groups that may not recognize the government's right to rule. For instance, Scotland wants to break away from the UK. Parliament has to consider what it can do to its sovereignty over Scotland to keep it.

Power and authority often get lumped together, but they're different things. **Power** is what the government can actually do to influence the conduct of individuals and organizations within the state. **Authority** means it has the legitimate right to use that power. Putin had the power to invade Crimea and claim it as part of Russia, but he didn't have the authority to do it.

How a regime uses power to support its sovereignty often comes down to whether it is a democratic or authoritarian regime. An authoritarian government is more likely to use power it isn't authorized to use. (Ex: Using the judicial system to punish people who disagree with the government.) An authoritarian regime can act with a lot of autonomy, meaning it can act independently from the citizens.

Sources of power and authority include constitutions, the military, religion, political parties, the legislature, and popular support. You can see a lot of overlap here with sources of legitimacy.

Before you go on, be sure you have a solid understanding of the concepts we've covered so far. You'll see them again and again in the course. Be able to define them in your own words.

Making Comparisons

Empirical vs. Normative

Political scientists try to rely on data to make comparisons between countries. For instance, relying on economic statistics such as GDP, per capita income, literacy rates, etc. **Empirical data** is based on factual information and statistics. It gives factual points of comparison, but data points don't always tell the whole story. You'll also see **normative statements**, which include value judgements or opinions.

For example:

- Empirical: Rates of voter turnout in Russia declined from 2008-2018.
- Normative: Putin should not have changed the term limits to keep himself in power.

Correlation vs. Causation

When looking at data, be careful not to see causation when it isn't there. Did one thing actually cause another to happen? It's hard to say most of the time in politics, because there are so many different variables. Often we're looking at correlations. We can see an association between two variables, but we can't fully prove cause and effect.

Answer the following questions in your own words. You don't need to use complete sentences.

1. What is politics?
2. How is a state different from a nation?
3. What is the purpose of the state?
4. How do the concepts of regime and government differ from one another?
5. If the UK Parliament selects a new Prime Minister, is that a regime change or a government change? Explain why.
6. What are institutions and why are they important? Give an example.
7. Why is legitimacy important? What are sources of legitimacy? What can weaken legitimacy?
8. Give an example of empirical data. Give an example of a normative statement. What is the role of both in studying politics?
9. Contrast causation with correlation.
10. Explain sovereignty and why it is essential to a state. What can threaten state sovereignty?
11. What is the difference between power and authority? What are the sources of authority for governments?
12. Why is an authoritarian regime more likely to use power it isn't authorized to use?

“After Decades of Triumph, Democracy is Losing Ground”

1. According to the author, why is democracy in decline?
2. What are the steps of democratic decline? (The author credits Putin with perfecting the technique.)

AP Comparative Government and Politics
Fall and Spring Semester
Current Events

You'll submit a one-page summary and analysis of a recent event in one of the six AP States – Mexico, Nigeria, UK, Iran, Russia, or China. You may select whichever state you like.

Finding Articles:

After picking one of the six states, read up on its recent news. Select one news article to write about for this assignment. The article should be current (within the last several weeks) and in-depth. Look specifically for articles that relate to the course. For instance, look for news about elections, the ruling government, political protests, etc. Avoid stories that are really about the United States relationship with your assigned state.

I recommend that you use one of the following news outlets known for their international coverage:

The Economist
The BBC

The Washington Post
The New York Times

The Guardian
Foreign Policy

If you prefer local news sources, you can also access these websites. Keep in mind the restrictions on free press that exist in some countries:

Great Britain - www.thetimes.co.uk

China - www.chinadaily.com.cn

Iran - www.irna.ir www.iran-daily.com www.tehran.com

Nigeria - www.ngrguardiannews.com

Mexico - www.pan.org.mx (can translate in Google)

Russia - www.themoscowtimes.com www.regnum.ru/english

Written Format:

Write one page about your news article. Give a summary and analysis of the article. Include the article's key points and **why** the topic is important. Be prepared to share your findings with the class.