CHAPTER
1

ISSUES IN COMPARATIVE POLITICS

WHAT IS POLITICS?

Some people love politics. They relish the excitement of political events, such as a presidential election, as they would an exciting athletic contest (the World Series of baseball or the World Cup of soccer, perhaps). Others are fascinated with politics because they care about the issues and their consequences for people in their own communities and around the world. Still others hate politics, either because it sets groups and individuals against each other, or because it involves abuse of power, deceit, manipulation, and violence. Finally, some people are indifferent to politics because it has little to do with the things that matter most to them. All of these reactions involve kernels of truth about politics. Indeed, most of us react to politics with a mixture of these sentiments. Politics has many faces and can be a force for good as well as evil. The core of politics, however, is about human beings making important decisions for themselves and for others.

This book is about the comparative study of politics. In order to make political comparisons, we need to understand what politics is as well as what it means to study politics comparatively. Comparative politics thus involves two separate elements:

- It is a subject of study—comparing the nature of politics and the political process across different political systems.
- It is a method of study—involving how and why we make such comparisons.

We address the first point in this chapter, Chapter 2 discusses the second.

Politics deals with human decisions, and political science is the study of such decisions. Yet, not all decisions are political, and many of the social sciences study decisions that are of little interest to political scientists. For example, consider when you go with a friend to an event, such as a concert or a soccer match. You can spend your money on the tickets (to get the best seats possible) or on food and drink, or you can save your money for the future. Economists study the sorts of spending decisions people make, and perhaps how they reach them. Psychologists, on the other hand, might study why you went to the event with this friend and not another, or who suggested going in the first place.

Political scientists seldom examine such personal experiences, unless they have political consequences. Instead, we examine the political process and its impact on the citizens. Political decisions constantly touch our lives in many ways, our careers, and our families. Our jobs are structured by government regulations, our homes are built to conform to government housing codes, our public schools are funded and managed by the government, and even when we go to a concert or sporting event, we travel on roads maintained by the government and monitored by the police. We might not think of politics as omnipresent in our lives, but it affects us in many important ways. Therefore, it is important to study how political decisions are made and what their consequences are.

Political decisions are *public* and *authoritative*. There is no such thing as political solitaire, playing

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politics by yourself. Political decisions take place within some community that we call a *political system*, which we describe below. Yet, not all social decisions are public. Most of what happens within families, among friends, or in social groups belongs to the *private sphere*. Actions within this sphere do not bind anyone outside that group. In most societies, your choice of concert partners and food are private decisions.

The *public sphere* deals with collective decisions that extend beyond the individual, typically involving government action. In totalitarian societies, like Hitler's Third Reich and some communist nations, the public sphere is very large and the private sphere is very limited. The state tries to dominate the life of its people, even intruding into family life. On the other hand, in some less developed nations the private domain may almost crowd out the public one. People in many African nations, for instance, may be unaware of what happens in the capital city and untouched by the decisions made there. Western democracies have a more balanced mix of private and public spheres. However, the boundaries between the two spheres get redrawn all the time. A couple of decades ago, the sex lives of U.S. presidents or members of the British royal family were considered private matters, not to be discussed in public. These norms are changing in Britain and the United States, but the traditional standards remain in other countries. Similarly, at one time in British history certain religious beliefs were considered treasonous. Today, religious beliefs are considered private matters in most modern democracies, but not in many other parts of the world. Even though politics may be influenced by what happens in the private domain, it deals directly with only those decisions that are public.

Politics is also *authoritative*. Authority means that formal power rests in individuals or groups whose decisions are expected to be carried out and respected. Thus, political decisions are binding for members of that political system. Governments may use force to ensure compliance, although authority is not always backed up by force. For instance, a religious authority, such as the Pope, has few coercive powers. He can persuade, but rarely compel, the Catholic Church's followers. In contrast, tax authorities, such as the U.S. Internal Revenue Service, can both exhort and compel people to follow their rules.

Thus, politics refers to activities associated with the control of public decisions among a given people and in a given territory, where this control may be backed up by authoritative means. Politics involves the crafting of these authoritative decisions—who gets to make them and for what purposes.

We live in one of the most exciting times to study politics. The end of the Cold War created a new international order, although its shape is still uncertain. The democratic transitions in Eastern Europe and many developing nations have transformed the world, although it is unclear whether these new democracies will endure and what forms they might take. In Western nations, new challenges and choices have arisen that divide their citizens. Some of these problems—such as confronting global warming and achieving international peace—are transnational. Part of their solutions, we hope, lies in the political choices that people make about their collective future. Our goal in this book is to give you a sense of how governments and politics function to address these challenges.

GOVERNMENTS AND THE STATE OF NATURE

Governments are organizations of individuals who have the power to make binding decisions on behalf of a particular community. Governments thus have authoritative and coercive powers. Governments do many things. They can wage war or encourage peace; cultivate or restrict international trade; open their borders to the exchange of ideas and art or close them; tax their populations heavily or lightly and through different means; allocate resources for education, health, and welfare or leave such matters to others. People who are affected by such decisions may well agree with them and indeed welcome them, but there is also often heated disagreement about the proper role of government decisions.

Debates over the nature and appropriate role of government are far from new. They reflect a classic polemic in political philosophy. For centuries, philosophers have debated whether governments are a force for good or evil. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—the time of the English, French, and American revolutions—much of this debate was couched in arguments concerning the **state of nature.**

Philosophers thought about the state of nature as the condition of humankind if no government existed. In some cases, they thought that such a situation

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existed before the first governments were formed. These philosophers used their ideas about the state of nature to identify an ideal social contract (agreement) on which to build a political system. Even today, many philosophers find it useful to make such a mental experiment to consider the consequences of having governments.

These debates have shaped our images of government, even to the present. The contrast between Thomas Hobbes' and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's ideas about the state of nature is most striking. Hobbes was the ultimate pessimist. He thought of the state of nature as mercilessly inhospitable, a situation of eternal conflict of all against all, and a source of barbarism and continuous fear. He pessimistically argued that "[i]n such condition, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building,... no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."[1]

Rousseau, in contrast, was more optimistic. For him, the state of nature represented humanity before its fall from grace, without all the corruptions that governments have introduced. "Man is born free," Rousseau observed in *The Social Contract*, "and yet everywhere he is in chains." Rousseau saw governments as the source of power and inequality, and these conditions in turn as the causes of human alienation and corruption. "The extreme inequality in our way of life," he argued, "excess of idleness in some, excess of labor in others;... late nights, excesses of all kinds, immoderate ecstasies of all the passions; fatigues and exhaustion of mind, numberless sorrows and afflictions... that most of our ills are our own work; that we would have avoided almost all of them by preserving the simple, uniform, and solitary way of life prescribed to us by nature."[2]

John Locke's ideas have been particularly important for the development of Western democracies. He took a position between those of Hobbes and Rousseau. Compared with Hobbes, Locke thought of human beings as more businesslike and less war prone. Yet, like Hobbes he proposed a social contract to replace the state of nature with a system of government. While Hobbes thought the main task for government is to quell disorder and protect against violence and war, Locke saw the state's main role as protecting property and commerce and promoting economic growth. He believed government would do this by establishing and enforcing property rights and rules of economic exchange. Whereas Hobbes thought government needed to be a Leviathan—a benevolent dictator to whom the citizens would yield all their power—Locke favored a limited government.[3]

Although these debates began centuries ago, they still underlie current discussions on the appropriate role of government. To some, government is the solution to many human needs and problems—a theme that former U.S. President Bill Clinton often advocated. To others, the government is often part of the problem—a theme that former U.S. President Ronald Reagan articulately argued. To some, government exists to create the social order that protects its citizens; to others, the government's rules limit our freedoms. This tension is part of the political discourse in many contemporary nations, including the United States. We explore these contrasting views and different examples of government structures in this book.

WHY GOVERNMENTS?

A recent libertarian science fiction book begins with the scenario of a group of travelers landing at an airport after a long overseas flight. As they disembark from the plane, they notice there are no police checking passports, no customs officers scanning baggage, and no officials applying immigration rules.[4] They had landed in a society without government, and the puzzle was what having no government would mean for the citizenry. The answer is a lot (see Box 1.1). As philosophers have pointed out, there are many reasons why people create governments and prefer to live under such a social order. We shall discuss some of these, beginning with activities that help generate a stable community in the first place and then those that help this community prosper.

Community- and Nation-Building

One of the first purposes of governments is to create and maintain a community in which people can feel safe and comfortable. While humans may be social beings, it is not always easy to build a community in which large numbers of people can communicate, feel

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BOX 1.1

U.S. Government's Top Ten List

Paul Light surveyed 450 historians and political scientists to assess the U.S. government's greatest achievements in the past half century. Their top ten list is as follows:

- Help rebuild Europe after World War II
- Expand the right to vote for minorities
- Promote equal access to public accommodations
- Reduce disease
- Reduce workplace discrimination
- Ensure safe food and drinking water
- Strengthen the nation's highway system
- Increase older Americans' access to health care
- Reduce the federal deficit
- Promote financial security in retirement

Source: Paul Light, *Government's Greatest Achievements of the Past Half-Century* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2000) (www.brookings.edu/comm/reformwatch/rw02.pdf).

at home, and interact constructively. Governments can help generate such communities in many different ways, for example, by teaching a common language, instilling common norms and values, creating common myths and symbols, and supporting a national identity. However, sometimes such actions create controversy because they threaten the values of minority groups.

Nation-building activities help instill common world views, values, and expectations. Using a concept discussed more in Chapter 3, governments can help create a national **political culture.** The political culture defines the public's expectations toward the political process and its role within the process. The more the political culture is shared, the easier it is to live in peaceful coexistence and engage in activities for mutual gain, such as commerce.

Security and Order

Government activities partially reflect Hobbes' belief that only strong governments can make society safe for their inhabitants. Providing security and law and order is among the most essential tasks that governments perform. Externally, security means protecting against attacks from other political systems. Armies, navies, and air forces typically perform this function. Internally, security means protecting against theft, aggression, and violence from members of one's own society. In most societies providing this protection is the function of the police.

Providing security and order is a critical role of modern governments. While governments worldwide have privatized many of the services they once performed—for example those involving post offices, railroads, and telecommunications, few, if any, governments have privatized their police or defense forces. This shows how security is one of the most essential roles of government. The international terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. on September 11, 2001, and subsequent attacks in London, Madrid and other cities underscore the importance of security.

Protecting Rights

John Locke considered property rights to be particularly critical to the development of prosperous communities. Without effective protection of property rights, people will not invest their goods or energies in productive processes. Also, unless property rights exist and contracts can be negotiated and enforced, people will not trust their neighbors enough to engage in trade and commerce. Anything beyond a subsistence economy requires effective property rights and contracts. Therefore, Locke believed that the primary role of government is to establish and protect such rights. Similarly, contemporary authors argue that social order is a prerequisite for development and democratization.[5]

Effective property rights allocate ownership and provide security against trespass and violations. Such rights must also make the buying and selling of property relatively inexpensive and painless. Finally, people must have faith that their property rights can be defended. Thus, many analysts argue that one of the most restrictive limitations on development in the Third World is the government's inability (or unwillingness) to guarantee such rights. Peasant families

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who have lived for generations on a plot of land cannot claim ownership, which erodes their incentive and opportunity to invest in the future.

Although Locke was most concerned with economic property rights, governments also protect many other social and political rights. Among them are freedoms of speech and association and protection against various forms of discrimination and harassment. Indeed, the protection of these rights and liberties is one of the prime goals of government—with other factors such as nation-building, security and property rights providing a means toward this goal. Governments also play a key role in protecting the rights of religious, racial and other social groups. Human development stresses the expansion of these rights and liberties, and governments play a key role in this process.

Promoting Economic Efficiency and Growth

Economists have long debated the government's potential role in promoting economic development. Neoclassical economics shows that markets are efficient when property rights are defined and protected, when competition is rigorous, and when information is freely available. When these conditions do not hold, markets may fail and the performance of the economy may suffer.[6] At least in some circumstances, governments can lessen the results of market failure.

Governments may be especially important in providing **public goods**, such as clean air, a national defense, or disease prevention. Public goods have two things in common. One is that if one person enjoys them, they cannot be withheld from anyone else. The second is that one person's enjoyment or consumption of the goods does not detract from anyone else's. Consider clean air. For most practical purposes, it is impossible to provide one person with clean air without also giving it to his or her neighbors. Moreover, my enjoyment of clean air does not mean that my neighbors have any less of it. Analysts therefore argue that people in a market economy will not pay enough for public goods. They claim that only government can provide such public goods. Otherwise, people will not voluntarily pay for public goods because they can benefit from the goods that others provide, or they will not act until they are assured others will also contribute.

Governments can also benefit society by controlling the **externalities** that occur when an activity produces costs that are not borne by the producer or the user. For instance, many forms of environmental pollution occur when those who produce or consume goods do not pay all of the environmental costs. Polluting factories, waste dumps, prisons, and major highways can impose large costs on those who live near them. NIMBY ("not in my backyard") groups are an example of citizens complaining about these costs. Governments can help protect people from such unfair externalities or ensure that burdens are fairly shared.

Governments also can promote fair competition in economic markets. For example, governments can assure that all businesses follow minimum standards of worker protection and product liability. In other cases, the government may control potentially monopolistic parts of the economy to ensure that suppliers do not take advantage of their market power. This happened in the nineteenth century with railroad monopolies, and now in the twenty-first century with technology monopolies, such as Microsoft, or telecommunications companies. In these cases the government acts as the policeman to ensure that the economically powerful do not exploit their power. Sometimes, the government itself may become the monopolist. There are some markets in which very large start-up costs or prohibitive costs of coordination mean that there should be only one producer. The government may then set itself up as that monopolist, or it may decide to tightly control a private monopolist. Telecommunications have commonly been a government monopoly, as have mail services and strategic defense industries.

Social Justice

Governments can also play a role in dividing the fruits of economic growth in equitable ways. Many people argue that governments are needed to promote social justice by redistributing wealth and other resources among citizens. In many countries the distribution of income or property is highly uneven. Moreover, in many societies income and wealth inequalities worsen over time. Brazil, for example, has one of the most severe income inequalities in the world, an inequality that grew in every decade from the 1930s to the 1990s.

Under such circumstances, social justice may require a "new deal," especially if inequalities deprive many individuals of education, adequate health care,

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or other basic needs. Government can intervene to redistribute resources from the better-off to the poor. Some theorists argue that such transfers should attempt to equalize the conditions of all citizens. Others prefer governments to redistribute enough to equalize opportunities, and then let individuals be responsible for their own fortunes.

Many private individuals, organizations, and foundations attempt to help the poor, but they generally lack the capacity to effect large-scale redistribution. Governments do, at least under some circumstances. Many tax and welfare policies effectively redistribute income, although the degree of redistribution is often hotly disputed. Yet most individuals agree that governments should provide their citizens with the opportunities to reach certain minimum standards of living and a social safety net.

Protecting the Weak

We commonly rely on the government to protect individuals and groups that are not able to speak for themselves. Groups such as the poor or the homeless or future generations cannot effectively protect their own interests. Governments, however, can protect the interests of the unborn and prevent them from getting saddled with economic debts or environmental degradation. In recent decades, governments have become much more involved in protecting groups that are politically weak or disenfranchised, such as children, the old, and the infirm or disabled, as well as nonhumans—from whales and birds to trees and other parts of our natural environment.

WHEN DOES GOVERNMENT BECOME THE PROBLEM?

There are many reasons that governments may become involved in human affairs, but such intervention is not always welcomed. When and how government intervention is necessary and desirable are among the most disputed issues in modern politics. During the twentieth century, the role of governments expanded enormously in most nations. At the same time, criticisms of many government policies have persisted and sometimes intensified. Such skepticism is directed at virtually all government activities, especially the economic role of government.

Destruction of Community

Whereas some see governments as a way to build community, others argue that governments destroy natural communities. Government, they hold, implies power and inequality among human beings. And power corrupts. In Lord Acton's famous words, "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

While those who have power are corrupted, those without it are degraded and alienated. According to Rousseau, only human beings unfettered by government can form bonds that allow them to develop their full human potential. By imposing an order based on coercion, hierarchy, and the threat of force, governments destroy natural communities. The stronger government becomes, the more it creates inequalities of power that have negative consequences. Such arguments stimulated Western criticism of communism as limiting the potential and freedom of its citizens.

Others argue that strong governments create a "client society," in which people learn to be subservient to authorities and to rely on governments to meet their needs. In such societies, governments patronize and pacify their citizens, as seen in many developing nations today.

Violations of Basic Rights

Just as governments can help establish many essential rights, they can also use their powers to violate these rights in the most serious manner. The twentieth century witnessed enormous progress in the extension of political, economic, and social rights in societies worldwide. At the same time, however, some governments violated basic **human rights** on an unprecedented scale. The millions of lives lost to political persecution is the most serious example of this. Such horrors happened not only in Nazi extermination camps and during Stalin's Great Terror in the Soviet Union, but also on a huge scale in China, Cambodia, and Rwanda, and on a smaller scale in Iraq, Argentina, the Sudan, and Afghanistan.

These extreme abuses of government power illustrate a dilemma that troubled James Madison and other Founders of the American Revolution: the tension between creating a government strong enough to govern effectively but not so strong that it could destroy the rights of its citizens. They understood the irony that to protect individuals from each other,

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societies can create a government that has even more power to coerce the individual.

Economic Inefficiency

Governments can help economies flourish, but they also can distort and restrict a state's economic potential. President Robert Mugabe, for instance, has destroyed the economy of a once developing Zimbabwe, and similar examples exist in many struggling economies. Economic problems might arise even if government officials do not actively abuse their power. Government regulation of the economy may distort the terms of trade and lower people's incentives to produce. Further inefficiencies may arise when governments actually own or manage important economic enterprises. This is particularly likely if the government holds a monopoly on an important good, since monopolies generally cause goods to be undersupplied and overpriced. Moreover, government industries may be especially prone to inefficiency and complacency because management and workers often have better job protection than those in the private sector. Therefore, they may worry less about the economic performance of the firm. Such experiences stimulate calls to restrict the economic role of governments in both developing and advanced industrial economies.

Government for Private Gain

Society also may suffer if government officials make decisions to benefit themselves personally, or select policies to get themselves reelected regardless of whether those policies would be the best for the society. These actions are like a game in which one person's gain is another person's loss. A politician or political group may use the government to unfairly reap benefits at the public's expense—what is called "rent seeking." *Rents* are benefits created through government intervention in the economy—for example, tax revenue or profits created because the government has restricted competition. Rent seeking refers to efforts by individuals, groups, firms, or organizations to reap such benefits. The idea is really quite simple. For instance, a local mayor plans an economic development project that will benefit his friends who own land in the area or who will supply contracts for the project. Rent seeking can impose large net costs on society because policies are chosen for the private benefits that they produce rather than for their social efficiency and because groups may expend large amounts of resources to control the spoils of government. Rent seeking may turn into outright corruption when influence is traded for money or other advantage (see Box 1.2).

Political exploitation is a particularly serious problem in poor societies. Holding political office is often an effective way to enrich oneself when other political actors are too weak to constrain the abuse of government officials. Besides, many developing societies do not have strong norms against using government for private gain. On the contrary, people often expect those in government to use their power to benefit themselves, their families, and their neighbors. Even in many advanced democratic societies public officeholders are expected to appoint their supporters

The Case of Mobutu Sese Seko — BOX 1.2

What happens if politicians use their power in their own self-interest or to benefit individuals or groups that support them? President Mobutu Sese Seko (1930–1997) of Zaire offers a tragic example of the costs that rent-seeking politicians can impose on their societies. After seizing power in a 1965 coup, Mobutu ruled the large African state of Congo (which he renamed Zaire) for more than thirty years. During his long rule, President Mobutu used government funds, including aid from Western states such as the United States, to amass a huge personal fortune, which he invested abroad. In addition to large sums of money, he is reported to have owned about thirty luxury residences abroad, including a number of palatial estates on the French Riviera. Meanwhile, living standards in Zaire, a poor country despite significant natural resources, plummeted, and the country was racked with epidemic disease and civil war. Mobutu died of natural causes shortly after his ouster.

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to ambassadorships and other public posts, constrained in part by civil service rules designed to reward merit over patronage. The temptations of officeholding are great. Despite formal rules, press scrutiny, and citizen concerns, few governments anywhere finish their terms of office untainted by some corruption scandal.

Vested Interests and Inertia

Government-created private gains are difficult to change or abolish once they have been established. Some people enjoy the benefits of government jobs, contracts, or other favors that they otherwise might not have had. The larger the government and the more attractive the benefits it provides, the more likely it is that such vested interests will resist change (unless change means even larger benefits). Therefore, any government will foster a group of people with a vested interest in maintaining or enlarging the government itself. Such groups may become a powerful force in favor of the status quo.

Vested interests make it difficult to change government policies or make them more efficient. Once established, agencies and policies can live on far beyond their usefulness. For example, when the Spanish Armada threatened to invade England in 1588, the government posted a military observation post at Land's End in southwest England. This observation post remained in place for four centuries! In the United States, the Rural Electrification Administration was created in 1935 to bring electricity to rural America; it persisted for almost sixty years until it was finally merged into the Rural Utilities Service in 1994.

Vested interests are particularly likely in political systems that contain a lot of safeguards against rapid political change. While the checks and balances in political systems as the United States are designed to safeguard individual rights, they may also protect the privileges of vested interests. Yet, even political systems that contain far fewer such checks may exhibit an excess of political inertia. Britain is an excellent example. Until recently, the House of Lords represented the social groups that dominated British society before the Industrial Revolution more than 200 years ago (noblemen, bishops, and judges). Only in the last few years has Britain begun reforming the House of Lords to eliminate features that reflect Britain's feudal and preindustrial past.

This debate and struggle over the proper role of government are an ongoing part of politics. In the past twenty-five years or so, there has been a clear trend away from extensive government regulation of many economic sectors. Since the 1970s especially, many societies have moved to privatize many economic sectors and to deregulate others. Government regulation has become less extensive in some areas, but it has grown in others—for example, through enacting laws to protect the environment or the rights of children. The overall size of governments in advanced industrial countries has not changed very much. In the former communist countries and in some developing countries, however, the government's size has shrunk quite dramatically. Yet, countries vary widely in the size of their governments, and they are likely to continue to do so.

POLITICAL SYSTEMS AND STATES

We began 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 necessarily has two properties: (1) it has a set of interdependent parts, and (2) it has boundaries between its environment.

Political systems are 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 parliaments, bureaucracies, and courts—that formulate and implement the collective goals of a society or of groups within it.

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. They represent some of the

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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—an 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.

External sovereignty means the right to make binding agreements (treaties) with other states. For instance, France's external sovereignty means that it can enter into treaties with other states. The city of Bordeaux, however, does not have this right (nor do other subnational units of government in France). Internal sovereignty means the right to determine matters having to do with one's own citizens. For example, the French government has internal sovereignty so that it can impose taxes on French citizens.

Yet, states mold and are molded by a domestic environment and an international environment. The system receives inputs from these environments and shapes them through its outputs. The boundaries of political systems are defined in terms of persons, territory, and property. Most people have citizenship rights in only one country. Similarly, territory is divided between states. A given piece of land is supposed to belong to only one country. Of course, disputes over citizenship, territory, and property are by no means uncommon and are among the most frequent causes of international conflict.

Every state faces some constraints on its external and internal sovereignty. For example, with the increasing integration of France into the **European Union (EU)**, the French government has given up parts of its sovereignty to the EU, and this loss of sovereignty is a major topic of political debate. In the United States, we confuse things a bit by calling the fifty constituent units "states," even though they enjoy much less sovereignty than France. The states of the United States share the power and authority of the "state" with the federal government in Washington, D.C.

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. We call the cases in which national identification and sovereign political authority largely coincide **nation-states.** 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 signed at the end of World War I.

Nation-states are often a desirable way to organize a political system. However, the national right to self-determination—is a relatively modern invention. 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. Gradually, a set of European nation-states evolved, and the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia established that principle for the political organization of Europe. The nation-state thus emerged as the dominant political system during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe.

Since then, Europe has transformed itself into distinct nation-states. This did not happen accidentally—indeed, the governments of the emerging nation-states had a lot to do with it. 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, 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 former colonial powers (particularly Britain and France) left the newly independent states with very weak national identities. In many parts of Africa, large-scale national communities simply did not exist at the time of colonization. Even where they did exist, they were rarely reflected in the boundaries that the colonial powers drew between their possessions. After independence, many new states have therefore faced huge nation-building tasks.

There are additional challenges to contemporary nation-states. After World War II, power in Western states began to shift downward from the state to local governments, and upward to supranational organizations, such as the EU. Most of the industrialized countries of Western Europe have gradually created a common market economy. Originally consisting of six countries—France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg—the EU has expanded

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to twenty-seven members with the addition of two members in 2006.

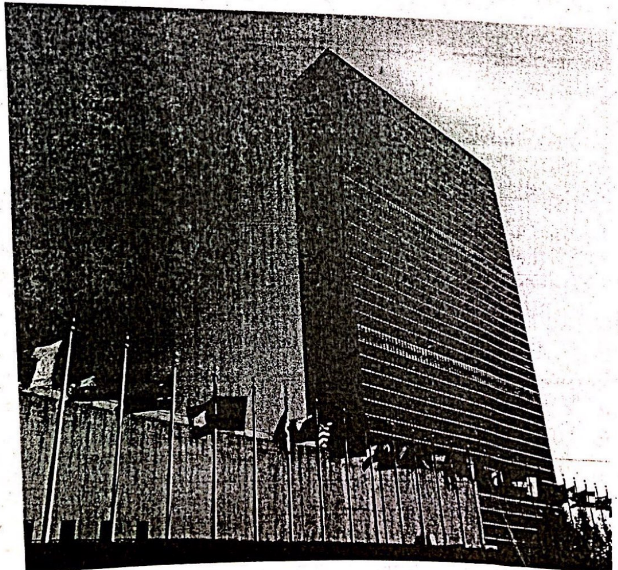
The **United Nations (UN)**, formed at the end of World War II in 1945, has also acquired new responsibilities since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. As of early 2006, UN forces were peacekeepers in fifteen countries. These operations—involving more than 100,000 peacekeepers—separate combatants in domestic and international conflicts, settle disputes, and form effective governing institutions. The UN has increased authority over world security, constraining, supporting, and sometimes replacing the unilateral actions of individual states. While the sovereignty of states may be diminishing, they are still the most important political systems. That, of course, is the main reason that they are the subject of our study.

THE DIVERSITY OF STATES

Just about the entire surface of the world today is covered by independent states. There were 192 UN "member-states" in 2006.[7] A few countries are not members of the UN (Taiwan, Switzerland, and the Vatican), and some independence movements would create even more states. When the United States declared its independence in 1776, most independent states were European (see Figure 1.1). Much of the rest of the world existed as 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, national proliferation extended to North Africa and the Middle East; and Europe continued to fragment as the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires broke up. Since World War II, the development of new states has taken off. By 2006, 125 new countries have joined the sixty-eight 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.

All these countries—new as well as old—share certain characteristics. They have legal authority over their territories and people; most have armies, air forces, and



The United Nations is the most inclusive organization of states. As of 2006, the United Nations had 192 member states, represented by the flags flying outside its headquarters in New York City.

Joseph Sohm–ChromoSohm,

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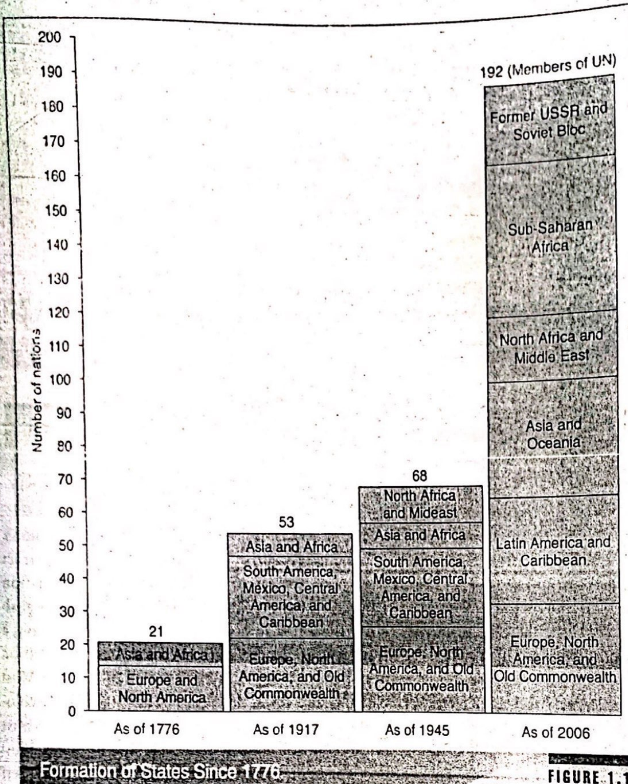

Formation of States Since 1776 FIGURE 1.1

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), 26 ff.

in some cases navies; they collect taxes and spend money; they regulate their economies, maintain public order, and pursue their general welfare. Countries send and receive ambassadors; most belong to several international organizations. They also vary, often profoundly, in physical size, histories, institutions, cultures, religions, economies, and social structures—factors that shape their politics.

Big and Small States

Nations come in all sizes. The smallest legally independent political entity in both geographic extent and population is Vatican City, the headquarters of the Catholic Church, with less than half a square kilometer of turf and less than a thousand residents.

The contrasts between geographic size and population size can be graphically seen in the following two maps. Map 1.1 is the familiar global map in which countries are displayed according to their size. Russia, with its landmass extending over eleven contiguous time zones, is the world's largest state with more than 17 million square kilometers. The United States falls about midpoint in this range, with just more than 9 million square kilometers. Many of the established democracies in Europe are relatively small (Britain has 242,000 square kilometers and Germany 349,000).

Map 1.2 is more provocative because is displays nations by their population size. Instantly we see China and India balloon in size because of their large populations. China alone accounts for almost a quarter of the world's population (with 1.3 billion people), and India is not far behind (with 1.1 billion). The European democracies we compare—Britain, France, and Germany—look smaller in these comparisons because their populations range from about 60 million to 80 million. Even more dramatically, Australia shrinks from a continent in the first map to a small dot in the population map because of its small population size (20 million). The United States in this global perspective seems relatively small in population terms

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Map of the World Based on Geographic Size

MAP 1.1

Source: Copyright © *The Real World Atlas*, Thames & Hudson, Ltd., London, 2008.

(298 million), even though it has roughly the same area as China and is geographically larger than India. And even though Russia has almost twice as much land as any other country, it has a modest population size (142 million) that is barely half as large as the United States and Russia is shrinking.

The political implications of these striking contrasts in population size and geographic area are not always obvious. Big countries are not always the most important and do not always prevail over the small ones: Cuba has challenged the United States for almost forty years; Israel stands off the Arab world; and tiny Vatican City has great power and influence. Nor do area and population size determine a country's political system. Both little Luxembourg and large India are democracies. Authoritarian regimes are found in small, medium, and large countries. These enormous contrasts in size show only that the states now making up the world differ greatly in their physical and human resources.

A state's geographic location can also have important strategic implications. In the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries, European states typically required a large land army to protect themselves from the threats of their neighbors. These nations had difficulties developing free political institutions since they needed a strong government to extract resources on a large scale and keep the population under control. Britain was protected by the English Channel and could defend itself through its navy, a smaller army, lower taxation, and less centralization of power—which aided political liberalization. Most peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America were colonized by the more powerful Western nations. Those that had the richest natural resources and the most benign climates tended to attract the largest numbers of settlers.

Whether they are old or new, large or small, most of the world's states face a number of common challenges. The first is building community. Most states do not have a homogeneous population, and instilling a sense of shared identity can be a serious challenge. Second, the ability to foster economic and social development is a challenge that is shared even by the wealthiest states. Finally, most states face significant challenges in advancing democracy and civil liberties. These challenges should be familiar from our discussion of the purposes and dangers of governments. In the remainder of this chapter, we discuss these challenges successively.

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