Introduction to Comparative Politics In this mini lecture, we will be introduced to the concept of comparative politics, as well as get a glimpse at some of the topics that we will be covering in this class. The study of each new subject in the field of Social Sciences starts with a discussion of terminology. We need to define our terms so we are all speaking the same language! for example… what is COMPARATIVE POLITICS??? Our book, The Essentials of Comparative Politics by Patrick O’Neil (Norton) gives us the following definition: Comparative politics is the study and comparison of domestic politics across countries. Well, that seems simple enough! But in order to understand what we mean by that, we also have to define POLITICS and POWER Politics is the struggle in any group for power that will give one or more persons the ability to make decisions for the larger group. Think about all the places in your life where this definition of power applies…your workplace? Your classroom? How about at home? As I'm sure you've figure out, politics is a relationship which exists in many areas of our lives. It is not something that governments or countries deal with. When you think about politics, are you an optimist or a pessimist? Where do you see yourself in the world of politics? I find that many college students are very skeptical about politics. Let's think about this...and re-evaluate your attitude at the end of the class. Now, let's turn our attention to a concept which goes hand in hand with politics...power. Your book's definition is as follows: Power is the ability to influence others or impose one’s will on them. Some political scientists tweak that definition slightly, and say that power is the ability to get someone to do something that they otherwise would not do. Which definition do you agree with more? Methodology In this class, we will be using the comparative method. In other words, we will be making comparisons and drawing conclusions by looking at a variety of case studies across the world. The comparative method may rely on inductive reasoning (using case studies to generate hypotheses) or deductive reasoning (coming up with a hypothesis, and testing this with data collected). The goal in both cases is to establish a causal relationship (an if/then statement, for example) and develop a theory. This is not as easy as it sounds, as there may be a limited number of case studies to analyze. We may only look at certain cases because it is convenient to do so. It may not be simple to separate the causes and effects. Basic Terms A few more terms to define so we are all on the same page as we proceed... Actors – the various players in the political system Actors include not just nation-states, like the United States and China, but also international organizations like the European Union and the United Nations as well as terrorist organizations, like ISIS and Al Qaeda, and multi-national corporations like Nike and Citibank. Institutions – organizations that have been founded to serve an educational, religious, social or professional purpose. As your book says “Political science examines institutions because they define what is possible in political life by laying out the rules and structures of how politics operates. Politics is full of institutions, and they embody the norms or values unique to a given country. Institutions are both a cause and an effect of political behavior. Institutions vary from country to country and provide a powerful way to compare political systems and behavior. Some examples of institutions include the army, taxation, elections, and the state.” (Essentials, Chapter 1) Understanding the World Through Comparative Politics and Institutions We have to make sure we are all on the same page when it comes to our terminology…So we will spend this week defining some more terms, and then applying our new “language” to some examples in the real world… Our real goal is not to learn new terms but to analyze what is happening in the world through a systematic and clear lens. What we really want to do is compare how people in diverse societies organize and manage their political activities. Why do we compare? To better understand the strengths and weaknesses of our own governments, and to understand other societies, and thus bring some of this understanding when we are interacting with people from other countries. We want to be able to answer such questions as whether Russia is a democracy today? Or China? Did the storming of the US Capitol on January 6th 2021 challenge the democratic nature of American government? What does a state need to do in order to be considered a democracy? Comparison helps us answer these questions. What is comparison? The study of the similarities and differences among and between political systems. Our basic unit of comparison is the nation-state (a political system based around one or more groups living within a fixed and defined territory) First, we will set up a framework of analysis, a method which will guide our comparison of political ideologies, institutions and processes around the world. We will then use this framework to examine some industrial as well as some developing countries. Now, let’s get back to that discussion of institutions… “Political science examines institutions because they define what is possible in political life by laying out the rules and structures of how politics operates. Politics is full of institutions, and they embody the norms or values unique to a given country. Institutions are both a cause and an effect of political behavior. Institutions vary from country to country and provide a powerful way to compare political systems and behavior. Some examples of institutions include the army, taxation, elections, and the state.” (Essentials, Chapter 1) Democracy, for example, is an institution... But not all institutions are political. There are: formal institutions – tend to be based on clearly defined rules and processes informal institutions – unwritten and unofficial but does not mean they are less important a mix of both formal and informal We will explore various institutions we are involved in during our discussion.