Global Trends and the Tasks of Comparative Politics

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Abstract: While comparative politics is concerned with the domestic dynamics of political communities, global trends face each community with common pressures and challenges. Three basic trends are identified. First, the redefinition of political communities by globalization; second, the transformation of communication by electronic media; and third, the transformation of policy issues by demographic changes. These trends set three broad and interrelated challenges for all political communities: identity, governance, and sustainability. Each political community responds in its own way to these challenges, and the task of comparative politics is to understand the distinctive responses to shared problems of adjustment. The study of comparative politics should proceed from a variety of national perspectives in order to globalize its own academic discourse.

Key words: globalization, e-media, identity, governance, sustainability, democracy

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Introduction: Common problems and individual responses

The study of comparative politics is more than the analysis of similarities and differences among different governments. The issues that loom large in any political community will drive its interest in the politics of others, and issues of global significance are especially attractive targets of research. But even if problems are global, the perspective of each political community will differ. Here we will address global trends rather than the various responses by states, but each state can and will work out its own political course of action. Global trends can be compared to the effect of a tsunami. A tsunami is one geological event, but its effect on each country is shaped by its own exposure and capacity to respond.

The first task here is to identify basic global trends that are already evident and are likely to persist past 2030. As with an event like a tsunami, exposure to these trends will differ, as will capacity of each country to respond. Since they are trends rather than single events, each political community is likely to adapt its response over time and to develop a characteristic path. But the trends are global, so the responses can be compared.

The second task is to consider the general domestic challenges presented by each of these trends. Global trends will also reshape the international context and therefore present new challenges to international relations, but we will concentrate here on their likely domestic impacts.

Finally we will consider how these trends might interact and shape the global context of comparative politics. Hitherto the academic study of comparative politics has been dominated by developed countries and especially by the United States. Not only will the problems confronting comparative politics be more global in the future, but the study of comparative politics will be more global as well.

Three Global Trends

The three trends briefly described below are already visible and it is reasonable to expect them to continue for the indefinite future. Of course, the future cannot be known in advance, and trends can change. However, if any of these three trends changes direction, the circumstances and consequences of the directional change would imply a major break from current world dynamics.

1. Globalization

Increasingly, the basic reality of the global environment is that it is horizonless and interactive. In every dimension of life, from information and economics to disease, the natural limits of contact have faded, and the opportunities for mobility have expanded. Nevertheless, globalization is not homogenization. Both personal and group interests remain located, different, and sometimes competitive. Even in a horizonless world attention is limited, and one’s own perspective determines what one wants to see. The lack of natural limits means that the definition of boundaries becomes a more conscious and arbitrary process. Limitless exposure implies both unlimited opportunities but also unlimited vulnerabilities.

2. E-Media
The internet and social media have created a situation in which communication can be costless, instantly sent and received, and with an indefinitely large and varied audience. Each of these characteristics is a tremendous advantage over traditional print and broadcast media. Even in developed and stable political communities e-media has transformed the informational and communications environment. Traditional media are necessarily institutionalized because of their costs and processes of production and distribution, and therefore they must be careful of their funding, their reputations, and of government control. E-media is generally not bound by these considerations. Effective prior censorship is almost impossible. Besides providing instant information e-media can incite and guide action, as demonstrated by the 2011 uprisings in the Middle East.

3. Demography
A global demographic revolution is underway in which all states will experience an aging of their populations, while populations of developing states will also experience increasing life expectancy, productivity, and urbanization. The current gap in per capita wellbeing between developed and developing countries will continue to diminish. It is possible that the post-industrial era of developed states will prove to be the first stage of a general post-productivity societal agenda. In any case, developing states in particular will face increasing challenges from demographic trends, and their wealthier populations meanwhile will make more articulate and sophisticated demands on their governments.

Global challenges to political communities
Globalization, e-media, and demographic change raise distinctive challenges to political communities. Each will respond in its own way, but each will have to confront challenges of identity, governance, and sustainability.

1. Identity
Both the opportunities and the vulnerabilities associated with globalization have a transformative effect on political identity. On the positive side, individuals are not confined to their native community, and the more vivid presence of global information and contact create a sense of being part of a larger world. On the negative side, the “givenness” of one’s communal identity is challenged by the penetration of the external world, creating sense of loss of control. These positive and negative dimensions are rarely separate from one another. Moreover, the identity transformations of one political community can affect the identity challenges of other communities.

Take Taiwan for example. Its population is composed of mingled ethnic layers, including indigenous peoples, early migrants from Fujian, both Han and Hakka, and later Guomindang arrivals from the rest of China. But Taiwanese identity is even more complicated than its ethnic diversity. While fifty years of Japanese occupation was undoubtedly negative and it ended in a disastrous war, many Taiwanese utilized the imposed opportunities of occupation to learn from Japan, and Japanese influence remains strong in Taiwanese culture. Even stronger is the influence of over sixty years of American patronage. There are many Taiwanese educated in the United States and many families who bridge the Pacific. Thus there are many Taiwanese who are biculturally Taiwanese and American. And now in the reform era large numbers of
Taiwanese are long-term residents on the Mainland, especially in Shanghai and Fujian, pursuing careers in joint ventures.

So what does it mean to be Taiwanese? If the national essence of being Taiwanese excludes the influence of all other communities, then many Taiwanese whose lives have been globalized are excluded, and there is not much left that is purely Taiwanese. But to be Taiwanese can inclusive. It can mean more than to be not Japanese, not American, or not Chinese. Taiwan has been an open and inclusive community, although not always by choice. To say that Taiwan is part of China should not require a narrower identity for Taiwan, but rather a larger identity for China.

Other political communities face different identity problems resulting from globalization. The Korean peninsula is split between two governments, one that has encouraged migration and international contact and one that has prevented it. As a result there is an international diaspora of hybrid South Koreans fluent in two cultures. Meanwhile immigration poses complex identity challenges especially in Europe and the United States, while countries supplying the foreign workers have to struggle with problems of exploitation and dependency. Generally speaking, the identity problems facing developing countries result from the rapidity of change, while those of developed countries result from the reduction of their control over their global environment.

The effect of globalization on identity is not simply a national or a personal problem. As localities and ethnic minorities become more exposed to the outside, they can face what appears to be a choice between new opportunities or retaining a familiar sense of community. It is not really a choice, because globalization can be regulated but not prevented. However, the increasing pace of change can increase the urgency of preserving the familiar, especially if the group feels that its autonomy is not respected by the national government.

The identity challenges presented by globalization are a rich field of research for comparative politics, and one in which comparative politics can make a contribution to the self-understanding of political communities. Understanding the causes of identity complexities and of the experience of other countries can help put one’s own problems in perspective. Just as important as general and cross-national investigations is close and empathetic research on individual cases. Identities and their transformations are unique even if the challenges are general.

2. Governance

Governance is the political correlate to the media revolution because all political communities beyond the village level are mediated. Few people in a modern state witness politically relevant events or know personally the leadership. As Walter Lippmann pointed out in his classic book *Public Opinion* written at the beginning of the age of broadcast media in the 1920s, between reality and public opinion lies a vast media space of reports, distractions, myths, stereotypes, and limited choices, and this space is structured by the available processes of transmission.¹ In the 1920s the new ability of government to utilize mass media for its own purposes was particularly attractive to the Fascists. Mussolini was primarily a propagandist. And of course the option of official control of media is attractive to all governments, especially in wartime. Beyond government manipulation, the cost and complexity of mass media has usually

tied it to elite and establishment interests, and the power of media moguls such as Rupert Murdoch sometimes raises the question of whether the media is manipulating the government. Of course, there is a reality beyond the media, and mythmakers can become their own victims. Mussolini made the mistake of believing his own propaganda concerning the strength of the Italian army.\(^2\)

The key characteristics of e-media—instant transmission, costless, and broadcast—each create new opportunities and challenges for mediated political communities. Moreover, the difficulty of controlling e-media creates special problems for governments to the extent that they rely on official control of media. Instant transmission gives the advantages of freshness and immediacy to e-media. Print media everywhere is losing audience to e-media. Censorship cannot intervene between sending and receiving. Content censorship of e-media is crude and easily evaded. Even traditional broadcast media and the web pages of print media are forced to simplify their production processes in order to avoid becoming “old news.” Prior censorship of traditional media, where it occurs, is the most problematic component of the news production process because review by censors takes time and restricts coverage. The more interesting and unexpected the news, the more censorship will delay official media and cause it to lose attention and credibility. Moreover, the combination of mobile phones and social media have transformed the capacity for quick, spontaneous group action.

Since e-media has no cost per message and a small cost for a computer or smart phone, the capacity to broadcast information and opinion is in the hands of almost every person. On the positive side, e-media opens up media participation to the whole political community, not just the government and the media establishment. But there is also an expanded field for misinformation and manipulation. Government is faced with a more diverse and volatile media environment between itself and the citizenry. Do the arguments that John Stuart Mill makes for the freedom of personal opinion\(^3\) apply to e-media? Do governments have a responsibility to encourage and enforce responsibility, and if so, what are its limits? A recent case that raises governance questions is the American U-Tube video “The Innocence of Muslims” that sparked anti-American riots in the Middle East and contributed to the death of an American ambassador in Libya.\(^4\)

In cases where the government has a monopoly on official media the capacity of e-media to broadcast to anyone is a special challenge. When broadcast and print media are controlled by the government rumor becomes the essential but informal channel of unofficial information, but previously rumor was person-to-person. E-media makes rumor instantly and publicly available. Since rumor has greater credibility as well as a broader scope than official media, e-media is especially attractive and powerful. Official media thus loses its control of information. Moreover, the gap between official information and e-media information increases public distrust of the official story. Whereas in the past official media could control the public’s image of the government, in an e-media environment the limitations of official media detract from government credibility and image.

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3. Sustainability
Sustainability is a term usually associated with environmental issues such as resource exhaustion and global warming. While this dimension of sustainability is extremely important, demographic change will be a less obvious but equally important source of sustainability challenges over the next forty years. We will consider demographic changes first and then environmental sustainability. Finally, we will raise a basic question about possible changes in the function of the economy.

Increasing longevity and the costs of urban child-rearing are changing the global demographic situation. According to UN estimates, the global median age will change from its current 29 years to 38 years by 2050, an increase of one-third. One hundred countries, including all developed countries, will have median ages above 40. The age shift will be most acute in developed countries. Europe’s median age is expected to be 46 years; in 2011 Japan’s median age was already 45, and it is expected to increase to 52. The “middle-aged European” of 2050 is already 6 years old; the “middle-aged Japanese is already 12. Japan and Germany are projected to have more than ten percent of their populations over 80 by 2050. Moreover, Japan’s population is expected to decline by twenty percent from its 2011 level.

While developed countries such as Japan will offer the most extreme cases of demographic shift, developing countries will experience the sharpest demographic challenges. Urbanization raises the cost of child-rearing and removes the security incentive associated with large rural families, thus reducing the birthrate. As people move to the cities to become more prosperous and more productive, the process of urbanization increases their labor power even though the result—a highly urbanized population—will ultimately live longer past retirement and have fewer children. Throughout the developing world the number of people of working age (25 to 59) is at an all-time high. Thus there is a spike in labor productivity as the population moves to the cities, followed by a large demographic burden on a smaller workforce. This surge-and-decline effect will be particularly strong in China because of population control, but it can be expected throughout the developing world. China is expected to have a hundred million people aged 80 or above by 2050, and its median age will be 49, higher than Europe or the United States. Two corollaries of this problem are that maximum growth policies will be increasingly ineffective and that the welfare burden on government and society is likely to rise sharply. Fortunately developed countries are currently further along on the same demographic path and their experience and policies can be studied.

Demographic change is not simply a matter of age. As populations become more urban, more prosperous, and better educated their demands on government become more varied and sophisticated. A good example is the evolution of food policy priorities in China from food sufficiency to food quality. More generally, an urban population requires more effective rule of law, more government transparency, and greater avenues of participation. Moreover, as citizens and enterprises become more...

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6 Ibid., p. xiii.
7 Ibid., p. 109.
wealthy they have more at stake in government policy. Proper management of the diversity of society becomes the basic governmental responsibility.\(^8\)

Environmental problems of sustainability are also increasingly important. These include controlling the side effects of production such as air and water pollution. More fundamentally, as the capacity to exploit resources begins to exceed their supply, government resource policy must change from encouraging exploitation to managing sustainable exploitation. The situation is perhaps most obvious in fisheries. With many resources, including off-shore fisheries, the problem of managing resources is further complicated by the need for international cooperation. The problem of reducing greenhouse gases is particularly difficult because preventing global warming is a global public good.

Perhaps we can combine the demographic and environmental trends into a new attitude toward the function of the economy. If economics is defined as the pursuit and allocation of scarce resources, then the natures both of the pursuit and of the scarcity are changing. As the population shifts toward post-retirement, the focus of the pursuit of resources shifts from the labor to produce them toward the entitlement of non-producers, from production to distribution. Moreover, as sustainability replaces maximum growth as the primary policy goal, the problem of scarcity shifts from capacity to produce to management of finite resources. Expansion of resource exploitation has driven the development of the modern world since 1500, but perhaps we are in a new era in which management of resources is more important. Innovation will undoubtedly continue to discover new resources and new methods of both exploitation and conservation, but the pattern is more likely to be intensive advance than extensive advance.

Interaction of global trends

Globalization, e-media, and demography can be analyzed as separate trends but in reality they interact. Moreover, the loss of horizons affects not only the objects of comparative politics research but also comparative politics as an academic discipline. The combination of shared research problems and the spread of advanced political science research around the world create the potential for globalized comparative politics. But the mission of globalized political science should be different from the America-centered political science from which it originated. We conclude by discussing first the interaction effects of global trends and then the global mission of comparative politics.

Perhaps the most dramatic interaction effect of the trends just discussed is between e-media and identity. As globalization increases the exposure of political communities to the outside world, e-media sharpens and amplifies community reactions. E-media reactions are especially acute when a foreign threat or insult is perceived, and they can lead to public demonstrations that raise governance issues. A recent example would be anti-Japanese demonstrations in China over the Japanese government’s actions on the Diaoyutai islands. A similar example would be anti-Chinese demonstrations in Hanoi regarding administrative changes in the Xisha (Paracel)

islands. As globalization brings nations into more frequent contact, e-media creates a broad and unstructured domestic audience. Moreover, the e-media reaction to an event can become its own lead story, thus snowballing the event. For its part, the government can neither ignore public opinion nor can it simply act impulsively. Globalization raises the risks and collateral damage created by impetuous action. Thus governments are increasingly caught between a volatile public and the need for international cooperation.

The relationship between globalization and demographics is perhaps more comforting. An aging world population not only reduces the workforce, it reduces the potential for military mobilization. Moreover, the increasing budgetary needs of a retired population puts pressure on military expenditures. However, the different demographic profiles of the developed and developing world create a situation in which already urbanized populations have begun their workforce decline while urbanizing populations are enjoying their temporary workforce bulge and therefore more rapid growth. Thus the gap in per-capita income between the developed and developing world will become smaller. For example, the economy of China is expected to surpass the United States in the next few years. These relative changes have important effects in international relations, but they have domestic consequences as well, since the shift in relative positions affects the identities of the political communities.

The combination of e-media and a more prosperous and urban population is perhaps the most important interaction for China. E-media has democratized communication at the same time that urbanization has concentrated and enriched the population, thereby expanding its political expectations and activity. The tutelary approach to governance introduced by Sun Yat-sen is not adequate for an attentive and diverse population. Government needs to regain credibility by increasing transparency and participation, otherwise the gap between e-media opinion and official information will increase alienation. “Performance legitimacy” is inadequate in the long term because it does not produce system loyalty. Sustainable politics is as important as sustainable economics.

**Globalizing comparative politics**

While countries have long been interested in how the politics of their neighbors worked, comparative politics as a sub-discipline of political science grew in the United States as a result of the American situation after World War II. In 1945 the United States produced over half of the world’s GDP, and by 1948 it was committed to a global role in opposition to the Soviet Union. However, the American government was unfamiliar with the domestic situations of the world’s governments, and unlike Western imperialism it preferred to lead independent states rather than submissive colonies. Thus the global political role of the United States in the Cold War led to the emergence of comparative politics as well as area studies more generally.

Although comparative politics approached the study of other nations empirically, its perspective was that of the United States. Thus the chief concern of the 1950s and 1960s was political development, with the implicit expectations that political and economic development were linked and with the right guidance all states could be democracies like the United States.⁹ Any revolutionary movement was a distracting

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disease from the correct path. Communist states were shunned as totalitarian, and were not usually included in general surveys of world politics. As the American war in Vietnam dragged on, the problems of domestic unrest were taken more seriously, but as problems of insurgency rather than as expressions of more fundamental problems with externally-imposed political solutions.

The post-Cold War era produced two contrasting strands of development. On the one hand, the collapse of European communism and the spread of democratic governments produced a feeling of validation concerning the Western (American) model. The sense of triumph was well expressed by Francis Fukuyama’s declaration of the “end of history.” On the other hand, Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” showed a concern that major parts of the world would not simply become more like the United States, and therefore that fundamental conflicts were inevitable.

Of course, underneath these grand trends there has been much specific research on individual countries as well as on specific phenomena across a number of countries. Moreover, the growth of international cooperation on policy problems has led to many useful studies of how countries are coping with similar problems. Nevertheless, the study of comparative politics would benefit from involving the perspectives of a variety of states. For example, if it is useful to study politics from an outside, disengaged perspective, then the understanding of American politics has suffered from the American perspective that has dominated comparative politics. If, on the other hand, it is useful to understand world politics from one’s own national perspective, then the global study of comparative politics should not simply cluster around American issues but should seriously reflect on, for instance, what China needs to know about the rest of the word and about global issues.

The primary example of the utility of diverse perspectives is the problem of democratization. The Greek root of “democracy” means “the power of the people,” but in 1942 Joseph Schumpeter redefined democracy as a competitive process of voting to determine leadership, and since then American comparative politics has identified democracy with electoral competition. But a more general notion of democracy is needed to address the full range of global issues concerning the relationship of popular power to public authority. Is it possible to have a democratic revolution, and if so, what are the strengths and limitations of the resulting public authority? Is process the only criterion, or do results matter? If electoral competition produces chaos, stalemate, or structural neglect of majority (or minority) interests, is it still democratic? Is there a difference between bourgeois and socialist democracy? Is there any common ground between the two? These questions do not have easy answers, and with globalization all have become more complicated. They are best addressed from a variety of national perspectives.

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Globalization produces increased contact and common problems, but it does not melt all identities and interests into a global identity. Similarly, a global comparative politics should find much to learn and much to talk about between countries, but each researcher will proceed from his or her own perspective. As a social science, comparative politics and political science more generally must be founded on a respect for difference, and respect for the differences of others is the key to self-respect in the global community of scholarship.