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A Review of "Comparative Political Systems",  
by Gabriel A. Almond, *The Journal of Politics*,  
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Almond's "Comparative Political Systems", written in 1956, is a timely comparison and categorization of different political systems based on sociological concepts which combine and touch on aspects not included in particularity, political system classification, and regional approaches (392). The political system that Almond defines is sociological in the sense that it studies how institutions and norms affect (observable) behavior. He identifies four distinct political systems (Anglo-American, Pre-Industrial, Totalitarian, and Continental European), acknowledging that these are simply the most common, and that they do not necessarily comprise all political systems (393). To define these political systems, Almond uses borrowed terminology from the political science and sociology fields as well as his own invented terminology. The text was quite influential for the time period when it was written, and while the political systems described may not necessarily still hold today, the process of classification and the tools used to construct these political systems are still very relevant for our modern classification of political systems. In this sense, the article holds a timeless quality in addition to its timely design.

The terminology defined in the text are useful to understand the categorization of the Anglo-American, Pre-Industrial, Totalitarian, and Continental European systems. First of all, the political role means what a political unit does, why it does it, and how it influences other roles. In a word, this is the patterning of interactions, but unlike a political science definition of interaction, what is meant here is the broadest sense of interactions in the public domain (394). Second, the definition of system is basically the agglomeration of patterned roles which influence a political decision in a legitimate/legal way. To be blunt, it looks at the different roles in the political decision making process which are accepted as the way government works. This differs from other social orders which act illegally, or outside of the legitimate political system (395). Third, the orientation to political action looks at the discrimination, emotional investment, and way in which individuals use perception, preference, and values to create a political position (396). Lastly, the political culture is the pattern of these orientations beyond the scope of a political system. Almond mentions that unlike a national character, a political culture emphasizes two lacking qualities of national character, namely the pattern of discrimination and the socialization of political positions (how one is influenced to develop political positions). This is an especially important aspect, because unlike the terms political party and ideology, which

are minimalist in character, the political culture takes in broad aspects of society (397). Using these definitions, Almond goes about describing the four political systems devised by himself.

The Anglo-American political systems are described to be homogenous and have a secular political culture/multi-valued, rational, and experimental culture (398). Even with the above terms, this seems at first a bit difficult to understand, but as Almond begins to put these terms in the praxis, his picture of the Anglo-American political system begins to illuminate. The homogenous aspect reflects that the system is legitimate, accepted, and used for political purposes. For instance, it is mentioned that these systems all care about freedom, mass welfare, and security. First, The homogeneity questions only how to deal with these issues, it does not question the system. Second, Almond calls it rational, because the political actors play the system like a game, and in this game they act rational in achieving their aims; i.e. they will act carefully when the stakes are high. Third, The description of the culture as experimental refers to the idea that politicians exchange votes for a hypotheses of how to implement ideas, and the resulting legislation is the test phase of the hypotheses. Fourth, The secularization refers to the abundance and independent nature of roles. Each entity is thus autonomous, but it is interdependent for the system to function. It is bureaucratized in that various interests are organized and act in a specific process. In addition, the different roles are explicitly defined and thus generate a large degree of stability. All of this allows for a diffusion of power throughout the system that makes these states predictable to an extent (399).

The Pre-Industrial political system contrasts greatly to the Anglo-American system. It is a mix of political cultures and systems. What you get is a mix of Western ideas of democracy interwoven with prior indigenous political systems, like a ruling family. This seems irrational in the Western sense of government, because the functions of political units like the army, parliament, and pressure groups tend to take on roles that an Anglo-American political system would categorize more efficiently--the army for instance would not serve in a legislative capacity in an Anglo-American government, but it might in a Pre-Industrial system (400). The different political cultures in these systems generally generate a degree of nationalism for each system and an anger toward the other political cultures. It is therefore described as an unstable and unpredictable system archetype (401).

The roles structure has no patterned system of bureaucracy, and hence no real structure (402). As mentioned above, the army could take on any number of roles. The competing mixture of political roles makes it easier to identify these states and their unstable processes.

The Totalitarian political system may look homogenous, but this is a facade of sorts due to the central control of the system. There is therefore no way to actually measure the acceptance of the system. It is non-consensual. It does not require acceptance in the traditional sense, because it enforces this by conforming or creating political apathy through means of a rational bureaucracy and a monopoly of communications and violence technology (403). Almond quotes several social scientists as typifying totalitarianism as having no legitimate state, because there is no stable delegation of power among the bureaucracy, party, army, and big business. Basically, the top retains the real power by isolating each personal unit, as to not give it a sense of solidarity in its role. This is handled through three characteristics in the role structure: 1. The state coerces individuals through the "enemy of state" concept, whereby individuals may be ratted out or removed for going against the state; 2. The instability of power roles means that through coercion, no other center of power will emerge; and 3. The facade of policy-making norms and institutions satisfy the need for legitimization of one's state (405).

The Continental European system is described as having a fragmented political culture. In essence, the various political cultures may have a common root within a national culture, but they represent different periods of domination, for instance, Almond mentions the Catholic, middle class, and industrial subcultures as being the dominant three. Within these different cultures there exist divides between semi-secular and anti-secular, left and right, and non-representation (406). So in contrast to the political parties of an Anglo-American system, the parties in a Continental European system represent different faiths in an ideological battle. So instead of a politician offering a vote in an exchange for a policy, a vote represents someone who represents that ideology with no real hope of changing the system. The role structure is therefore in a gridlock. Individuals are not the political entities as in the Anglo-American system. Instead, the different sub-cultures are the entities. Almond says that any bargaining that "does occur tends to take the form of under-the-counter transactions" (407). This is basically a sell out to one's ideology. These

different parties have mutual relationships with their sub-cultures, each shaping the way the other defines itself. But since the defining role is immobility, much of the policy making lies in the bureaucracy. Finally, the immobile role structure may allow for a charismatic leader to sweep away all the ideologies and refashion the system into a totalitarian system (408).

This text uses very intricate wording to detail new abstract ideas of how to view different political systems. This makes the actual reading of the document somewhat difficult to understand, because one is forced to take the newly defined words which Almond uses and immediately put them to use, as he describes his four classifications. Although one tends to be a bit confused by the way these words are to be understood, after getting through the last portion, one finally sees their practicality and function.

There are several aspects which Almond does not explain. Almond does not give his explanation for defining the four systems as Anglo-American, Pre-Industrial, Totalitarian, and Continental European. While the totalitarian system may be entirely clear, one wonders how Almond comes up with Anglo-American, Pre-Industrial, and Continental European. Certainly, pre-industrial societies may fit the description of the Pre-Industrial political system, but it is not clear that all pre-industrial societies have this form of system--which may be more true today than at that time. He mentions that the Continental European system excludes the lowlands and Nordic countries due to their mixture of Western systems, but he never addresses them and creates a new group. This represents the timeliness of this article. If we were to apply the same ideas today, we may end up with a post-totalitarian political system in Eastern Europe, which like the Pre-Industrial system includes several political cultures in competition with each other, and like the Continental European system has parties formed around ideologies, but unlike it, parties also formed around interests.

The concept that the Continental European system is unstable was also a false prediction. True, the Weimar Republic would have proved his theory correct, but coalition governments in Europe have performed quite well in the past fifty years. Even with the rise of extremist political parties, there has been no repeat of the instability and corruption characterized by the Weimar Republic. This may be Almond's largest bias--that his view of the Anglo-American system makes it sound more superior to the Continental European

system. In reality the political game of the Anglo-American system can be confusing for voters as to make them irrational. For instance, a social-democrat may vote for the Democratic party in the United States, because he knows it to represent the Left and the interests of trade unions. However, because of this “political game” concept, the Democrats may easily sell out the social-democrat for neo-liberal interests. Stability should therefore be perceived as getting what you vote for, but also to be sure that who you vote for represents what you want, and in that regard, the Continental European system is superior to the Anglo-American system.

Almond's article seems most useful in the definitions and terminology it bring into use. The four political systems are indeed important classifications for political scientists, but as Almond mentions, changes in roles will differentiate one system from the others. The events of the Cold War, post Cold War, and globalization have changed roles in once totalitarian and pre-industrial systems into new political systems.

#### Works Cited:

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