Introduction to Comparative Politics
POL S V1501 Spring 2018
TR 5:25-6:40

Instructor
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Introduction
The course provides a broad overview of the comparative politics subfield. Particular attention will be paid to understanding differences between democracies and autocracies, on one hand, and between different forms of democracy, on the other. What influences whether countries become and/or stay democratic? Why do we care if a country is democratic or not? Do democracies perform better (or worse) than non-democracies in policy areas of importance? What is “good representation” and how do political institutions affect the prospects for achieving it? How does the choice of democratic institutions influence the prospects for stable and successful democracy? Are there particular institutional forms that are appropriate in particular contexts, or do cultural factors overwhelm institutional considerations?

Course Requirements
Your grade will be based on the following:

Exams (25% each). There will be three in-class exams covering the lectures and assigned readings. You must sit these exams at the scheduled time. If you cannot do the exam because you are sick, please provide a note from your doctor stating that your health prevented you from taking the exam. You will be responsible for understanding the major arguments that are discussed in class lectures (including current events discussions) and in the required readings. All exams are cumulative. The exams will be held in class on:

- February 15
- March 29
- April 26

Written Assignment (10%): You will write a paper about institutional design in a particular country. The final paper should be no longer than 1500 words, not counting
the bibliography. The final paper will be due at 9am on May 3rd. We will circulate a
description of the assignment and a list of eligible countries on April 5th. You must
clear your proposed paper topic with your TA by April 12th.

*Discussion sections (15%).* Discussion sections begin the second week of class.
Section times and locations will be posted in the on-line course catalog and all
students must enroll in a section. The purpose of the sections is to provide students
an opportunity to clarify questions they have related to the readings and lectures, and
to probe more deeply topics of particular interest. Discussion section leaders will
establish polices for grades in their sections.

**Procedure for requesting a re-grade on an exam.**

If are concerned about how you have been graded on an exam, the first step is to bring your
concerns to your TA. The policy for doing so is the following:

1. Describe in writing what you feel constitutes the correct answer.
2. Describe in writing why/how your work meets the standard described in (1).

Your TA will then give the materials to the TA who graded the work, who will read and evaluate
your arguments and reply in writing. If you ask to have the grade for your work reconsidered, *the
grader has the right to change your grade to a better grade, a worse grade, or to leave it
unchanged.*
Course materials.

Readings published in journals are available by going through Columbia Library and are easily accessible from on-campus by simply searching on-line for the article. Readings not available in on-line journals will be posted in Courseworks in the “Files/Readings” folder. There are no materials to purchase.

Course outline

We will try hard to stick closely to the schedule below, but things can get a bit off track… Any changes to reading assignments will be announced at least one week in advance.

January 16: General introduction

January 18/23: The state.

Lecture topics include:

- What are states (and how do they differ from nations)?
- Why do states exist?
  - Life without a state
  - The problem with functionalism and the need for microfoundations
  - Using formal models to study politics

Readings:

- Macartan Humphreys, *Political Games*, Chapters 1 and 4
- Kenneth Shepsle and Mark Bonchek, *Analyzing Politics*, chapters 8 and 10

January 25. State breakdown: Violence and civil wars

Lecture topics include:

- Why are some countries prone to conflict while other places are relatively peaceful?
- When and how do politicians use violence to advance their goals?
- What are the individual motivations to engage in political violence?

Readings:

January 30: Autocracies

Lecture topics:

- Autocracies and their varieties
- Autocratic performance

Readings:


February 1: Democracies

Lecture topics:

- What is a democracy?
- How do we know if a country is democratic or not?

Readings:


Robert Dahl, Polyarchy, chapter 1

Adam Przeworski, et al, Democracy and Development, Chapter 1

February 6/8: The effects of democracy

Lecture topics:

- Why do we care if a country is democratic or not?
  - The ephemeral “will of the majority”
  - Redistribution, growth, peace, corruption, inequality, happiness and other stuff

Required readings:

Macartan Humphreys, Political Games, Chapters 8,9,12

Sen, Development as Freedom, chapters 6-7


**February 13: Democratic transitions**

Lecture topics

Democracies in the world over time.
What influences whether countries transition to democracy?
Is Islam compatible with democracy?

Required readings:


Choose one:

Michael L. Ross, “Does Oil Hinder Democracy?” *World Politics* 53 (April 2001)


**February 15 -- First exam**

**February 20: Democratic backsliding**

Lecture topics:

How would you know if a country is slipping out of democracy into autocracy?

Is this happening in democracies around the world today? Should we worry about it?

Readings


*Choose ONE of the following two articles:*
February 27: Electoral laws and party systems

Lecture topics:

What are the different ways to organize voting and elections?

Reading:

William Clark, Matt Golder and Sona Golder. *Principles of Comparative Politics*, Ch. 13, Elections and Electoral Systems

March 1: Citizen participation

Lecture topics:

What factors influence the number and types of individuals that turn out to vote?

Readings


March 6/8. Voting behavior

Lecture topics:

Individual attributes and voting behavior
The broader context and voting behavior

Readings:


**March 13/15: Spring recess**

**March 20/22:** Separation of powers and the nature of parliamentary and presidential forms of government

Lecture topics:

What are the institutional differences between parliamentary and presidential government?
Is the US president institutionally strong or weak?
How do governments form in parliamentary systems? What determines their survival?

Required readings:

Federalist papers, 47-48 (Madison) and 70 (Hamilton) (E-reserves)

William Clark, Matt Golder and Sona Golder. *Principles of Comparative Politics*, Ch. 11, Parliamentary Presidential and Semi-Presidential Democracies

**March 27. Federalism and decentralization**

Lecture topic:

How and why do central governments devolve power to subnational ones?

Required readings:

Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy*, chapter 10


**March 29 Exam 2**
April 3. Putting the pieces together: Approaches to constitutional design

Lecture topics:

What normative criteria might be employed for thinking about the design of constitutions?

What are useful frameworks for describing how particular constitutional designs achieve particular normative objectives?

Required readings:


Powell, G. Bingham, Jr, Elections as Instruments of Democracy, chapters 1-2


April 5. Constitutional design in the European Union (tentative)

Lecture topic:

How does the European Union operate and what sort of "democracy" is it?

Required reading:

"The European Union and Representative Government," in Representative Government in Modern Europe (fifth edition), Michael Gallagher, Michael Laver and Peter Mair.

April 10. Political representation

Lecture topics:

What is “good representation” and how do political institutions affect the prospects for achieving it?

Required readings:


**April 12. Inequality and redistribution**

Lecture topics:

- How should we conceptualize the nature and role of welfare states?
- How do welfare states – and in particular the degree of redistribution -- differ across countries?
- What explains these differences?

Required readings:

Alesina and Glaeser, *Fighting Poverty in the US and Europe*, chapters 4 and 6


**April 17. Democratic institutions and stability**

Lecture topics.

- How does the choice of democratic institutions influence the prospects for stable and successful democracy?

Required readings:


April 19: *Undue influence? Who shapes policy outcomes?*

Lecture topics

What is undue influence and how do particular groups exercise it?

Readings:


Gilens, Martin. “Inequality and democratic responsiveness.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 69(5): 778-96


April 24. *The challenges of ethnically divided societies*

Lecture topic:

What are problems challenges posed by governing ethnically diverse societies and how should they be addressed?

Readings:


April 26. *Third in-class exam*