

POSC 120: Democracy and Dictatorship

Carleton College, Winter 2026



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Winter Office Hours:

MW 12:45-4:00pm

F 9:30-11:30am, 1:30-3:00pm

Please book appointments via [Google calendar](#) (link also available on Moodle). Please double-check calendar for up-to-date availability

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Course Description

This class introduces the study of comparative politics, one of the subfields within political science that focuses on the political dynamics of other countries. There are almost 200 independent states in the world, and within this group of countries, there is dazzling variety in institutional types, policies, political attitudes, levels of citizen participation, and economic performance. In this class, we will try to understand (1) how and why this diversity exists and (2) what the consequences are of these choices/differences for people in different societies.

During the term, we will entertain some of the foundational questions that interest comparative politics specialists, including:

- Why are some countries more democratic and others more autocratic? What makes a country likely to be a democracy or be a dictatorship? How easy is it for countries to transition from one type of government to the other? What makes some democracies resistant and resilient to authoritarianism and what makes backsliding and breakdown more likely?
- How do different societies embed their values and social norms in the political “rules of the game” and what consequences do these rules have for who has power, who is excluded, and the types of policies that are passed?

Learning Goals

By the end of this course, you will be able to:

1. Understand and apply core concepts to analyze comparative politics.

You will be able to define and use key concepts—e.g., state, nation, democracy, authoritarianism, and presidentialism—to describe and analyze the causes, consequences, and diversity of political institutions and processes as well as their implications.

2. Engage with and critique scholarly literature.

You will read and interpret political science research, identify the author’s main argument and evidence, and critically evaluate the work while considering other scholarship and empirical data.

3. Apply comparative methods to political analysis

You will learn how to use the comparative method to select cases, identify variables, and develop explanations for political patterns and events.

4. Craft persuasive, evidence-based arguments using data

You will formulate clear, well-structured arguments that integrate qualitative and quantitative evidence, analyze data effectively, and consider alternative arguments. You will present your ideas in both oral and written forms.

Assignments

Your grade for this class will be based on the following six elements:

Participation	10%
Midterm exam	15%
Final exam	20%
Op-ed analysis	15%
Data analysis presentation	20%
Comparative research design	20%

Participation (10%)

Participation requires you to (a) be a good citizen in the classroom **and** (b) contribute in an active way to class discussions and debates. Being a good citizen involves being present, on time, fully engaged in our tasks, and respectful of everyone else in the room. Active contribution requires you to be more than a passive observer. We are learning in a collective setting, and the insights, ideas, questions, and critiques that each person brings helps make the learning experience richer and more valuable for everyone. Speaking up--in small-group discussions, large-group discussions, simulations, mini-debates, presentations, and other classroom activities—is key.

Midterm exam (15%)

There will be an in-class midterm exam that will cover material from the first half of the term, focusing mainly on key concepts, theories, and debates. There will be three sections: identification of key concepts, short answer, and an essay question. You will be provided a study guide ahead of time to help you focus your efforts when reviewing key material. Those requiring extra time as part of a documented accommodation should check in with me proactively to discuss options for taking the exam that will meet your needs.

Final exam (20%)

The final exam will cover the material from the whole term, though it will focus more heavily on the content that we cover in weeks 6-10. The format will be the same as for the midterm exam, and will also involve a study guide to help you review efficiently. This will be a self-scheduled exam. Those requiring extra time as part of a documented accommodation should check in with me proactively to discuss options for taking the exam that will meet your needs.

Op-ed analysis (15%)

In this assignment, you will demonstrate your understanding of the foundational ideologies that we discuss at the beginning of the term by analyzing a given op-ed to analyze how values and assumptions about what governments ought to prioritize in their policies shape political arguments. You will also think about how to craft counterarguments from a different perspective. You will revise this paper after receiving feedback before receiving your final grade. You will also be required to meet at least once with the writing assistant during the paper writing/revision process.

Data analysis presentation (20%)

In this assignment, you will work in small groups to research the relationship between regime type (i.e., whether a country is a democracy or dictatorship) and a particular political “good” that we might care about, like economic growth, political stability, gender equality, public health, happiness, etc. Each group will investigate whether the type of government seems to matter for achieving a particular political good. To do this, groups will do background research on how scholars and policymakers think about their particular “good,” decide how to will measure their chosen concept, and work collectively to gather cross-national data to assess whether democracy or dictatorship is better at delivering this political good. Each member of the group will also do a deeper dive into a single case study to add some qualitative details to your analysis.

Your group will put together a presentation for class, complete with supporting visuals, and field questions from your peers. You will also turn in an individual report that focuses on your individual case study that discusses how your case relates to the larger pattern of data that your group discovered. Your grade will be based on both the quality of the group presentation (12%) and your individual case study (8%). In addition, you will have the opportunity to earn extra credit if your contribution to the collective work of the group is particularly significant or impactful as measured by the feedback of your peers.

Comparative research design (20%)

For this assignment, you will create a mini-research study to test a hypothesis about comparative politics. You will pick a hypothesis from a list given to you, identify relevant variables, do background research on possible countries that could be paired together, and then select two countries to test your selected hypothesis. This project will be broken into smaller components to give you opportunities to get feedback along the way before the final submission is due. You are encouraged to meet with the writing assistant once during the lead-up to the final paper.

More information about each of the written assignments and presentations will be provided in class, along with assessment rubrics. All written work must conform to the class style guide and use the American Political Science Review’s citation style. More details are available on Moodle.

Course Policies

Please familiarize yourself with the course policies that apply to this class, all of which are available on Moodle. You will find more information about my attendance policy, late work, accommodations, academic honesty, devices in class, and use of AI tools in your work. **It is your responsibility to read through these policies.** Pleading ignorance is no defense against violating the policies.

Course Schedule

All of the assigned materials are available on Moodle. Please complete the readings in advance of class and bring a copy of the materials with you to aid in discussion (hard copy or electronic version are both fine). Your job is to read carefully and actively, paying attention to the key arguments that each author makes and noting down how they build and support their claims with reasoning and evidence. You should also jot down notes about points that you find unclear, questions that the material raises for you, and potential connections that you see with other readings/ideas from class.

The readings represent a variety of writing in political science. Some will be more accessible and easier for you to grasp while others may be more abstract and require more effort on your part. I expect you to put forward your best effort at understanding the key points in the readings, even if you don't feel you have complete mastery. This is one area where AI-assisted tools like Notebook LM can be helpful to you, though such tools are only a complement to your own reading, not a substitute.

There is a folder with reading guides for each class session. Using these guides is optional, but they may help you better understand the core ideas and arguments of the assigned texts before coming to class. (N.B. The number in the parenthesis each class is the approximate number of pages of reading for that day, excluding bibliographies and appendices).

Foundations of Comparative Politics

Date	Topic	Readings and Assignments
January 5	Introduction to the class	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read through this syllabus and jot down any questions you have • Familiarize yourself with the course Moodle page and figure out how to make an appointment for office hours. • Review all course policies on Moodle. If you have questions, post them on the Moodle forum so I can answer/clarify for everyone in class.
January 7 (~21)	Ideological foundations: liberalism and conservatism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch lecture video on ideologies • Shorten, Andrew. 2014. "Liberalism." In <i>Political Ideologies: An Introduction</i>, Robert Eccleshalt, et. al, eds. London: Routledge, pp. 19-46. [Read excerpt] • Andreasson, Stefan. 2014. "Conservatism." In <i>Political Ideologies: An Introduction</i>, Robert Eccleshalt, et. al, eds. London: Routledge, pp. 47-70. [Read excerpt]
January 9 (~34)	Ideological foundations: socialism and fascism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geoghegan, Vincent. 2014. "Socialism." In <i>Political Ideologies: An Introduction</i>, Robert Eccleshalt, et. al, eds. London: Routledge, pp. 72-98. [Read excerpt] • Wilford, Rick. 2014. "Fascism." In <i>Political Ideologies: An Introduction</i>, Robert Eccleshalt, et. al, eds. London: Routledge, pp. 121-152. [Read excerpt]

Building Blocks of Comparative Analysis

January 12 (~18)	Origins of the modern state system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch lecture video on states • Tilly, Charles. 1985. "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime." In <i>Bringing the State Back In</i>, Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 161-191. <p style="text-align: center;">Op-ed assignment handed out</p>
January 14 (~18)	States vs. nations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connor, Walker. 2018. <i>Ethnonationalism</i>. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. [Read excerpt] • Renan, Ernest. 1990 [1882]. "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?" <i>Oeuvres Complètes</i>, vol 1: 887-807, reprinted in <i>Nation and Narration</i>, Homi K. Bhabha, ed. [trans. Martin Thom]. London and New York: Routledge, read selected passages.
January 16 (~39)	States and nations outside of Europe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch lecture video on colonialism • Herbst, Jeffrey. 2000. <i>States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control</i>. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, ch. 4.
January 19 (~17)	Application: natural resources and rentier states	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schwarz, Rolf. 2008. "The Political Economy of State formation in the Arab Middle East: Rentier States, Economic Reform and Democratization." <i>Review of International Political Economy</i>, 15(4): 599-621. <p style="text-align: center;">Op-ed assignment due on Moodle, 7pm</p>

Democracies

January 21 (~22)	Defining democracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schmitter, Philippe C. and Terry Lynn Karl. 1991. "What Democracy Is...and Is Not." <i>Journal of Democracy</i>, 2(3): 75-88. • Sen, Amartya Kumar. 1999. "Democracy as a Universal Value." <i>Journal of Democracy</i>, 10(3): 3-17. <p style="text-align: center;">Group data assignment handed out</p>
January 23 (~21)	Origins of democracy: modernization theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch lecture video on modernization theory • Inglehart, Ronald and Christian Welzel. 2010. "Changing Mass Priorities: The Link between Modernization and Democracy." <i>Perspectives on Politics</i>, 8(2): 551-567. • Przeworski, Adam and Fernando Limongi. 1997. "Modernization: Theories and Facts." <i>World Politics</i>, 49(2): 155-183. [You are not responsible for the technical appendices]

January 26 (~19)	Origins of democracy: social class	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Moore, Barrington. 1993. <i>Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World</i>. Boston: Beacon Press, pp. 413-432.
January 28 (~50)	Democratic backsliding and breakdown	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Linz, Juan J. 1978. <i>The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Crisis, Breakdown, and Reequilibration</i>, Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, eds. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 14-23, 27-40. Bermeo, Nancy. 2016. "On Democratic Backsliding." <i>Journal of Democracy</i>, 27(1): 5-19. Svolik, Milan W. 2019. "Polarization vs. Democracy." <i>Journal of Democracy</i>, 30(3): 20-32.
January 30 (~22)	Democratic erosion: polarization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Iyengar, Shanto and Markus Wagner. 2025. "Conceptualizing Affective Polarization." In <i>Handbook of Affective Polarization</i>, Mariano Torcal and Eelco Harteveld, eds. Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, ch. 2 Sign up on Moodle to read ONE of the following chapters from <i>Handbook of Affective Polarization</i>, Mariano Torcal and Eelco Harteveld, eds. Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reiljan, Andres. 2025. "Affective Polarization in Europe." (chapter 8) Moraes, Juan and Sergio Béjar. 2025. "Affective Polarization in Latin America." (chapter 9) Hsiao, Yi-ching and Eric Chen-hua Yu. 2025. "Affective Polarization in East Asia." (chapter 10) <p style="text-align: center;">Op-ed rewrites due, Moodle, 7pm</p>
February 2 (~31)	Democratic erosion: populism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mudde, Cas. 2004. "The Populist Zeitgeist." <i>Government and Opposition</i>, 39(4): 541-563. [Read excerpt] Canovan, Margaret. 1999. "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy." <i>Political Studies</i>, 47: 2-17.
February 4 (~39)	Democratic resilience and consolidation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Merkel, Wolfgang and Anna Lührmann. 2021. "Resilience of Democracies: Responses to Illiberal and Authoritarian Challenges." <i>Democratization</i>, 28(5): 869-884. Gamboa, Laura. 2017. "Opposition at the Margins: Strategies against the Erosion of Democracy in Colombia and Venezuela." <i>Comparative Politics</i>, 49(4): 457-477. Somer, Murat, Jennifer L. McCoy, and Russell E. Luke. 2021. "Pernicious Polarization, Autocratization and Opposition Strategies." <i>Democratization</i> 28(5): 929-948.
February 6	In-class midterm exam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No reading
February 9	Midterm break, no class	

February 11	In-class presentations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No reading <p>Group data project uploads due by beginning of class</p>
February 13	In-class presentations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No reading <p>Mini-research paper assignment handed out</p>

Dictatorships

February 16 (~55)	Varieties of authoritarianism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Watch video on varieties of authoritarianism Guriev, Sergei and Daniel Treisman. 2022. <i>Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century</i>. Princeton: Princeton University Press, ch. 1, 2.
February 18 (~24)	Legitimacy and control in authoritarian regimes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lorch, Jasmin and Bettina Bunk. 2016. "Using Civil Society as an Authoritarian Legitimation Strategy: Algeria and Mozambique in Comparative Perspective." <i>Democratization</i>, 24(6): 987-1005. Nathan, Andrew J. 2003. "China's Changing of the Guard: Authoritarian Resilience." <i>Journal of Democracy</i>, 14(1): 6-17.
February 20 (~27)	Electoral authoritarianism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Levitsky, Steven and Lucan Way. 2020. "The New Competitive Authoritarianism." <i>Journal of Democracy</i>, 31(1): 51-65. Schedler, Andreas. 2002. "Elections Without Democracy: The Menu of Manipulation." <i>Journal of Democracy</i>, 13(2): 36-50.
February 23	NO CLASS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No reading <p>Mechanism worksheet + memo due, 7pm on Moodle</p>

Political Institutions

February 25 (~39)	Presidential and parliamentary systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Watch video on executive/legislative branches Linz, Juan J. 1990. "The Perils of Presidentialism." <i>Journal of Democracy</i>, 1(1): 51-69. Mainwaring, Scott and Matthew S. Shugart. 1997. "Juan Linz, Presidentialism, and Democracy: A Critical Appraisal." <i>Comparative Politics</i>, 29(4): 449-471.
Feb. 27 (~35)	Parties and party systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Boix, Carles. 2007. "The Emergence of Parties and Party Systems." In <i>The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics</i>, Carles Boix and Susan C. Stokes, eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press, ch. 21. Mainwaring, Scott. 1998. "Party Systems in the Third Wave." <i>Journal of Democracy</i>, 9(3): 67-81.

March 2 (~26)	Electoral systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch video on electoral design • Norris, Pippa. 2004. <i>Electoral Engineering: Voting Rules and Political Behavior</i>. New York: Cambridge University Press, Chapter 2. <p style="text-align: right;">Case pairing memo due, 7pm on Moodle</p>
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Economic Development

March 4 (~30)	Economic development in comparative perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch video on development approaches • Gerschenkron, Alexander. 2015 [1960]. "Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective." In <i>The Globalization and Development Reader: Perspectives on Development and Global Change</i>, 2nd edition. J. Timmons Roberts, et. al, eds. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, ch. 4. • Przeworski, Adam and Fernando Limongi. 1993. "Political Regimes and Economic Growth." <i>The Journal of Economic Perspectives</i>, 7(3): 51-69.
March 6 (~25)	Import-substitution industrialization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch video on dependency theory • Kingstone, Peter. 2018. <i>The Political Economy of Latin America</i>, 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, ch. 2.
March 9 (~24)	Export-led industrialization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stiglitz, Joseph E. 1996. "Some Lessons from the East Asian Miracle." <i>The World Bank Research Observer</i>, 11(2): 151-177.
March 11	Wrap-up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No reading <p style="text-align: right;">Final paper due, 7pm on Moodle</p>

The final exam is self-scheduled.