

POLI 130: Introduction to Comparative Politics

Fall 2026

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Instructor Information

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Office Hours: We, 10:15 AM -1:15 PM; Schedule a meeting [here](#).

Class Information

Meeting: Mo/We/Fr

Time: 9:00–9:55 AM

Classroom: Davie Hall — Room 0122

Course Description

Why do some societies build strong, prosperous states while others struggle? Why do certain countries thrive under democracy while others remain trapped in authoritarian rule? What sparks political conflict, instability, or even revolution? Introduction to Comparative Politics provides the tools to understand how politics works around the world. By examining institutions, power struggles, and historical trajectories—and exploring cases from the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Africa—students will uncover why political systems differ, how they change, and what these differences mean for development and everyday life. We will explore the forces that drive political change, the conditions that sustain (or undermine) democracy, and the consequences of these dynamics for societies worldwide.

Along the way, we will tackle some of the most pressing debates in contemporary politics – including democratic backsliding and the growing pressures facing democratic institutions. Through these topics, students will be introduced to the social-scientific study of comparative politics and to the principal method that defines the field: systematic comparison across countries and other political units.

The course is organized around three broad questions. First, we will examine the emergence of modern states, asking why some societies develop strong and economically prosperous states while others do not. Second, we will explore the diversity of political regimes around the world, focusing on the factors that explain the emergence, endurance, and breakdown of democracy and dictatorship. Finally, we will analyze how different institutional arrangements—particularly executive-legislative relations and electoral systems—shape political outcomes across countries. Throughout the semester, students will engage with the core theoretical arguments and empirical findings that have shaped the field of comparative politics.

Course Goals

This course is part of the General Education curriculum, which means that it is designed to prepare students for a lifetime of learning about the world in which we live. It should give students the basic tools to expand or deepen their knowledge of politics as they continue their studies at UNC. To that end, one of the primary goals of this course is to provide students with a solid theoretical and empirical foundation for understanding contemporary events, in keeping with the General Education mission of connecting classroom learning to community engagement and real-world circumstances. Lectures and readings will make very explicit connections between historical events and current events, encouraging students to see how our world has developed and to form their own opinions about political events.

Another goal of the course is to make students more informed consumers of political knowledge, both in the classroom and in society at large. As such, the course empowers students to dissect political arguments and critically examine the evidence used to support them. The course makes every effort to present different sides of political and economic debates, focusing on showing the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches. Students will be encouraged to think critically about the arguments presented to the class, with the understanding that in most of the cases there is no single right answer in political science (although there may be many unsupported ones!).

Grading Scale

Final grades will be assigned according to the following scale.

Letter Grade	Percentage
A	94 and above
A–	90 – < 94
B+	87 – < 90
B	84 – < 87
B–	80 – < 84
C+	77 – < 80
C	74 – < 77
C–	70 – < 74
D+	67 – < 70
D	64 – < 67
D–	60 – < 64
F	< 60

The website of the Registrar provides the following definitions as a guide:

- **A:** Mastery of course content at the highest level of attainment that can reasonably be expected of students at a given stage of development.
- **B:** Strong performance demonstrating a high level of attainment for a student at a given stage of development.
- **C:** A totally acceptable performance demonstrating an adequate level of attainment for a student at a given stage of development.
- **D:** A marginal performance in the required exercises demonstrating a minimal passing level of attainment.

- **F:** For whatever reason, an unacceptable performance. The F grade indicates that the student's performance in the required exercises has revealed almost no understanding of the course content.

Grade Modifications

All grades, once released, should be considered final. Under exceptional circumstances, grades may be appealed if there is evidence of a clerical/arithmetic error or if the student feels that they have been unfairly evaluated. Any student who wishes to challenge a grade must do so in a typed and signed letter identifying the type of error and supporting the claim with evidence (submitted electronically in a single PDF to me). This policy admits no exceptions.

Course Requirements

This course combines weekly lectures with active student participation. Therefore, it is essential that students complete and reflect on the required readings prior to each class session and come to class prepared to actively engage with the material. Course grades are determined by the following assignments, which are described in greater detail below.

Assignment	Weight
Attendance and Participation	10%
Reading Quizzes	15%
Short essay 1	10%
Short essay 2	10%
Midterm Exam	25%
Final Exam	30%

Attendance and Participation (10%)

Students are expected to keep up with the lectures and readings each week so that they are adequately prepared to discuss the course material in class. I strongly encourage you to complete the readings before each class and to use the office hours to ask questions and clarify doubts. Since our meetings are your primary opportunity to engage with course topics and ask questions about material, attendance is mandatory and you will be graded on your level of active participation in class discussions. Students may miss two classes without giving a reason. After that, each missed class will result in a zero for attendance and participation for that meeting.

Reading Quizzes (15%)

Keeping up with the assigned readings each week is essential to understanding the material covered in class. To help ensure this happens, you will complete a short quiz each week consisting of three questions testing your comprehension of that week's required readings and material. Students who complete this assignment correctly (answering all questions correctly) will receive full credit for the quiz. If a student misses a quiz, they will receive zero points. Because life does not always go as planned, your lowest two quiz scores will be dropped from your final grade at the end of the semester.

Short Essays (10% each)

During the semester, each student must submit two 3-4 page papers covering issues presented in class. Paper prompts will be handed out two weeks before the papers are due and students will be required to respond to one of these prompts using arguments and evidence from the course readings and lectures.

Midterm Exam (25%) and Final Exam (30%)

The midterm and final are exams designed to evaluate the degree to which students understand the main concepts and theoretical perspectives reviewed throughout the course. The Midterm takes place on October 14, and covers only the material presented until that point. The Final Exam, which will take place on December 4, will be cumulative in nature. Both the final and midterm will consist of a series of multiple-choice questions, short answer essays and identification questions that relate to topics presented in the course. Further guidance on the specific design of these exams will be given in the weeks leading up to the exam date. Students may not use any outside materials, resources, or electronic devices (including, but not limited to, laptop computers, cell phones, and smartwatches) during examinations.

- The midterm exam will take place October 14.
- The final exam will take place December 4.

Research Activity Requirement

Students enrolled in this course are required to participate in the Department of Political Science research activities as part of their course requirement. A principal goal of the requirement is for students to gain an appreciation of how political science research works, while simultaneously acquiring new knowledge about areas of the discipline that they may not encounter in their POLI courses.

The research requirement is administered by the Political Science Subject Pool (PSSP) Administrators. To satisfy the research requirement, you must complete eight (8) credits of research by participating in actual political science research studies. Research studies are typically research experiments or surveys. Typically, each study's completion satisfies one (1) credit towards the requirement; occasionally, a study will count for more than one credit. The research requirement is fulfilled when eight (8) credits are earned. Students should look for emails inviting them to participate in research studies and track their requirement fulfillment status starting in October.

Students who object or fail to total eight credits through participation in research studies will be given the opportunity to fulfill the research requirement by writing a 800-word research-oriented reaction paper for a current events article listed on the [PSSP website](#). The total time commitment to complete the research requirement should not exceed 3 hours. The research requirement does not substitute for other course requirements, nor does it generate extra credit. **Failure to satisfy the research requirement will result in an incomplete grade (IN) that will be removed only upon satisfaction of the requirement.**

For additional information and contacts, please review the [FAQ page](#) or email: pssp@unc.edu

IRB Contact Information: CB 7097720; Martin Luther King Jr.; Blvd.Bldg # 385, Second Floor; Chapel Hill, NC 27599-7097, Ph: 919-966-3113, Fax: 919-966-7879

Course Policies and Procedures

Attendance

This class follows university policy, which states:

Regular class attendance is your obligation, and you are responsible for all the work, including tests and written work, of all class meetings. No right or privilege exists that permits you to be absent from any class meetings except for excused absences for authorized university activities or religious observances required by your faith.

If you are going to miss a lecture, I encourage you to contact me as soon as possible. Excused absences for authorized university activities and other permitted absences must be documented (e.g., doctor's note, dean's excuse, form from appropriate university office). You are responsible for any material covered, work assigned, or course changes made during the lecture. Do not expect the instructor to provide notes from any class you may miss. You may read the full policy [here](#).

Late Assignments

Barring an extraordinary excuse, all late papers will lose 5 points (out of 100) for each day after the due date. Uncompleted quizzes will receive a score of zero. Students are responsible for submission errors and for ensuring that uploaded files are readable. Any unreadable assignment will be considered late, and the late penalty will be calculated from the time a readable version is received.

Electronic Devices

Laptops are permitted in class only for note-taking. If you use your laptop for any other purpose (e.g., playing games or browsing unrelated websites), you will receive a zero for attendance and participation for that class session. Cell phones are not allowed during class. If you are expecting an important call or text message, please let me know in advance and step outside the classroom to respond.

Email

I will make every effort to respond to emails within 24 hours. If you have not heard back from me within 48 hours, please send me a follow-up email.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

The use of generative AI tools of any kind (e.g. chatGPT) is not permitted in this course, except for grammar and spelling checking. There are three main principles ruling the A.I usage in this course:

- AI can only be used to help edit content that students have already written on their own. They cannot be used to generate ideas for assignments, to answer specific questions about course materials/exams, or to compose responses to essay prompts.
- You are 100% responsible for your final product. Using AI technology entails notable risks. The operations that produce AI output are often unknown to its end-users. As a result, AI may produce content that is biased, inaccurate, or content that infringes on others' intellectual

property (IP). As the researcher, you are required to review all content produced by AI and assume all responsibility for any errors, as if you had produced the content yourself.

- The use of AI must be clearly documented. The use of any AI in the composition of your work must be declared on the final page of your paper.

Any other use of these tools will be considered an instance of academic dishonesty and will be referred to the Honor System. Check the UNC Generative AI Guideline [here](#) for more information.

Academic Honor Code

Discussion and the exchange of ideas are essential to academic work. For assignments in this course, you are encouraged to consult with your classmates on the choice of paper topics and to share sources. You may find it useful to discuss your chosen topic with your peers, particularly if you are working on the same topic as a classmate. However, you should ensure that any written work you submit for evaluation is the result of your own research and writing and that it reflects your own approach to the topic. You must also adhere to standard citation practices in this discipline and properly cite any books, articles, websites, lectures, etc. that have helped you with your work.

Additionally, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has had a student-administered honor system and judicial system for over 100 years. For all coursework, the Honor Code applies; your name on each of the assignments or exams confirms your respect of Honor Code rules. Your full observance of the Honor Code is required; ignorance is not a valid excuse. If you are unfamiliar with the Honor Code you should read it in its entirety before completing any work for this course. Click [here](#) for further information.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

Creating an inclusive classroom that is welcoming to all students is important. In collaboration with various institutions at UNC (Accessibility Resources and Service Office, Digital Accessibility Office), I will actively seek to meet the individual needs of students with disabilities and medical conditions as they relate to coursework and assignments. If you think you need an accommodation for a disability, please let me know at your earliest convenience. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill facilitates the implementation of reasonable accommodations, including resources and services, for students with disabilities, chronic medical conditions, a temporary disability or pregnancy complications resulting in difficulties with accessing learning opportunities. All accommodations are coordinated through the Accessibility Resources and Service Office. See the [ARS website](#) for contact information.

Student Mental Health

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is committed to advancing the mental health and wellbeing of students. If you or someone you know is feeling overwhelmed, depressed, and/or in need of support, services are available. For help, contact Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) during and after hours, on weekends and holidays, or through its counselors physically located in schools on both North and Central Campus. CAPS is strongly committed to addressing the mental health needs of a diverse student body through timely access to consultation and connection to clinically appropriate services, whether for short or long-term needs. Go to their [website](#) or visit their facilities on the third floor of the Campus Health Services building for a walk-in evaluation to learn more. You may also consult Campus Health Services (CHS) at (919) 966-2281.

Title IX Resources

Any student who is impacted by discrimination, harassment, interpersonal (relationship) violence, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, or stalking is encouraged to seek resources on campus or in the community. Reports can be made online to the EOC at this [link](#) or by contacting the University's Title IX Coordinator ([Elizabeth Hall](#)) or the [Report and Response Coordinators in the Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office](#). Confidential resources include [Counseling and Psychological Services](#) and the [Gender Violence Services Coordinators](#). Additional resources are available [here](#).

Course Reading Schedule

Please find below the course schedule and required readings for each session. The following reading schedule is subject to change —additions, replacements, and deletions— with advance notice to ensure that students can complete the readings for the appropriate date. Please read only the specified pages.

Unit 1: The State

August 17: Introduction to the Course

August 19-21: The Study of Comparative Politics

- Samuels, David. 2013. *Comparative Politics*. London: Pearson. Pages 1-28.

August 24 - 26: The State

- Weber, Max. 1946 [1919]. "Politics as a Vocation." In *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. Points 1-11.

August 28 - 31: The State Strength and State Collapse

- Fukuyama, Francis. 2004. "The Imperative of State-Building." *Journal of Democracy* 15(2): 17-31.

Supplementary

- Ben Watson. 2018. "The War in Yemen and the Making of a Chaos State." *The Atlantic*, February 3

September 2: The Emergence of the Modern State

- Charles Tilly. 1985. "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime." in *Bringing the State Back In*, edited by Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, Cambridge University Press, pp. 169-191

Supplementary

- Mazzuca, Sebastian. 2021 "Latecomer State Formation : Political Geography and Capacity Failure in Latin America." Yale University Press. pp. 1-20.
- Herbst, Jeffrey. 1990. "War and the State in Africa." *International Security* 14(4): 117-139.
- Sharman, Jason. 2023. "Something New out of Africa: States Made Slaves, Slaves Made States." *International Organization* 77(3): 497-526.

September 4: No Classes

September 7: Labor Day Holidays – No Classes

September 9 - 11: Classical Explanations of Economic Development

- Guzman, Sebastian, and James Hill. 2017. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Macat Library. Pages 33-37.
- Sachs, Jeffrey, Andrew Mellinger, and John Gallup. 2001. “The Geography of Poverty and Wealth.” *Scientific American* 284(3): 70-75.
- Acemoglu, Daron, and James A. Robinson. 2012. *Why Nations Fail*. New York: Crown Business. Pages 70-95.

September 14 - 16: Modernization Theory

- Inglehart, Ronald and Christian Welzel. 2005. *Modernization, cultural change, and democracy: the human development sequence*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 15-43, *read all but the struck-through portions*.
- Andre Gunder Frank. 1969. “The Development of Underdevelopment” in *Latin America: Underdevelopment or Revolution*, pp. 4-16

Supplementary

- Alexander Gerschenkron. 1962. *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective*. Harvard University Press. pp. 5-25
- W.W. Rostow. 1960. *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*. Cambridge University Press. pp. 1-16

September 18 - 23: State-led Development

- Kim, Suk Joon. 1989. “The Political Economy of Export-Led Industrialization in Korea and Taiwan: A Statist Approach”. *Asian Perspectives*, vol. 13, no.1, pp. 69-88.

Supplementary

- Minho Kuk. 1988. “The Governmental Role in the Making of Chaebol in the Industrial Development of South Korea.” *Asian Perspectives*, vol. 12, no.1, pp. 107-133
- Evans, Peter B. 1995. *Embedded autonomy: States and industrial transformation*. Princeton University Press. pp. 3-20.

September 21: Well-Being Day – No Classes

September 25 - 28: The Welfare State

- Esping-Andersen, Gosta. 1988. *The Three Political Economies of the Welfare State*. Florence: European University Institute. Pages 21-34.

Short Essay 1 due September 28

Unit 2: Political Regimes

September 30 - October 2: Democracy

- Karl, Terry and Phillippe Schmitter. 1991. "What Democracy Is... And Is Not.", *Journal of Democracy*, pp. 3-16
- Dahl, Robert A. 1971. *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven: Yale University Press. pp. 1-10.

October 5 - 7: Democratization

- Przeworski, Adam, and Fernando Limongi. 1997. "Modernization: Theories and Facts." *World Politics* 49(2). Pages 155-167.
- Rosenfeld, Bryn. 2020. *The Autocratic Middle Class: How State Dependency Reduces the Demand for Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Pages 1-17.

Supplementary

- Samuel Huntington, 1991. "Religion and the Third Wave." *The National Interest*, no. 24, pp. 29-42
- Seymour Martin Lipset. 1998. "George Washington and the Founding of American Democracy." *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 9, no. 4, pp. 24-36

October 9 - 12: Historical Waves of Democratization

- Huntington, Samuel. 1991. "Democracy's Third Wave." *Journal of Democracy* 2(2). Pages 12-17, 31-33, 18-22, and 34 (in that order).

October 14: Midterm Exam

October 16: Fall Break – No Classes

October 19 - 21: Competitive Authoritarianism and Hybrid Regimes

- Levitsky, Steven and Lucan Way. 2002. "Elections Without Democracy: The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism." *Journal of Democracy* 13(2): 51-65.

Supplementary

- Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, "The New Competitive Authoritarianism." *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2020, pp. 51-65
- Sergei Guriev and Daniel Triesman. 2022. *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century*. Princeton University Press, pp. 3-22

October 23 - 26: Authoritarianism

- Hadenius, Axel and Jan Teorell. 2007. "Pathways from Authoritarianism." *Journal of Democracy* 18(1): 143-156.

Supplementary

- Milan Svolik. 2012. *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-39
- Barbara Geddes. 1999. "What do we know about democratization after twenty years?." *Annual Review of Political Science*. pp. 115-144.

October 28 - 30: Democratic Backsliding

- Bermeo, Nancy. 2016. "On Democratic Backsliding." *Journal of Democracy* 27(1): 5-19.

Supplementary

- Tom Ginsburg and Aziz Huq. 2018. "Democracy's Near Misses." *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 29, no. 4, pp. 16-30

Unit 3: Government

November 2 - 4: Formal and Informal Institutions

- Levitsky, Steven and María Victoria Murillo. 2009. "Variation in Institutional Strength." *Annual Review of Political Science* 12: 115-133.

Supplementary

- Zachary Elkins and Tom Ginsburg. 2021. "What Can We Learn from Written Constitutions?." *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 24, pp. 321-343

November 6 - 9: Presidentialism Versus Parliamentarism

- Linz, Juan. 1990. "The Perils of Presidentialism." *Journal of Democracy* 1(1): 51-70.

November 11 - 13: Electoral Systems

- Lijphart, Arend. 2012. *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*. New Haven: Yale University Press. Pages 130-157.

Supplementary

- Quentin Quade. 1991. "PR and Democratic Statecraft." *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 2, no. 3, pp. 36-41
- Benjamin Reilly. 2002. "Electoral Systems for Divided Societies." *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 156-170

November 16 - 18: Political Parties and Competition

- Kitschelt, Herbert. 2000. "Linkages between citizens and politicians in democratic polities". *Comparative Political Studies*, 33(6-7), 845-879.

Short Essay 2 due November 18

November 20 - 23: Federalism

- Beramendi, Pablo. 2009. "Federalism" The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics, Sections 1 & 2.

Supplementary

- Rodden, Jonathan. 2002. "The dilemma of fiscal federalism: Grants and fiscal performance around the world." *American Journal of Political Science*. 46: 670.

November 25 - 27: Thanksgiving Recess – No classes

November 30 - December 2: Final Review Session

December 4: Final Exam