

INTRODUCTION TO COMPARATIVE POLITICS

PLSC 113 90 – Fall 2020

Tuesday & Thursday, 4:25-5:50

Instructor: Brendan Szendrő, PhD Candidate

Email: bszendr1@binghamton.edu

Office hours: By appointment via Zoom

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This class is designed to familiarize up-and-coming students with the fundamental questions of politics. With any luck, it will equip you with some of the knowledge and skills needed to pursue the areas of study. It's important to note, however, that this class cannot teach you everything and cannot teach you how to interpret it — that's up to you. My hope in constructing this course is that you will find topics that interest you and look into them with your own sound mind and rational judgment.

There are many ways to study politics. Rather than try to direct you towards specific methods, this course will focus on the fundamentals — what is politics? What are democracies and dictatorships? Why does the world feel like a precarious jewel dropped from the top of a skyscraper?

Due to the ongoing pandemic, I have decided to administer this course online. In order to foster a better sense of familiarity with the students, I'm going to prepare weekly video lectures and/or Powerpoint presentations to accompany the readings. I'll make these on the shorter side. In addition to these elements, we will have online discussion components, semi-weekly writing assignments and supplementary readings. I will also hold zoom office hours.

Textbooks are a little dry. I've tried to include some extra readings and viewings to spice things up. Don't spend too much time on the textbook or the supplements — I included extra readings because when I was a college freshman, they helped me figure out what I wanted to do with my life. At the same time, I understand that not everyone wants to be a political scientist, and also that the situation at the moment is not conducive to a robust learning environment. We're all taking this one day at a time, and I'll try to be aware of that.

Most supplementary material is floating around on the internet, but if it's not I'll upload it to MyCourses.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Virtual lectures/presentations — I won't be keeping strict attendance, but visibility doesn't hurt. We don't grade based on favorites, but we do keep track of students who express specific interests and concerns and we can grade them more easily when we know what it is they're looking for or struggling with — we track progress. In short, if we don't know who you are, we don't know how to grade you, and that can only hurt.

Online discussion posts — this one is just a replacement for your standard participation credits. Every week you'll be required to make a post in our online message, but additional posts are acceptable if you so choose. Let's try to keep it civil, at least more civil than the average online message board. DISCUSSION POSTS WILL DEAL WITH THE MATERIAL FROM THE PREVIOUS CLASS AND WILL BE POSTED ON THURSDAYS.

Quizzes/writing assignments — most weeks you'll have a short writing response or online quiz. Responses will be short, 1-2 paragraphs. You should think about the subject matter and contemplate the major themes in detail both during our lectures and through independent study; these writing assignments should be short exercises designed to demonstrate your knowledge and understanding. Responses will be due by the start of each meeting. WRITING ASSIGNMENTS WILL DEAL WITH THE READING FOR THE UPCOMING CLASS AND WILL BE POSTED ON FRIDAYS.

Exams — there will be two exams, which will help me track your progress. These will be administered in short answer fashion due to the constraints imposed by the online course format.

Paper – Due December 1st, you will write a 5-10-page paper in which you will research one country outside of North America – i.e., not the United States or Canada – and discuss their political system. You should be able to answer the following questions: 1) what is their structure of government? 2) Do you think this is an effective form of governance? 3) What would you do to improve their political system? Think critically and creatively. We will discuss this paper further as the deadline nears.

The last four components will each be worth one fourth of your grade in total. You may appeal any grade you receive over the course of the semester by filing a one-page written report as to the reason for your appeal. I will have the final say over whether or not any assignment receives a re-grading; regraded assignments may have lower, higher or equivalent scores.

If you do attend the video lectures, you will be expected to pay attention. If you act in disruptive fashion you will be asked to leave the virtual space.

READINGS & CLASS SCHEDULE

We shall use the following textbook as the basis of our weekly readings:

Clark, William Roberts, Matt Golder, and Sona Nadenichek Golder. 2017. *Principles of Comparative Politics*, 3rd ed. Washington, DC: Sage/CQ Press.

The textbook is fairly dense, and I think you'll learn better if you can see some outside readings that go into more detail. So, because of that, I would suggest that you don't read the textbook too closely – skim it and pick out the important points. Check out the outside readings and see how they connect. Don't worry too much about getting every last detail.

Aug. 27 – Introduction

Sept. 1 – Studying politics

What is “comparative politics”?

Clark et al, ch. 1-2 (skim)

Sept. 8 – The state

Where do governments come from?

Key concept: State of nature

Key concept: Prisoner's dilemma

Key concept: Bandit theory

Key concept: Westphalian sovereignty

Clark et al, pp. 89-119 (skim).

Thomas Hobbes. *Leviathan*, ch. 13.

“Two Visions of Government.” *Constitutional Rights Foundation*.

Sept. 15 – Collective actions problems

How do modern-day governments solve age-old problems?

Key concept: Tragedy of the commons

Key concept: Collective action problem

Key concept: Principle-agent problem

Clark et al, pp. 409-441.

The Dark Knight – The Joker's Social Experiment. Available on Youtube.

The Princess Bride – The Battle of Wits. Available on Youtube.

Sept. 22 – Institutions

How does government shape society?

Key concept: Commitment

Key concept: Tying the hands

Key concept: Arrow's Theorem

“Talking Heads: Roving Bandits and Stationary Bandits.” *Forbes*. May 3, 1998.

Sept. 29 – Institutions II

Key concept: Agenda setter

Key concept: Median voter theorem
Key concept: Veto player
Clark et al, pp. 645-688 (skim).

Oct. 6 – Varieties of Dictatorship

What kinds of dictatorships are there?

Key concept: Authoritarianism
Key concept: Totalitarianism (ideology)
Clark et al, pp. 353-399 (skim).

Last Week Tonight. “Authoritarianism.” Available on Youtube.

Oct. 13 – Dictatorships II

What institutions enable dictatorships?

Key concept: Clientelism
Key concept: Cartelism
Key concept: Selectorate

Last Week Tonight. Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov. Available on Youtube.

Last Week Tonight. “Xi Jinping.” Available on Youtube.

Last Week Tonight. “China & The Uighurs.” Available on Youtube.

Oct. 20 – Varieties of Democracy I: Electoral systems

What different methods do we have for choosing leaders?

Key concept: Presidential systems
Key concept: Parliamentary systems
Key concept: Federalism

Clark et al, pp. 487-510.

Federalist no. 10, 39 & 70 (skim)

Recommended: Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. *How Democracies Die*. Crown Publishing.

Oct. 27 – Democracy II: Social cleavages

How does democracy respond to turmoil?

Key concept: PR vs. SMP
Key concept: Mobilization
Key concept: Parties

Clark et al. pp. 585-639 (skim).

Ayre Carmen. “Israel’s Democracy Is Broken.” *The New York Times*. December 19, 2019.

Christopher Caldwell. “Britain Now Has a Politicized Supreme Court, Too.” *The New York Times*. September 25, 2019.

Nov. 3 – Democratic transitions

How do dictatorships become democracies?

Modernization theory

Key concept: Economic development & inequality

Key concept: Globalization

Clark et al, pp. 175-210 (skim).

Fukuyama, Francis. 1989. “The End of History?” *The National Interest*, 16: pp. 3-18.

John O’Sullivan. “Globalization Backlash 2.0.” *The Economist*. July 27, 2016.

Nov. 10 – Democratic transitions II

Cultural explanations

Clark et al, pp. 223-260 (skim).

“The Man In The Baghdad Café.” *The Economist*. November 9, 1996.

Huntington, Samuel. 1993. “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs*, 72(3): pp. 22-49.

Edward Said. “The Clash of Ignorance.” *The Nation*. October 22, 2001.

Nov. 17 – Democratic Transitions III

Bottom-up vs. top-down

Clark et al, pp. 269-311 (skim).

Erik Kirschbaum. “Who brought down the Berlin Wall? It might have been The Boss.” *LA Times*. November 4, 2019.

Nov. 24 – Regime types

How do different types of government shape people’s lives?

Clark et al, pp. 329-349

Dec. 1 – What next?

Where do we go from here?

What are the biggest questions facing comparative politics?

Clark et al, pp. 701-780 (skim).

This is my first time teaching this class as a lecturer rather than just a TA. As such, I’ve tried to put my own spin on it in places where students seemed to struggle in previous years. That being said, it also means that I don’t necessarily have this down to a science yet. As such, I might make some adjustments to this schedule if it seems like something’s not working.

GENERAL OBJECTIVES

Political Science Department Learning Objectives: As one of the introductory lecture courses in Political Science, this course is intended to contribute to Political Science majors' achievement of the following objectives:

1. Awareness of the main overall elements of the discipline, incorporating knowledge of each of the four principal subfields of political science (American Politics, International Relations, Comparative Politics, Political Theory).
2. Basic knowledge of theories and methods of interpreting information for political science purposes.
3. The ability to engage in critical thinking and critical discourse.

This course satisfies the following general education requirements:

1. Global Interdependencies (G Requirement) Students in G courses will demonstrate knowledge of how two or more distinctive world regions have influenced and interacted with one another and how such interactions have been informed by their respective cultures or civilizations.
2. Social Sciences (N Requirements) Students will demonstrate (1) knowledge of major concepts, models, and issues (and their interrelationships) in political science, and (2) an understanding of the methods used by social scientists to explore social phenomena, including, when appropriate to the discipline, observation, hypothesis development, measurement and data collection, experimentation, evaluation of evidence, and analysis by mathematics or other interpretive frameworks.

OTHER IMPORTANT DETAILS

Note that this section was copy and pasted from pre-pandemic times and it is unclear to me if any of it has changed. Feel free to reach out to me if you need assistance with anything.

Disability-Related Accommodations:

Students wishing to request academic accommodations to insure their equitable access and participation in this course should notify the instructor by the second week of class. Authorizations from Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) are generally required. Please contact SSD at (607)777- 2686 to schedule an appointment with the Director or Learning Disabilities Specialist. Their website (www.binghamton.edu/ssd) includes information regarding their Disability Documentation Guidelines. The office is located in UU-119. Do not hesitate to reach out to me personally if you need any help. I myself have an experience with a "learning disability" – Autism Spectrum Disorder – and I know how hard college can be.

Academic Honesty:

Please review university guidelines regarding academic honesty and submit your work, and only your work. Academic dishonesty, such as plagiarism, can have an adverse effect on your career – you will almost certainly receive a failing grade and you may very well

face expulsion. Don't do it – just muscle out the assignments, please. It will go easier on both of us. If you have any doubt about what constitutes plagiarism or a violation of academic honesty, please consult the university code and/or contact the instructor. Information on plagiarism can be found at <http://www2.binghamton.edu/watson/about/academic-honesty.html>, and tutorials on academic honesty can be found at <http://library.binghamton.edu/research/tutorials/WebTutorials/web/index.html>. All students are required to have completed the “Avoiding Issues of Academic Dishonesty” tutorial on the Binghamton University Libraries website (Tutorial #1 at <http://www.binghamton.edu/libraries/research/tutorials/webtutorials/index.html>).

Stress:

College is hard in general, and the current situation definitely doesn't help. If you need any personal or academic assistance, please seek support as soon as possible – no one can help if you don't let us know! If you're dealing with personal issues you'd rather not entrust to an embattled graduate student, please reach out to any of the following parties:

1. Dean of Students Office: 607-777-2804
2. Decker Student Health Services Center: 607-777-2221
3. University Police: On campus emergency, 911
4. University Counseling Center: 607-777-2772
5. Interpersonal Violence Prevention: 607-777-3062
6. Harpur Advising: 607-777-6305
7. Office of International Student & Scholar Services: 607-777-2510
8. Ombudsman:
 - Main Campus: 607-777-2388
 - University Downtown Center office : 607-777-2388
9. Services for Students with Disabilities: 607-777-2686 (Voice, TTY)

Don't wait until it's too late – mental or physical health issues can have a serious impact on your performance and experience. If you don't let anyone know, we can't help, and it's a lot harder to do something after the fact than it is up front. We're not your enemies – we're here to help if we can.

Sexual Violence:

Please note that should you choose to discuss any matters pertaining to sexual violence with myself, federal and state laws require that I notify the proper authorities. If you would like to disclose your experience confidentially, you can contact University Counseling Center, Decker Student Health Services, Harpur Ferry, Ombudsman, or Campus Ministry. For more information, please go to <https://www.binghamton.edu/ivp/> or <https://www.binghamton.edu/rmac/title-ix/>.