

POLS 3311: Intro to Comparative Politics

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Office hours: By appointment.

Fall 2026. COM 150.
Tuesdays/Thursdays 2:30–4:00 PM.

Course Description:

This course offers an introduction to theoretical and empirical research in comparative politics, a field that seeks to explain variation in political institutions and outcomes across countries, and variation in political behavior across individuals and groups within them. We will study the concept of state and its formation, political regimes, constitutional design, electoral rules and political parties, focusing throughout on how institutions shape the policies governments adopt and the outcomes those policies produce. Making sense of these explanations requires understanding the nature of power: who holds it, how it is exercised, and what constrains it.

Learning Outcomes:

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

- Explain how states, political regimes, and constitutional systems differ from one another, and why those differences matter for how power is held, exercised, and constrained.
- Compare the major institutional arrangements covered in the course — parliamentary and presidential government, electoral rules, party systems, and institutional veto players — and describe the incentives each creates for voters, parties, and politicians.
- Apply simple formal models to derive predictions about political behavior, and identify the assumptions those predictions rest on.
- Trace how institutions shape the policies governments adopt and the outcomes those policies produce.
- Distinguish correlation from causation, and assess whether a study's research design supports the causal claim it makes.
- Evaluate a theoretical argument in light of its empirical support.

Course Requirements:

You are expected to read the assigned readings before each session and participate in class.

In-class Quizzes: Four in-class quizzes on Canvas.

Midterm Exam: The exam is closed-book and in class on Tuesday, October 13th.

Final Exam: The exam is closed-book and takes place on Wednesday, December 9th, from 2:00 to 4:00 PM.

Grading:

Grading will be based on:

- Midterm Exam (30%)
- Final Exam (30%)
- In-class quizzes (30%)
- Participation (10%)

Final letter grades are assigned on the following scale:

A	93–100	C+	77–79
A–	90–92	C	73–76
B+	87–89	C–	70–72
B	83–86	D+	67–69
B–	80–82	D	63–66
		D–	60–62
		F	Below 60

Course Policies:

- All course communication will be done through Canvas or via the email listed above.
- Students are expected to have completed all readings before the class in which they will be covered.
- Students are expected to be prepared to answer questions related to the readings, come prepared with questions regarding the material and actively participate in class discussions.
- Missed work: Absences may be excused under the University of Houston Excused Absence Policy described at the end of this syllabus. If you have an excused absence, you will be given an opportunity to make up the quiz or exam you missed, or a satisfactory alternative. Contact me as far in advance as the circumstances allow, and be prepared to provide documentation.
- **An unexcused absence from a quiz results in a grade of zero on that quiz.** The same applies to the midterm and final exams: make-up exams are given only for absences excused under University policy.
- Disclaimer: The schedule, policies, procedures, and assignments in this course are subject to change in the event of extenuating circumstances, by mutual agreement, and/or to ensure better student learning.

Course Materials:

The primary course materials are the instructor's lecture slides and the required readings, which are listed below. The lecture slides for each class will be available on Canvas before the class. There is one required textbook for this course:

Clark, W. R., Golder, M., and Golder, S. N. (2024). **Principles of Comparative Politics**. CQ Press, fourth edition.

Reading List: Below is the list of topics and readings for the course. A topic will be covered approximately every week. The readings are a mixture of book chapters and academic journal articles.

LECTURES

1. What is Science?
2. What Is Politics?
3. State Formation
4. Measuring Democracies and Dictatorships
5. Income, Inequality and Democracy
6. Democratic Transitions
7. Autocratic Regimes
8. Parliamentary and Presidential Regimes
9. Electoral Systems
10. Party Systems
11. Veto Players
12. Consequences of Democratic Institutions
13. Corruption and Clientelism
14. Political Selection

READINGS

WHAT IS SCIENCE?

1. Chapter 2 of Clark et al. (2024)

WHAT IS POLITICS?

1. Chapter 3 of Clark et al. (2024)

STATE FORMATION

1. Chapter 4 of Clark et al. (2024)
2. Tilly, C. (1985). War Making and State Making as Organized Crime. In Evans, P. B., Rueschemeyer, D., and Skocpol, T., editors, **Bringing the State Back In**, pages 169–191. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
3. Abramson, S. F. (2017). The economic origins of the territorial state. **International Organization**, 71(1):97–130

MEASURING DEMOCRACIES AND DICTATORSHIPS

1. Chapter 5 of Clark et al. (2024)
2. Schmitter, P. C. and Karl, T. L. (1991). What democracy is... and is not. **Journal of democracy**, 2(3):75–88

INCOME, INEQUALITY AND DEMOCRACY

1. Chapter 6 of Clark et al. (2024)
2. Acemoglu, D., Johnson, S., Robinson, J. A., and Yared, P. (2008). Income and democracy. **American economic review**, 98(3):808–842
3. Boix, C. (2011). Democracy, development, and the international system. **American political science review**, 105(4):809–828

DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS

1. Chapter 8 of Clark et al. (2024)
2. Kuran, T. (1991). Now out of never: The element of surprise in the east european revolution of 1989. **World politics**, 44(1):7–48

AUTOCRATIC REGIMES

1. Chapter 9 of Clark et al. (2024)
2. Gandhi, J. and Przeworski, A. (2007). Authoritarian institutions and the survival of autocrats. **Comparative political studies**, 40(11):1279–1301

PARLIAMENTARY AND PRESIDENTIAL REGIMES

1. Chapter 11 of Clark et al. (2024)
2. Cheibub, J. A., Elkins, Z., and Ginsburg, T. (2014). Beyond presidentialism and parliamentarism. **British Journal of Political Science**, 44(3):515–544

ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

1. Chapter 12 of Clark et al. (2024)
2. Chang, E. C. and Golden, M. A. (2007). Electoral systems, district magnitude and corruption. **British journal of political science**, 37(1):115–137

PARTY SYSTEMS

1. Chapter 13 of Clark et al. (2024)
2. Cox, G. (1999). Electoral rules and electoral coordination. **Annual Review of Political Science**, 2(1):145–161

VETO PLAYERS

1. Chapter 14 of Clark et al. (2024)

CONSEQUENCES OF DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

1. Chapter 15 of Clark et al. (2024)
2. Fujiwara, T. (2015). Voting technology, political responsiveness, and infant health: Evidence from brazil. **Econometrica**, 83(2):423–464

CORRUPTION AND CLIENTELISM

1. Ferraz, C. and Finan, F. (2008). Exposing corrupt politicians: the effects of brazil’s publicly released audits on electoral outcomes. **The Quarterly journal of economics**, 123(2):703–745
2. Larreguy, H., Marshall, J., and Querubin, P. (2016). Parties, brokers, and voter mobilization: How turnout buying depends upon the party’s capacity to monitor brokers. **American Political Science Review**, 110(1):160–179
3. De La O, A. L. (2013). Do conditional cash transfers affect electoral behavior? evidence from a randomized experiment in mexico. **American journal of political science**, 57(1):1–14

POLITICAL SELECTION

1. Besley, T. (2005). Political selection. **Journal of Economic perspectives**, 19(3):43–60
2. Dal Bó, E., Finan, F., Folke, O., Persson, T., and Rickne, J. (2017). Who becomes a politician? **The Quarterly Journal of Economics**, 132(4):1877–1914

UNIVERSITY POLICIES AND STUDENT SUPPORT RESOURCES

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS RESOURCES

The University of Houston has a number of resources to support students’ mental health and overall wellness, including CoogsCARE and the UH Go App. UH Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) offers 24/7 mental health support for all students, addressing various concerns like stress, college adjustment and sadness. CAPS provides individual and couples counseling, group therapy, workshops and connections to other support services on and off-campus. For assistance visit uh.edu/caps, call 713-743-5454, or visit a Let’s Talk location in-person or virtually. Let’s Talk are daily, informal confidential consultations with CAPS therapists where no appointment or paperwork is needed.

Need Support Now? If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, help is available. Call CAPS crisis support 24/7 at 713-743-5454, or the National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: call or text 988, or chat 988lifeline.org.

TITLE IX/SEXUAL MISCONDUCT

Per the UHS Sexual Misconduct Policy, your instructor is a “responsible employee” for reporting purposes under Title IX regulations and state law and must report incidents of sexual misconduct (sexual harassment, non-consensual sexual contact, sexual assault, sexual exploitation, sexual intimidation, intimate partner violence, or stalking) about which they become aware to the Title IX office (known at UH as the Equal Opportunity Services office or “EOS”). Please know there are places on campus where you can make a report in confidence. You can find more information about resources on the UH Title IX/Sexual Misconduct Resources page. Please note that you may also report concerns of discrimination based on your protected class identity to EOS.

REASONABLE ACADEMIC ADJUSTMENTS/AUXILIARY AIDS

The University of Houston is committed to providing an academic environment and educational programs that are accessible for its students. Any student with a disability who is experiencing barriers to learning, assessment or participation is encouraged to contact the Justin Dart, Jr. Student Accessibility Center (Dart Center) to learn more about academic accommodations and support that may be available to them. Students seeking academic accommodations will need to register with the Dart Center as soon as possible to ensure timely implementation of approved accommodations. Please contact the Dart Center by visiting the website: <https://uh.edu/accessibility/>, calling (713) 743-5400, or emailing jdcen@Central.UH.EDU.

The Student Health Center offers a Psychiatry Clinic for enrolled UH students. Call 713-743-5149 during clinic hours, Monday through Friday 8 a.m.–4:30 p.m. to schedule an appointment.

The A.D. Bruce Religion Center offers spiritual support and a variety of programs centered on well-being.

The Center for Student Advocacy and Community (CSAC) is where you can go if you need help but don't know where to start. CSAC is a "home away from home" and serves as a resource hub to help you get the resources needed to support academic and personal success. Through our Cougar Cupboard, all students can get up to 30 lbs of FREE groceries a week. Additionally, we provide 1:1 appointments to get you connected to on- and off-campus resources related to essential needs, safety and advocacy, and more. The Cougar Closet is a registered student organization advised by our office and offers free clothes to students so that all Coogs can feel good in their fit. We also host a series of cultural and community-based events that foster social connection and helps the cougar community come closer together. Visit the CSAC homepage or follow us on Instagram: @uh_CSAC and @uhcupbrd. YOU belong here.

COUGAR PARENT AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT OFFICE

This office, under the Dean of Students Office, coordinates resources for Pregnant and Parenting Students, Parents and Family members of UH students, and Sexual Misconduct Support Services. A description of available support and resources are provided on the respective web pages. The Cougar Parent and Family Engagement Office is located in Student Center South, room B12.

ACADEMIC HONESTY POLICY

High ethical standards are critical to the integrity of any institution, and bear directly on the ultimate value of conferred degrees. All UH community members are expected to contribute to an atmosphere of the highest possible ethical standards. Maintaining such an atmosphere requires that any instances of academic dishonesty be recognized and addressed. The UH Academic Honesty Policy is designed to handle those instances with fairness to all parties involved: the students, the instructors, and the University itself. All students and faculty of the University of Houston are responsible for being familiar with this policy.

EXCUSED ABSENCE POLICY

Regular class attendance, participation, and engagement in coursework are important contributors to student success. Absences may be excused as provided in the University of Houston Undergraduate Excused Absence Policy and Graduate Excused Absence Policy for reasons including medical illness of student or close relative, death of a close family member, legal or government proceeding that a student is obligated to attend, recognized professional and educational activities where the student is presenting, and University-sponsored activity or athletic competition. Under these policies, students with excused absences will be provided with an opportunity to make up any quiz, exam or other work that contributes to the course grade or a satisfactory alternative. Please read the full policy for details regarding reasons for excused

absences, the approval process, and extended absences. Additional policies address absences related to military service, religious holy days, pregnancy and related conditions, and disability.

RECORDING OF CLASS

Students may not record all or part of class, livestream all or part of class, or make/distribute screen captures, without advanced written consent of the instructor. If you have or think you may have a disability such that you need to record class-related activities, please contact the Justin Dart, Jr. Student Accessibility Center. If you have an accommodation to record class-related activities, those recordings may not be shared with any other student, whether in this course or not, or with any other person or on any other platform. Classes may be recorded by the instructor. Students may use instructor's recordings for their own studying and notetaking. Instructor's recordings are not authorized to be shared with anyone without the prior written approval of the instructor. Failure to comply with requirements regarding recordings will result in a disciplinary referral to the Dean of Students Office and may result in disciplinary action.

Bibliography

- Abramson, S. F. (2017). The economic origins of the territorial state. **International Organization**, 71(1):97–130.
- Acemoglu, D., Johnson, S., Robinson, J. A., and Yared, P. (2008). Income and democracy. **American economic review**, 98(3):808–842.
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