Comparative Political Institutions
POL 235
Winter 2018

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Class Meeting Time: W 9:00 – 11:50 a.m.
Office: 3715 Ellison Hall
Office Hours: T 10:00 a.m. – 11:00 a.m., R 11:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m., or by appointment

1 Course Objectives

This seminar introduces students to political institutions in comparative perspective. It first aims to familiarize students with the major theoretical approaches to institutions. It then surveys the literature on the core political institutions, from the electoral system to bureaucracy. Along the way, it grapples with issues such as institutional change (for example, which theoretical approach provides the best account?); debates about how institutions should be conceptualized and measured (for example, are mechanisms for contestation the key institutional feature of democratic regimes?); and the link between institutions, democratic representation, and other consequential outcomes of the policy process (for example, do consensual institutions indeed deliver a “kinder and gentler” form of democracy?). Accordingly, the course will help to prepare students for the political institutions section of the comparative politics comprehensive exam, as well as for conducting research in comparative politics.

2 Course Requirements

First and most obviously, students should come to class prepared to discuss the readings. That means having read the readings both carefully and critically. Moreover, we will discuss student work throughout the quarter; students are expected to have read and be prepared to discuss this work, in addition to the readings. The student work that we will discuss will take two forms: first, as described below, brief research prospectuses; second, past CP political institutions exam answers, which we will constructively criticize and grade at several points (to be announced in class), which means that students will have need to have read the answers and come prepared to discuss them.

Second, students are required to serve as a moderator for one topic (i.e., one week’s readings) for Weeks 2–9. The moderator’s main job is to come to class prepared enough to keep everyone else (including the instructor!) on their toes, helping to lead discussion. The secondary responsibility of the moderator is to write and share with the class an approximately one to three page, meaning brief critical summary of the readings containing questions for discussion. This critical summary should be posted on the course Gaucho Space website by 5:00 p.m. on the Monday before the class meeting so as to allow everyone time to reflect upon it prior to class. To elaborate, these reports should not merely summarize the readings (e.g., “Jones says X”). Instead, they should be critical. That is, they
might identify key conceptual disagreements; identify central debate(s) running through the different readings; point out any methodological (including measurement) issues that seem potentially problematic; and/or offer thoughts about useful directions for future work. Please send me your top three choices of weeks (ranked from first to third) by the end of the first day of class, and I will assign students to topics in order to ensure an even distribution, doing my best to take everyone’s preferences into account.

Third, students will write a brief (approximately three to four page) research prospectus for two of the topics from Weeks 3 through 9. These prospectuses will identify a research question and testable hypothesis drawn from the readings for empirical investigation, and then propose and justify a research design for testing this hypothesis. Be creative—this is your chance to draw attention to what you see as an overlooked claim or observable implication of someone’s argument. You can assume a reasonably generous budget (for a graduate student!) to carry out the research, such as $50,000. The best prospectuses will either identify existing data for testing their hypothesis, or make the case that the appropriate data does not exist and describe a methodology for gathering it, from a survey to a field experiment to a comparative case study. The goal is to provide students practice with constructing empirical research proposals, a skill that is obviously required of comparative politics doctoral students. The research prospectuses must be written for topics for which the student does not serve as the moderator. Like the moderator’s critical summary, the prospectus is due on the Monday before the class when the topic from which the prospectus is drawn will be discussed. We willdevote about 1/2 hour of class to discussing the prospectuses. Students are expected to have read their colleagues’ prospectuses and come prepared with constructive criticism for the discussion. As with the choice of weeks for the job of moderator, please send me your top three choices by the end of the first day of class, and I will assign students to topics.

Fourth and finally, as the final project for the class, students will be given a sample comprehensive exam question for political institutions and asked to write an approximately five to ten page answer within a 48 hour period of their choosing (modeling the real comprehensive exam situation) between the day following the last day of class and March 23rd (the Friday before grades are due, so as to give me time to grade these final projects).

3 Grading

Grades for the course will be calculated as follows.

- Class participation. (25%)
- Service as moderator, including critical summary/discussion questions. (15%)
- Short research prospectuses. (15% each for a total of 30%)
- Final project consisting of a sample comprehensive exam question answer. (30%)
4 Required Reading Materials

Readings for the course are available in one of three ways. For copyright reasons, the few books from which we will be reading four or more chapters are available on reserve from the library; these readings are labeled [LIB] in the schedule below. You are of course alternatively welcome to purchase copies of these books. Because they can be obtained from so many online vendors nowadays, often used (and hence inexpensively), I have not asked the university bookstore to stock them. For example, the 1999 edition of the Lijphart text is an acceptable substitute for the recently-released 2012 edition, and both it and the 2012 editions are available used. Accordingly, if you are interested in building your personal library, which I recommend, go shopping with your fingers for these modern classics! All other reading materials are available from the course GauchoSpace page. Note, however, that you will either need to be on a university computer or to have your home computer configured for off campus access to access some of these readings.

The course GauchoSpace page also lists (and sometimes provides) further, recommended readings for most topics.

5 Syllabus

PART I: Theoretical Approaches

An Introduction to Organization Theory (Week 1)


Politics, Institutions, and Organizations: Major Issues (Week 2)


PART II: Democratic Institutions in Comparative Perspective

Democracy and Autocracy (Week 3)


Political Regimes I: Presidentialism vs. Parliamentarism (Week 4)


Political Regimes II: Centralization vs. Decentralization (Week 5)


Electoral Systems (Week 6)


Note: Read either Gandhi and Heller or Kollman.


**Legislatures (Week 7)**


**Bureaucracy (Week 8)**


**PART III: Pulling It All Together (Maybe):**

**Institutions, Typologies, and Democracy (Week 9)**


