GOVT 530: Comparative Politics

Fall 2020

Wednesdays, 7:20-10:00pm
Location: Online Course Room, Blackboard Collaborate Ultra

Instructor: Dr. Philip A. Martin
Email: pmarti5@gmu.edu
Office Hours: By appointment.

Course Overview

This is a graduate-level seminar in comparative politics. The course aims to survey the key scholarly theories and debates in the field, and to familiarize students with the analytical and methodological tools necessary to conduct research in this area. We will divide our attention between “classics” and more cutting-edge work. Comparative politics being a broad field, our coverage of many topics will be cursory. The Schar School Comparative Politics Reading List can be found here: https://goo.gl/cLAeXn.

Objectives

Students who actively engage with readings, assignments and virtual seminar discussions will:

1. Become familiar with foundational concepts and debates in the field of comparative politics.
2. Improve their ability to critically read and digest books and articles in political science, including work using state-of-the-art research methods.
3. Possess a strong understanding of the comparative method and be able to apply this method to their own research and critical analysis.
4. Practice the skill of incorporating feedback to improve written work.
5. Be able to ask original research questions that might advance the frontiers of knowledge in comparative politics.

Reading

The reading load for this course will be intensive. Plan to spend around ten hours each week to read the required material and prepare for class discussion. Tips for reading and critiquing appear at the end of this syllabus.

Most required readings for the course will be available through the Mason library. For those interested in diving deeper, I recommend that you purchase and read the following in their entirety: Tilly’s *Coercion, Capital and European States*; Migdal’s *Strong Societies and Weak States*; Dahl’s *Polyarchy*; Scott’s *Weapons of the Weak*; Ostrom’s *Governing the Commons*; Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*; and Moore’s *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. 
Requirements

The course will be run as an online seminar. It is therefore essential for students to do the required readings and come prepared to participate in seminar discussion each week.

The course requirements consist of seminar participation (10%), weekly posts to the discussion board (10%), and four critical reaction memos (20% each). “Regrading” of assignments will not be considered.

Seminar Participation (10%): Attendance is a necessary but not sufficient condition for high-quality seminar participation. You should be prepared to jump into the discussion each week by identifying the key arguments and debates in the assigned readings, offering critical reactions to those arguments, and extrapolating from the readings to discuss related issues and/or current affairs. All students get one “bye” week.

Discussion Board Posts (10%): Each week by 10:00 AM EST the day of class (Wednesday), you must post a comment or question to the Blackboard discussion board based on the assigned readings. Your post can be a critical reaction to an author’s argument (“I found X’s argument to be unpersuasive because…”), raise a question that extends the debate in some way (“X’s study raised the following question for future research…”), or apply an idea(s) raised in the readings to a current policy issue in the world. Your post should provide enough context for others to be able to engage with your ideas. Each post should be around 100-200 words, though it can be longer. See point 2 in the “How to Read (and Critique)” section at the end of this syllabus for ideas about possible topics for posts.

Critical Reaction Memos (20% each): Students will write four critical reaction memos that respond to a specific prompt based on the assigned readings for one week. The goal of the memos is to practice the skill of identifying the key issues and debates within a specific literature, describing the positions of scholars within those literatures, and commenting critically on those positions and the state of the debate. A high-quality memo should not simply summarize the readings, but rather offer a critical discussion of the underlying issues they address.

Memos should be double-spaced in 12-point font and should be around 1000 words (though it can be longer if the paper is of high quality). Memos must be uploaded to Blackboard by the beginning of class the week of the seminar when the readings are discussed. Students may choose which weeks they want to write memos for. However, you must write your first memo no later than week 4, and you must write your second memo no later than week 8.

Before handing in your memos, please consult the Writing Guidelines section at the end of the syllabus. I recommend that you budget at least 5-6 hours to write each memo, after you have finished the readings.

The critical reaction memo prompts for each week appear below:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week #</th>
<th>Reaction Memo Prompt</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>How do you think research in comparative politics is supposed to be conducted? Is it actually conducted this way? If not, why not?</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Does war contribute to state formation? How? When might wars fail to stimulate state formation?</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>What is the relationship between class (on the one hand) and political identities or behavior (on the other)? Do you think that class trumps other social categories? Why or why not?</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>How should we measure ethnicity in political science? What are the consequences of measuring ethnicity the wrong way?</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Putnam and Berman seem to disagree about the benefits of civil society for liberal democracy. Who is right?</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>What kinds of political institutions are the most conducive to gender equality? Why?</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Do you think that it is possible for political scientists to accurately predict what the effects of constitutional reforms will be for specific countries? Or are the effects of constitutional systems so contingent on other social, political, and economic factors, such that we cannot draw firm inferences?</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Choose three readings from this week. What sorts of policy positions should we expect political parties to take according to each of the authors? Which argument seems most compelling?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>What are the conditions that facilitate collective action for purposes of social or political change?</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>What is Anderson’s argument? How much explanatory power does it have? Do Darden and Gryzmala-Busse’s findings affect your view of Anderson’s conclusions?</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>A common critique of Lipset and Moore’s theories of modernization and political regimes is that they are overly deterministic. Do you agree?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Are the conditions required to sustain democracy different than those required to transition from authoritarianism to democracy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>What are the topics in comparative politics that are under-researched? Which are over-researched? Should the field of comparative politics have a broader scope than it does today, or a narrower one?</td>
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**Academic Integrity**

Faculty in the Schar School have zero tolerance for academic dishonesty (e.g. plagiarism) and will strictly enforce Mason’s honor code. Please familiarize yourself with the Honor Code here: https://oai.gmu.edu/mason-honor-code/.

*If you have any doubts about the rules concerning plagiarism, please ask for clarification. No grade or assignment is worth academic misconduct.*

**Students with Disabilities**

If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see me and contact the Disability Resource Center (DRC) at 993-2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through the DRC.

**Communications Policy**

All course-related communications should be conducted via Mason email or through Blackboard. In general, I will try to respond to email within 48 hours. Do not expect immediate replies in evenings or on weekends. If you must be absent for class, it is your obligation to inform me beforehand.

**Policy on Absences and Late Assignments**

All students are expected to attend every seminar punctually and submit assignments and discussion board posts on time. Students will be granted *one* unexcused absence during the semester. Unless there is a documented health or family emergency, any additional unexcused absence will result in a participation grade reduction.

**Standards of Online Conduct**

An online course does not give you permission to be offensive. If you would not say something to somebody’s face, then you should not say it to them electronically. Try to communicate thoughtfully and with empathy for others’ point of view.

**Technology Requirements**

You will need a computer or tablet device with reliable high-speed internet connection, as well as a microphone and webcam to participate in discussion groups.

In terms of software, you will need a browser and operating system that is compatible with Mason’s version of Blackboard. A list of supported browsers and operating systems is available here: https://help.blackboard.com/Learn/Student/Getting Started/Browser Support.
Course Schedule (subject to change)

Week 1 (August 26) – Introduction

Readings:

- No required readings for Week 1.

Week 2 (Sept 2) – Scope and Method of Comparative Politics

Readings:


Discussion questions:

- How do you think research in comparative politics is supposed to be conducted? Is it actually conducted this way? If not, why not? How does research in comparative politics compare to the way research is conducted in other fields?

- Do you think it is possible for social scientists to predict events like the collapse of the Soviet Union or the Arab Spring? If not, what does this mean about the value of our discipline for society?

Week 3 (Sept 9) – The State and Political Order

Readings:


Discussion Questions:

• What are “states” and why do they exist?
• Does war contribute to state formation? How? When might wars fail to stimulate state-formation?
• How should we measure “state strength”?
• Why are there seemingly so many weak and/or “failed” states in the world today? Is this situation likely to change?

**Week 4 (Sept 16) – Class Politics**

Readings:


Discussion questions:
• What is the relationship between class (on the one hand) and political identities or behavior (on the other)? Do you think that class trumps other social categories?
• Under what class conditions is democracy most feasible? Least feasible?
• Compare the methods used by each of the authors. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?

Week 5 (Sept 23) – Ethnic Politics

Readings:

Discussion questions:
• What is ethnicity? Why does ethnic identification vary across contexts?
• What is the relationship between ethnicity and political identities and behaviors? Do you think that ethnicity trumps other social categories?
• Under what ethnic conditions are democracy and economic development most feasible? Least feasible?
• How should we measure ethnicity in political science?

Week 6 (Sept 30) – Political Culture

Readings:


Discussion questions:

• What is political culture? In what sense does culture “cause” political or economic outcomes?
• How should political culture be measured?
• Putnam and Berman seem to disagree about the effects of civil society for democracy. Who is right?
• Does Fish’s explanation imply that Muslims ought to be less supportive of democracy than non-Muslims even within the country? What if that were not the case?
• What role does “culture” play in Nunn and Wantchekon’s account of the legacies of the slave trade in Africa? Are there other events in world history that might have generated similar effects?

**Week 7 (October 7): Gender**

Readings:


Discussion Questions:

- Is gender a similar type of social category to class or ethnicity? If it is different from these categories, what does this mean for the study of gender in comparative politics?
- What role do “women’s movements” play in democratization? Why do some countries have strong women’s movements, but others do not?
- What explains women’s underrepresentation in formal political institutions, and what explains variation in the degree of underrepresentation?

Week 8 (October 14): Constitutions

Readings:


Discussion questions:

- What are the principle varieties of modern democracy? How do they differ? What are the main putative consequences of those institutional choices?
- Most political scientists, at least during the 1990s and 2000s, argued that presidentialism was hostile to democracy and urged new democracies to adopt parliamentary forms of government. Do you agree?
- Do you think that it is possible for political scientists to accurately predict what the effects of constitutional reforms will be for specific countries? Or are the effects of constitutional systems so contingent on other social, political, and economic factors, such that we cannot draw firm inferences?
Week 9 (October 21): Parties and Voters

Readings:


Discussion questions:

- Are political parties important in modern democracies? Why? Could democracy work without them?
- Describe Down’s argument. Why does the distribution of voter preferences affect the efficacy of government? What role does (incomplete) information play in Down’s model?
- How accurate is the Lipset-Rokkan hypothesis about why different party systems develop? Does the argument fit some areas of the world better than others?
- What sorts of policy positions should we expect parties to take according to each of the authors? Which explanation seems most compelling?
- How and why do social divisions (class, ethnicity, gender, etc.) become the basis for electoral competition? Under what conditions do different social categories form electoral divisions?
- Do you think that the assumptions made by each of the authors about the behavior of individual voters are plausible? How would altering these assumptions affect their conclusions?

Week 10 (October 28): Collective Action and Mobilization

Readings:


Discussion questions:

• Rapid mobilization for large scale uprising such as the Arab Spring or the Velvet Revolution often seem to “come out of nowhere” and catch external observers by surprise. Why, according to Kuran, is this the case?

• What are the conditions that facilitate collective action for purposes of social or political change? How are these conditions different from the conditions needed for responsible management of collective resources?

• Is the problem of collective action at the level of, say, a small-scale human community of 100 individuals fundamentally different than the problem of collective action among societies and nation-states? Why or why not?

• Under what conditions are material incentives for collective action more or less important than ideational incentives?

• Describe the “free-rider problem.” How can it be solved?

**Week 11 (Nov 4): Nationalism**

Readings:


Discussion questions:
- What is Anderson’s argument? How much explanatory power does it have? Do Darden and Gryzmala-Busse’s findings affect your view of Anderson’s conclusions?
- If you wanted to test Posen’s argument about the link between nationalism and warfare at the individual level, how would you do it? What about cross-nationally?
- Is nationalism necessary for large-scale, stable societies? Why or why not?

**Week 12 (Nov 11): Modernization and Economic Development**

Readings:


Discussion questions:

- For the last sixty years, political scientists have generally remembered Lipset for the argument that modernization leads to democracy. What, in your view, is Lipset’s claim about the effect of economic development on politics?
- How does Moore’s view of the political impacts of modernization differ from Lipset’s?
- Consider several of the variables in Moore’s analysis: “strength of the landed class”, “commercial impulse”, and “routes to modernization”. Can these variables be measured? If so, how? If not, what does this mean for the utility of Moore’s theory?
- A common critique of Lipset and Moore’s theories of democratization is that they are overly “deterministic.” Do you agree?
- Do the findings of Przeworski and Limongi fundamentally challenge the arguments of Lipset and Moore?
- Compare and contrast the empirical methods used in each of the readings, especially Moore versus Przeworski and Limongi. What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of these approaches?

**Week 13 (Nov 18): Transitions from Authoritarianism**

Readings:


Discussion questions:

• Are the conditions required to sustain democracy different than those required to transition from authoritarianism to democracy?
• O’Donnell and Schmitter’s volume is considered a landmark study in the democratization literature. Is the work still helpful for understanding transitions from authoritarian rule today? What did they overlook?
• Does it make sense to think about “transition” periods as political phenomena that are analytically distinct from other periods?
• What, according to Carothers, did the transition paradigm get wrong about democratization? Is he right?

**Week 14 (Thanksgiving break)**

**Week 15 (Dec 2): Recap and Conclusion**

Readings:


Discussion questions:

• What are the topics in comparative politics that are under-researched? Which are over-researched? Should the field of comparative politics have a broader scope than it does today, or a narrower one?
• Should the goal of comparative politics be to generate primarily causal analysis about the world? Or should it be “merely” descriptive?
• Do you think that inductive or deductive methods are more appropriate in the field of comparative politics?
• Should all work in the field of comparative politics aim to be “multimethod”? What are the advantages (or disadvantage)?
How to Write (in Political Science)

There are many resources that provide guidance for writing effectively. For a good overview of the basics, I highly recommend Kate L. Turabian’s *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations: Chicago Style for Students and Researchers* (any recent edition is fine).

I have listed below key guidelines that students should consult before turning in written work (memos, research papers, etc.).

**Introductions**

The introduction paragraph is usually the most important paragraph. The introduction should clearly summarize the main question(s) or problem that will be addressed, and what the main argument/thesis/conclusion is. Do not “bury” key points or conclusions at the end of your paper. You should plan to edit and re-write your introduction paragraph many times. The same applies to conclusion paragraphs, but introductions are more important.

**Use of sections**

Most written work that is longer than a few pages should be broken up into discrete sections that help to organize the paper.

- Each section should have a title that is concise and informative (e.g. “Introduction”, “Literature Review”, etc.)
- Organize sections in a logical manner

**Style of prose**

- Aim for clarity and brevity. Remove unnecessary “filler” words and phrases. It is better for your writing to be blunt and direct.
- Adverbs (“really”, “extremely”) clutter up sentences. Consider removing them.
- Use the active voice rather than the passive voice (“Germany invaded Poland in 1939”, not “In 1939, Poland was invaded by Germany”).
- Write formally and professionally. Avoid contractions (“do not” instead of “don’t”; “it is” instead of “it’s”). Avoid hyperbole (“X’s argument is outrageous”). Avoid biased or imprecise language (“Country X’s behavior is evil/malicious”)
- It is fine to use the first person singular (“In this essay, I will argue…”). Do not use first person plural (“In this essay, we will argue…”) unless you are co-authoring.
- When using impersonal pronouns (“it”; “this”; “that”) make sure that the referent noun is clear. For example, do not write: “Modernization theory predicts that as economic wealth rises, democracy will be more likely. But this overlooks the experience of China.”
- Proofread your writing multiple times to catch spelling, grammar, and syntax errors.
Argumentative presentation

It is normal to “go in circles” as you develop your thinking on a topic. However, your writing should not bring your reader on these circles. Rather, your writing should communicate your arguments to the reader as effectively and clearly as possible and explain why the empirical evidence you have consulted supports (or does not support) those arguments.

Formatting

- Include page numbers.
- Double space your writing.
- Use 12-point font for main text, headings, titles, etc. Use 10-point font for footnotes.

Substance

- When assessing empirical evidence (case studies, statistics, etc.) do not ignore evidence that contradicts your argument. Ignoring evidence will make your paper less persuasive. Rather, use this evidence to clarify the limitations of your argument, or (if true) explain to the reader why the evidence does not actually contradict the argument.
- It is better to acknowledge uncertainty and doubt about your conclusions than to be falsely overconfident.
- Always identify and discuss counterarguments. What would a skeptic say about your position? What would you say to that skeptic?
- If you are writing about a topic that is covered by the required readings for the class, your paper should engage explicitly with those readings.
How to Read (and Critique)

Learning to efficiently read and critically absorb large amounts of material is a crucial skill to develop. Some readings can be skimmed quickly. Others may take several hours to fully digest. Here are a few pointers.

1. Read with purpose. Do not try to memorize every fact or piece of evidence. Rather, aim to extract the essentials. These include:
   a. The central argument. For many readings, the central argument should be further broken down into three pieces:
      i. The outcome that is being explained (“dependent variable”).
      ii. The explanatory factors that affect the outcome (“independent variables”).
      iii. The causal logic that connects the independent and dependent variables (“mechanisms”).
   b. The methodology and evidence that is presented to support the argument.
   c. How the reading fits in to the larger debate or research tradition of its subfield.

2. Once you have identified these essentials, reflect critically on each. Note the following as possible points for discussion:
   a. Issues with the argument or evidence that you are not convinced by, and why.
      For example, you might ask the following:
      i. Is the explanatory logic of the argument compelling?
      ii. Is the argument original, or is it old wine in a new bottle?
      iii. Is the research design appropriate? What would improve it?
      iv. Is the data reliable? Is it representative of the larger “universe of cases”?
      v. Should we be concerned about reverse causality?
      vi. Are there relevant variables that are omitted from the author’s analysis?
   b. Strengths of the piece, or moments that gave you an “aha” moment. What do you know now that you did not know before?
   c. Broader issues in the world to which the argument might extrapolate.