

**Comparative Politics**  
**Instructor:** Patrick Le Bihan  
**SciencesPo, Reims Campus**  
**Fall 2019**

## Course Description

This course provides an introduction to the study of comparative politics. We will provide a survey of some of the most important questions of the field: Why are some countries democratic, while others are not? Does democracy make a difference in terms of well-being of its citizens? Do elections help identify the general will? Does federalism improve decision-making? Does presidentialism improve accountability? Are constitutional courts necessary to uphold the constitution? Does democracy help fight economic inequality? Do social media increase political polarization? Etc. We will approach these questions in a scientific manner introducing students in the process to the main difficulties that researchers face when studying politics. Can we identify causal relationships in politics? What units of analysis need to be compared in order to be able to make meaningful inferences? Etc. In the process, students will learn that science is always about comparison, yet, understanding which comparisons are insightful and which are not, requires a lot of thinking....

## Course Requirements

The final grade will be on the following elements:

1. A written final exam (1/3 of the final grade)
2. A research paper. Students will choose a topic on which they will write a research paper (3000 words). To make sure that students make progress on the research paper during the semester, the students will submit (via email) a proposal (500 words) for their research paper to the Teaching Assistants before the beginning of the sixth lecture. The research paper will count for 1/3 of the final grade. A more detailed description of the research paper assignment will be provided shortly.
3. Finally, students will receive a grade for their work in their respective Discussion section. The discussion section grade will count for 1/3 of the final grade and will be based on three components. First, groups of two students will be responsible for giving a 15 minute presentation on a topic related to class (40% of the discussion section grade). Second, each student will be responsible for leading the discussion on a topic related to the weekly readings. Leading the discussion will consist in providing a brief introduction to the discussion topic (5 minutes at most) and making sure the class discussion remains structured and fruitful after the short introduction (30% of the discussion section grade). Presentation and Discussion topics will be allocated during the first session of the Discussion section. Third, active participation during discussion will count for 30% of the discussion section grade.

## Recommended Textbook

Though we will not follow any textbook in particular, I recommend the following textbook as background reading:

Clark, W. R., Golder, M., and Golder, S. N. (2018b). *Principles of Comparative Politics*. SAGE Publications, 3d edition

I will at times base some of the lecture material on slides provided with the book.

## 1 September 3: Is the Science of Comparative Politics Possible? - I Introduction

### *Required*

- Clark, W. R., Golder, M., and Golder, S. N. (2018a). Introduction and what is science? In *Principles of Comparative Politics*, chapter 1-2. SAGE Publications

### *Recommended*

- Sekhon, J. S. (2004). Quality meets quantity: Case studies, conditional probability, and counterfactuals. *Perspectives on Politics*, 2(2):281–293

Suggested structure for the first session of the discussion section

1. Go over the syllabus,
2. Go over the requirements for the class,
3. Allocate Presentation topics and Discussion leading topics,
4. Have a discussion on the notions of necessary, and sufficient conditions. I would suggest you use the exercise Necessary and Sufficient Conditions from the assigned reading.
5. Go over the exercise on Scientific Statements from the assigned reading.
6. Finally, discuss the problems with the methods of John Stuart Mill. Why does measurement error undermine the comparative method la John Stuart Mill? What are interaction effects and why can't the comparative method be used to uncover them? Etc.

## 2 September 10: Is the Science of Comparative Politics Possible? - II Science

### *Required*

- Fearon, J. D. (1991). Counterfactuals and hypothesis testing in political science. *World Politics*, 43(2):169–95

### *Recommended*

- Wuffle, A. (2015). Uncle wuffle's reflections on political science methodology. *PS*, pages 176–182
- Wagner, R. H. (2001). Who's afraid of "rational choice theory"?

Presentation Topic: Experiments in political science

Possible Discussion Topics:

1. Go over logic exercise in the assigned reading from last week,

2. Some authors claim causality should be defined in terms of causal mechanisms rather than causal effects, while statisticians tend to claim that causality should be defined via the notion of causal effect. What is at stake in this debate? And why should you always prefer to be able to identify both the causal effect and the causal mechanism behind that effect?
3. Einstein is famous for saying that “Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler”. Discuss what this implies for scientific research? What does this imply for how you should approach scientific arguments?
4. Scientists often distinguish the world of facts and the world of values. Yet in political discourse, political actors from all sides often argue that some fact should not be investigated or should be disregarded because it is morally wrong. Discuss what difficulties this implies for knowledge accumulation in the sciences, especially the social sciences? Does this also create difficulties when trying to figure out what is good?
5. Taking the fundamental problem of causal inference into account, can history be studied without engaging in reasoning about counterfactuals?

### 3 September 17: Does Democracy Cause Growth or Is It the Other Way Around?

#### *Required*

- Treisman, D. (2020). Economic development and democracy: Predispositions and triggers. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 23
- Acemoglu, D. and Robinson, J. A. (2018). Beyond modernization theory. *Annals of Comparative Democratization*, 16(3):26–31

#### *Recommended*

- Acemoglu, D., Naidu, S., Restrepo, P., and Robinson, J. A. (2019). Democracy does cause growth. *Journal of Political Economy*, 127(1):47–100

Presentation Topic: Do democracies select more competent leaders?

Possible Discussion Topics:

1. Treisman highlights several possible causal mechanisms that could explain why and how modernisation could affect democratisation. Have a student pick one, let her/him research one paper that details that one mechanism more precisely and have her/him argue in favour or against that mechanism to open a discussion on whether students find that causal mechanism plausible.
2. Have one student read and present the introduction of the paper by Melissa Dell (2010, *Econometrica*) and let students then have a discussion of whether they find the causal mechanism highlighted by Dell plausible. What really are the differences between the arguments made by proponents of modernisation theory and proponents of the institutionalist account?

## 4 September 24: Why Do Authoritarian Regimes Vary So Much?

### *Required*

- Haber, S. (2006). Authoritarian government. In Weingast, B. R. and Wittman, D. A., editors, *Oxford Handbook of Political Economy*, pages 693–707. Oxford University Press

### *Recommended*

- Guriev, S. and Treisman, D. (2019). Informational autocrats. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*

Presentation Topic: Media control in authoritarian regimes

Possible Discussion Topics:

1. In the required reading, Haber discusses two hypotheses about the relationship of natural resources and authoritarianism. The first claims that having a large stock of natural resources leads to authoritarianism. The second, on the contrary, claims that having authoritarian institutions leads the economy being organised around the extraction of natural resources. Which one of these two hypotheses do you find more convincing and why?
2. In the recommended reading, Guriev and Treisman describe a new form of dictatorship that is based first and foremost on the manipulation of information and less on repression and violence. Given that these informational autocrats try very hard to be perceived as democrats by their own people, they set-up seemingly democratic institutions that they manipulate. In the required reading, Haber distinguishes several types of dictatorships and argues that democratisation is more likely to occur for some types than for others. In light of the discussion by Haber, what specific challenges do you think stand in the way of full democratisation of informational autocracies?

## 5 October 1: Some Fundamentals about Democratic Decision-Making

### *Required*

- Clark, W. R., Golder, M., and Golder, S. N. (2018c). Problems with group decision making. In *Principles of Comparative Politics*, chapter 11. SAGE Publications

### *Recommended*

- Shepsle, K. A. (1992). Congress is a “they,” not an “it”: Legislative intent as oxymoron. *International Review of Law and Economics*, 12(2):239–256

Presentation Topic: Majority judgement

Possible Discussion Topics:

1. After each election, election winners claim that the people have spoken and provided them with a mandate to implement the policies they advertised during the electoral campaign. In representative democracies, however, the constitution usually rests on a notion of trustee mandate of representation and not on a delegate mandate of representation. In the light of Arrow's theorem, which model of representation, delegate or trustee, do you think is more meaningful?
2. Arrow's theorem and the various possibilities of agenda-manipulation paint a bleak picture of the possibility of reaching meaningful decisions in a democracy. Yet, in political philosophy, democracy is usually seen as comprising more than simply voting, but also includes the right for each citizen to her/his opinion and mechanisms for citizens to deliberate about which options are indeed best for the collectivity. In light of the various results presented in the required reading, how important for the good functioning of democracy, do you think a commitment to shared discussion and deliberation across all political views is for democracy?

## 6 October 8: Elections and Electoral Systems

### *Required*

- Grofman, B. (2016). Perspectives on the comparative study of electoral systems. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 19:523–540

### *Recommended*

- Pons, V. and Tricaud, C. (2018). Expressive voting and its cost: Evidence from runoffs with two or three candidates. *Econometrica*, 86(5):1621–1649

Presentation Topic: What explains the choice of an electoral system?

Possible Discussion Topics:

1. In light of the Gibbard/Satterthwaite theorem, the examples presented in class, and the results found by Pons and Tricaud in the recommended reading, do you think that strategic voting undermines democracy?
2. In the required reading, Grofman argues that plurality elections are linked to decisive outcomes and greater government accountability, while proportional representation leads to coalition governments with several political parties. Looking at the current situation in the UK regarding Brexit, do you think the UK government would have an easier time finding a solution to the Brexit problem under proportional representation than under plurality rule?

## 7 October 15: Accountability and Representation

### *Required*

- Ashworth, S. (2012). Electoral accountability: Recent theoretical and empirical work. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 15:183–201

*Recommended*

- Becher, M. and Menéndez González, I. (2019). Electoral reform and trade-offs in representation. *American Political Science Review*, 113(3):694–709

Presentation Topic: Is Justice Blind When it Runs for Office?

Possible Discussion Topics:

1. A long-standing claim in democratic theory is that, in order for democracy to function properly, voters need to be well-informed and rational. In light of the arguments presented in the required reading and the arguments presented during the lecture, how much do you agree with this claim. Why, why not?
2. One result discussed in Ashworth is that incumbents will be more responsive the greater the reward to winning the election is. One aspect of winning the election is the wage that the politician is paid while in office. Looking at the studies mentioned by Ashworth do you think the wages of politicians should be increased?

**8 October 22: Federalism***Required*

- Beramendi, P. (2009). Federalism. In *Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*. Oxford University Press

*Recommended*

- Brollo, F. and Nannicini, T. (2012). Tying your enemy's hands in close races: The politics of federal transfers in Brazil. *American Political Science Review*, 106(4):742–761

Presentation Topic: Partisan Federalism

Possible Discussion Topics:

1. In the required reading, Beramendi claims that “subnational governments have an incentive to incur debt and hope to be bailed out by the center whenever the financial crisis reaches its limit”. Discuss different mechanisms by which a federation may mitigate this problem. What mechanism does the European Union use to deal with this difficulty?
2. In the required reading, Beramendi argues that issues of self-selection and endogeneity make the analysis of the consequences of federalism particularly challenging. He argues for an approach based on *moments of exogeneity*. What does he mean by that and on what assumptions about federal institutions does such an empirical strategy rest?

## 9 November 5: Separation of Powers

### Required

- Samuels, D. (2009). Separation of powers. In *Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*. Oxford University Press

### Recommended

- Figueiredo, R. J. P. D., Jacobi, T., and Weingast, B. R. (2006). The new separation-of-powers approach to american politics. In *Oxford Handbook of Political Economy*. Oxford University Press

Presentation Topic: Presidential Vetoes

Possible Discussion Topics:

1. In the required reading, Samuels presents data and arguments that suggest that presidentialism may facilitate the emergence of political crises and/or collapse of democracy. Based on the arguments that explain this effect of presidentialism compared to parliamentarism, do you think semi-presidential systems are less or more prone to political crises and/or collapse of democracy?
2. In the required reading, Samuels mentions that some scholars believe that presidentialism leads to lower electoral accountability as the separation of powers creates a lack of clarity of responsibility and hence makes it more difficult for voters to identify who is responsible for good or bad policy outcomes. Other scholars argue that presidentialism gives voters two opportunities (the president and the legislature are elected in separate elections), rather than a single one (voters only elect the legislature), to control politicians, which improves electoral accountability. How can voters use the two votes to improve accountability?

## 10 November 12: Courts and Judicial Review

### Required

- Vanberg, G. (2015). Constitutional courts in comparative perspective: A theoretical assessment. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 18:167–185

### Recommended

- Canes-Wrone, B., Clark, T. S., and Kelly, J. P. (2014). Judicial selection and death penalty decisions. *American Political Science Review*, 108(1):23–39

Presentation Topic: The US Supreme Court and Public Opinion

Possible Discussion Topics:

1. In many countries, the constitutional court is considered as an institution designed to protect democracy against the possible return of authoritarianism. Considering the explanations for judicial independence provided in the required reading, under what conditions do you think constitutional courts can serve as a shield to authoritarian tendencies?



2. In light of the explanations for judicial independence provided in the required reading, how concerned are you about the possibility of a ‘government of judges’?

## 11 November 19: Groups and Interests

### *Required*

- Scheve, K. and Stasavage, D. (2017). Wealth inequality and democracy. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 20:451–468

### *Recommended*

- Ansolabehere, S., de Figueiredo, J. M., and Snyder, J. M. J. (2003). Why is there so little money in u.s. politics? *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 17(1):105–130

Presentation Topic: Should Campaign Contributions Be Limited?

Possible Discussion Topics:

1. In the required reading, Scheve and Stasavage discuss how societies divided along other cleavages than economic inequality, may be unable to agree on reducing inequality. How convincing do you find such an argument? What kind of cleavages may prevent the adoption of policies that reduce wealth inequality in today’s democracies?
2. In the required reading, Scheve and Stasavage discuss how different conceptions about fairness may lead voters to support or not support wealth distribution. One possible consequence of that argument is that democracies do not lead to the reduction of wealth inequality but lead to a wealth inequality that is derived from social processes that are considered to be fair rather than from outright rent extraction. Relating this to the class on authoritarian politics, how plausible do you find such a hypothesis? How would you study it?

## 12 November 26: Media

### *Required*

- Prior, M. (2013). Media and political polarization. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 16(101-127)

### *Recommended*

- Boxell, L., Gentzkow, M., and Shapiro, J. M. (2017). Greater internet use is not associated with faster growth in political polarization among us demographic groups. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 114:10612–10617

Presentation Topic: Fake News in the 2016 US Presidential Election

Possible Discussion Topics:

1. Based on the evidence presented in the required reading, what impact, if any, do you expect the emergence of news outlets with a stronger partisan bend to have on electoral accountability? Why?

2. The internet makes it much easier to produce partisan news. At the same time, it also makes it much easier for anyone to reach out for information across the political spectrum. Based on the information presented in the required reading about exposure choices by citizens to different news outlets, which of these effects do you think is more likely to dominate?