



Universidad
de Navarra

Contemporary Political Systems

Teaching guide 2025-26

INTRODUCTION

***Please take note that this syllabus will undergo revisions before the fall semester begins, but the overall direction and emphasis of the course will remain unchanged.*

This course aims to familiarize students with the fundamental concepts, analytical methods, and theoretical approaches that are central to the subfield of comparative politics. The discussions will be organized around essential questions and topics that shape comparative research, while also critically examining the strengths and weaknesses of different theories. Given the limitations of a single semester, it is impossible to cover a specific topic or the entire subfield comprehensively. Therefore, this course serves as an introduction to comparative research and encourages students to delve deeper into the subject matter.

All the required articles and book chapters will be made available in electronic format. Occasionally, I will also provide additional readings. These issues will be discussed on the first day of class.

- **Degree:** Global journalism
- **Module in the degree program:** Module II Journalism environments. Course 2: Legal and political environment.
- **ECTS:** 6
- **Year, semester:** 2nd year, Autumn semester
- **Type of course:** Required
- **Instructor:** Aurken Sierra Iso, Ph. D. *Assistant professor*
- **Language:** English
- **Lecture schedule:** Tuesdays, 12:00 - 14:00 (Classroom 11); Thursdays 17:30 - 19:30 (Classroom, 1)

Final exam, date and venue: December 10th, class 4, 4 p.m.

LEARNING OUTCOMES (Competencies)

Knowledge

- **RA1** - That students have demonstrated possession and understanding of knowledge in a field of study that is based on general secondary education, and is usually found at a level that, while supported by advanced textbooks, also includes some aspects that involve knowledge from the cutting edge of their field of study.
- **RA5** - Knowing the main constitutive elements of contemporary society, specifically in social, political, and economic issues related to current events.

Skills

- **RA13** - Expressing knowledge and ideas orally and in writing, with rigor, order, and creativity in order to disseminate knowledge to society.

Competencies



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- **RA24** - Understanding, analyzing, and critically evaluating the constitutive elements of the human being and contemporary society in its multiple dimensions: anthropological, historical, cultural, political, social, and economic.
- **RA27** - Interpreting and assessing the historical evolution of the recent world and understanding its political, economic, social, and cultural parameters that impact the good practice of a communicator.

Conceptual objectives of the subject:

The main objective of this course is to equip students with the necessary conceptual foundation encompassing various approaches to social inquiry in comparative politics, as well as different substantive subfields within the discipline. Additionally, the course aims to furnish students with a toolkit of analytical skills that they can employ to comprehend and critically assess current matters in comparative politics. By the end of this course, you should be capable of:

- Explain and evaluate what comparative politics, as a subfield, is about.
- Critique approaches and articles, and identify weaknesses, using your own insights or those of other approaches.
- Pursue further study of or research on related topics such as conflict studies or developmental studies.

How to maximize your learning experience

- Be prepared to read, think and discuss... a lot.
- Know that I have very high expectations of your work and that you should as well.
- Schedule appointments to meet with me to discuss your progress, writing, and understanding of course material. I am always willing to help.
- Plan to come to class every day and remember: 'To be early' is to be on time, to be 'on time' is to be late, and to be 'late' is just unacceptable.

Interactive lecture

An important aspect of this class will involve active class participation, which will entail discussing the assigned articles, critically analyzing theoretical approaches, and engaging in meaningful interactions with your peers. Therefore, it is crucial that you thoroughly read the assigned required readings before each class session. During the lectures, I will provide general theoretical and topical overviews, as well as cover key terms and principles that are addressed in the readings. It is expected that you complete all the required readings by the specified dates, as this will enable you to actively contribute to the class discussions.

To read efficiently, it is recommended that you avoid reading the text word by word in a meticulous and comprehensive manner. Instead, skim through the introduction and conclusion, if available, to identify the author's main argument(s). Then, scan the section headings (or the first sentence of each paragraph) to understand how the author develops and supports their argument. Finally, focus on detailed reading only for those sections that provide clarification or offer supporting evidence for the argument. If you find yourself spending more than three hours on a set of readings, it indicates that you are reading too closely. Additionally, allocate some time for reflection and contemplation on the readings:

- What is the author's main argument?
- What evidence is used to support the argument?
- Is the argument and evidence compelling? Are there alternative explanations?
- How does the reading relate to previous ones covered in the course?



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- Why are we reading this?

Participation

Active and mandatory participation is a fundamental aspect of this course. Your responsibilities include:

1. Coming to class having thoroughly read the assigned material and actively contributing to class discussions.
2. Staying updated with relevant news related to our topics.
3. Engaging in critical reflection on concepts and articles we encounter.

Transforming a conventional lecture-style class into an engaging and insightful seminar requires the collective and interactive participation of every student. Therefore, the quality of your learning experience hinges on vibrant and respectful exchanges of thoughts and criticisms. Your grade will be based on the quantity and quality of your participation, as well as your attendance. It should be evident that attending class is crucial to earning a high participation grade. Below are the defined criteria for different qualities of comments. Comment Quality:

- “High”: Comments show reflection about the reading or the discussion at hand, contribution through strong points and/or adding value to the discussion by stating their opinion based on factual knowledge.
- “Satisfying”: Comments show engagement in class discussion, willingness to “take a guess”, and ability to link previous lecture material to discussions at hand, as well as expressing opinions.
- “Low”: Comments show engagement in class discussion, but the student never contributes to the added value or demonstrates knowledge from the readings – they are just working for that tick mark.

Competency and skill objectives of the subject that the student must develop:

- Develop the capacity to analyze issues of current events.
- Develop the ability to understand and produce international political information.
- Develop a critical spirit towards contemporary political reality.
- Develop the skill to organize complex communicative knowledge in a coherent manner and its interrelationship with other social, human, and technological sciences, as well as with the methods and techniques of these disciplines.

Use of laptops & other electronic devices

All class material is provided electronically, so extensive use of laptops for note taking is not necessary and can be done by hand. Therefore, **the use of any electronic device during class is strictly prohibited and will only be allowed under special circumstances.** If you need to use an electronic device for medical reasons, please let me know. Lastly, smart/cell phones should be set to silent, not vibrate.

PROGRAM

The course is divided into three sections to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of comparative politics.

In the first section, students will be introduced to the foundations of comparative politics. They will explore the core concepts, including the state, nationalism, and ethnic identity. Moreover, they will gain insights into the methodologies and approaches used by social



scientists in studying politics. This section aims to give students a solid grasp of the fundamental principles and tools necessary to analyze and compare political systems.

The second section focuses on political institutions, regime types, and the dynamics of regime change. Students will examine the structures and functions of political institutions and governments. They will delve into the characteristics and workings of democratic regimes, such as the definition of democracy, the origins of democracy, and the institutions that underpin democratic systems. Case studies will be utilized to explore different models of democracy, including parliamentary, presidential, and semi-presidential systems. Nondemocratic regimes, including totalitarian and authoritarian systems, will also be analyzed, with an emphasis on understanding their origins and mechanisms of control. The section concludes with an exploration of regime transitions and the role of political violence and social movements in shaping political transformations.

The final section of the course addresses a range of special topics in comparative politics. Students will examine electoral systems, exploring their impact on political representation and decision-making processes. They will also delve into the complexities of political violence, understanding its causes, manifestations, and implications for political stability. Additionally, the course will explore various dimensions of political systems, such as civil society, social movements, and their role in shaping democratic processes. The section will also touch upon the challenges and prospects for democratic development in different regions around the world.

Through this course, students will develop a comprehensive understanding of comparative politics and the analytical frameworks used to study it. They will gain the ability to critically analyze political systems, institutions, and processes across different countries and regions. By examining core concepts, studying real-world case studies, and engaging with special topics, students will acquire a nuanced perspective on the complexities and dynamics of politics in a comparative context. Overall, the course aims to equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate and understand the diverse political landscapes of our interconnected world.

(I) INTRODUCTION TO COMPARATIVE POLITICS

1. The comparative method:
 1. A guiding concept: political institutions
 2. A guiding ideal: reconciling freedom and equality
 3. Theories and methods
2. The state
3. Nations and societies:
 1. Nationalism
 2. Ethnicity
 3. Political culture
 4. Political participation

(II) INSTITUTIONS, REGIME TYPES, AND ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

1. Institutions
 1. Structures and institutions
 2. Governments and bureaucracies
 3. Multilevel government
2. Democratic regimes:
 1. Defining democracy
 2. Origins of democracy
 3. Democracies



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4. Contemporary democratization: modernization, elites, society, international relations, culture & democratization.
5. Institutions of the democratic state
3. Models of democracy: parliamentary system
 1. Case studies: UK and Japan
4. Models of democracy: presidential systems
 1. Case studies: US, Mexico, Nigeria, and Brazil, four cases for one system.
5. Models of democracy: semi-presidential systems
 1. Case study: France
 2. Parliamentary, presidential and semi-presidential systems: benefits and drawbacks.
 3. Political parties and party systems: functions, models, and stabilization of democracy.
 4. Elections and referendums
 5. Electoral systems
6. Nondemocratic regimes
 1. Defining non-democratic rule
 2. Totalitarianism and nondemocratic rule
 3. Origins and sources of nondemocratic rule: modernization, elites, society, IR, culture, and nondemocratic rule
 4. Beyond Totalitarianism: understanding authoritarian regimes
 5. How do authoritarian regimes perform
 6. Political control
 7. Coercion and surveillance
 8. Co-optation: corporatism and clientelism
7. Personality cults
 1. Case study: Iran
 2. Models of nondemocratic rule
 3. Illiberal regimes
8. Regime transitions
 1. Retreat or retrenchment for non-democratic regimes?
 2. What causes democratization
 3. Political Violence and social movements: terrorism and Revolution

(III) SPECIAL TOPICS ON COMPARATIVE POLITICS (WHICH WE WILL NOT SEE IN CLASS)

1. Developed democracies
 1. Defining developed democracies
 2. Freedom and equality in developed democracies
 3. Contemporary challenges
 4. Political institutions and social institutions
 5. Developed democracies in transition
2. Civil Society and social capital
 1. Democracy and civic culture
 2. Social movements
3. Communism and post-communism
 1. Communism equality and the nature of human relations
 2. Revolution and the 'Triumph' of Communism
 3. Putting communism into practice
 4. Societal institutions under communism
 5. The collapse of communism
 6. Transformation of political and societal institutions
4. Global South
 1. Freedom and equality
 2. Imperialism and colonialism



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3. Institutions of imperialism
4. The challenges of post-imperialism
5. Puzzles and Prospects for democracy and development
5. Populism in comparative perspective

EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES

I. CLASSROOM TEACHING ACTIVITIES

1. Lectures (60 hours)

Lectures by the professor on Thursdays and Fridays. These classes will cover the most important aspects of the programme. Students should come to these classes having read the texts provided by ADI. The materials used in class —such as slides— will be uploaded to ADI at the end of the topic.

2. Group meetings (1 hour)

Students are required to submit a written report by November 15, prior to the end of the course. To complete this report, regular meetings with their peers will be essential, and optional meetings with the instructor are also available for additional guidance.

3. Exams (5 hours)

Exams to assess the successful accomplishment of the objectives.

- Midterm: 2 hours
- Final: 3 hours

II. PERSONAL WORK (84 hours)

- Personal study: 50 hours (readings) + 24 hours (revise).
- Monitoring and analysis of political information and its correlation with the course content: 10 hours.

ASSESSMENT

ORDINARY CALL

The final grade for the course will correspond to the teacher's overall assessment of the student's achievement of the planned objectives. In any case, it is essential to pass the written test of topics 2 to 4 in order to pass the course.

The assessed activities and criteria will be:

- Class attendance and participation: 10% of the final grade. This includes active participation and answering questions related to mandatory readings.
- Assessed student work: Written Report: 20%
- Exams will be worth **70%** of the final grade.
 - Midterm: 35%
 - Final exam: 35%/70%. If the midterm exam is failed, the final exam will automatically be worth 70% of the final grade and will act as only exam.

Exams shall consist of two parts:



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- Part 1: 60 multiple-choice questions. These questions will have two formats (explained in class).
- Part 2: up to four development and analysis questions.

Assessments

Weekly Reading (WR)

Students will complete one required WR per week. These WRs complement classroom instruction and include reflective questions to deepen understanding. To encourage active participation, some WRs will be discussed in class by volunteer students, who will earn participation points based on the quality of their contributions. For other WRs, students will complete brief multiple-choice quizzes to assess comprehension and attendance.

Written Report

Students will submit a written report in groups of five by November 15. The report must follow the guidelines outlined in class, which are also available on Blackboard.

RESIT

The retake in June will consist of a single exam which will account for 100% of the subject. This exam will consist of two parts:

- Part 1: a multiple-choice test of 60 questions.
- Part 2: up to six development and analysis questions.

Repeating students must take the course in the same way as first-year students.

Criteria to pass the course

- Students whose final grade is 5 points or more will pass the course.
- Students whose final grade is below 5 points will not pass the course and will be graded as *Suspenso*.
- Students who do not take the final exam will not pass the course and will be graded as *No presentado*.

Exams review

- Students will be able to review the exams in an interview with the professor, once the grades have been published.

OFFICE HOURS

Aurken Sierra, Ph. D.

- Office 0621
- Sánchez Bella building, Ground floor, left corridor.
- Office hours: Mondays 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. and Wednesdays 1 p.m. to 2:30 p.m. **by appointment** (write to aurken@unav.es or schedule a meeting [here](#)).

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND RESOURCES

Some handbooks:



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- Boix, C. & Stokes, S. 2007. *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [Find it in the Library](#)
- Caramani, Daniele. *Comparative Politics*. 2nd ed. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2011. [Find it in the Library](#)
- O'Neil, P. H., Fields, K. J. & Share, D. (2020). *Essentials of comparative politics*, Seventh Edition | New York: W.W. Norton & Company. [Find it in the Library](#)
- O'Neil, P. H., Fields, K. J. & Share, D. (2021). *Cases and concepts in comparative politics*, Second edition | New York: W.W. Norton & Company

***All the required articles and book chapters will be made available in electronic format. Occasionally, I will also provide additional readings. These issues will be discussed on the first day of class.*

Other books:

- Gómez Antón. (2003). *7 potencias : instituciones políticas e historia reciente (1945-2000)* (4a ed.). Ediciones Internacionales Universitarias.
- Mellone. (2003). Richard Gunther, José Ramón Montero e Juan J. Linz (a cura di), *Political Parties. Old Concepts and New Challenges*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. vii+371, Isbn 0-19-924674-2. *Rivista Italiana Di Scienza Politica*, 33(2), 342–344. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0048840200027258>
- Gunther, Montero, J. R., & Linz, J. J. (2002). *Political parties : old concepts and new challenges*. Oxford University Press.
- Levitsky, & Ziblatt, D. (2019). *How democracies die*. Penguin Books.