Introduction to Comparative Politics

BFSU Summer School
2018

“He who knows one country, knows no country.”

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Proposed Session: July 23rd to August 3rd.
Proposed Time Slot: Tues-Friday, 8:30-12:00 (with 30 minute break 10:00-10:30)

Course Description:
The course is an introduction to the study of comparative politics and provides an overview of some of the key theoretical frameworks, concepts, and analytical methods of this field of study. We study political systems around the world with a view to understanding and explaining their differences and similarities with respect to political institutions, the behaviour of key political actors, and their policymaking processes and performance. Among other things, comparative politics teaches us about the causes and effects of different ways of organizing the institutions of government: for instance what are the consequences of choosing a strong president versus a strong parliament or a highly proportional versus a majoritarian electoral system.

The over-arching goal of this course is to introduce students to the practice of comparison in a systematic and social scientific way. We will encounter a range of methods used in comparative politics from historical case studies to large N quantitative studies. No prior knowledge is required or assumed. By the end of this class, students should learn to become critical consumers of journalistic and academic writing. After taking this module, students should understand how to make intelligent and informed comparisons across states, regions and organizations for themselves.

Learning Outcomes
On successful completion of this module students should be able to:

• Describe and assess the study of comparative politics in a systematic, social scientific way
• Examine key issues in comparative politics
• Identify interesting research questions in comparative politics
• Evaluate the usefulness of various theoretical approaches to address research questions
• Describe a variety of political systems around the world
• Explain how political regimes emerge and survive

Course Structure
1) 15-25 Students registered:
The module is run as a seminar. That means that everyone is expected to attend having completed the required readings, ready to participate. A series of questions will be provided in advance of each session to assist students to actively engage with the material. A short presentation (15-20 minutes) at the beginning of each class will also be provided, to focus our discussions.
2) 26-50 Students registered:
The class will proceed by a mixture of lecture and interaction.
Group work will also be included with groups providing feedback to the class.

Grades and Evaluation (seminar based class).
Grades will be assigned on the basis of the final exam, seminar participation and a short paper.
The following weights are attached to each component.

Attendance and Participation: 10.0%  
Two short reaction papers: 40.0%  
Final Paper: 50.0%

Seminar participation (10%)
Class will proceed by discussion and student participation. It is, therefore, important that all students come prepared and ready to be involved. Students should have read the required readings for each class.

Two short reaction papers (worth 20 percent each):
Reaction papers should not be longer than two pages and can be as short as one (400-700 words, as a guideline). They can contain comments, questions, and thoughts about the day’s readings. You may also write your reaction paper in the form of a short review of a book or article. You must complete one of these papers during the first week of class.

Final Paper (50.0%):
Write an essay on one of the following topics (sample questions):

1) Is the concept of political culture useful in explaining differences in levels of institutional performance? Your answer should include a discussion of the critiques of the concept of civic culture.
2) Can constitutional courts be characterised as policy makers? Include examples in your answer.
3) Is it irrational to vote?
4) “Presidentialism is inherently more unstable than parliamentarism”. Discuss.

The essay should be a maximum of 1800 words in length (excluding the bibliography).

For the essay, you are required to (i) draw on academic literature (articles and/or books) and (ii) properly cite the academic literature you use to prepare your essay.

If you require information on proper citation style, please refer to one of the following books:

Readings
Students are responsible for reading the articles and book chapters listed under Required Readings. The literature listed under Recommended Readings is meant to suggest some starting points for further study, e.g., if you happen to be particularly interested in a certain topic and want to pursue the topic further, or for the paper. Obviously, the list of recommended readings is not comprehensive and you are free, indeed encouraged, to read beyond the reading list for essays. The list points to a select few classic, seminal and/or particularly interesting studies in the field.

For the course, we will be using the following textbook:


Week 1

Tuesday July 23rd
Session 1.1: Introduction

The Comparative Method: Comparing Regimes.

Required readings


Session 1.2: Worked Example: Comparing Democracies

Is consensus democracy “kinder, gentler democracy”?

Required readings


Recommended readings

Session 2: Regime Choices: Presidentialism versus Parliamentarism

*Are presidential systems less stable than parliamentary ones?*

**Required readings**

**Recommended readings**

Session 3: Regime Choices: Federalism and Bicameralism

*Why do some federations excel whilst others fail?*

**Required readings**

**Recommended readings**
Session 4: Constitutions and Judicial Politics

Is a ‘government of judges’ a real danger?

Required readings


Recommended readings


WEEK 2:

Session 5: Electoral Systems

Are some electoral systems superior to others?

Required readings


Recommended readings


Session 6: Political Culture

Do political cultures exist and do they shape political outcomes?

Required readings

**Recommended readings**


**Session 7: Civil Wars and Ethnic Politics**

*Do ethnic differences foster conflict?*

**Required readings**


**Recommended readings**


**Session 8: Political Representation**

*Should elites be representative, what difference does it make and how do we achieve representativeness?*


**Recommended readings**