

Political Science 3213G
Comparative Authoritarianism
Winter Term 2026

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Office Hours: Thursday 4-5:30, or by appointment

Course Description

Historically, most political regimes have been authoritarian, and there is certainly no sign of authoritarianism's disappearance in our time, even if there have been some remarkable recent challenges to authoritarian regimes. This course addresses the sources of authoritarianism, the varieties of authoritarian regime, the institutions and practices supportive of dictatorship, the causes of authoritarian decline and failure, and the authoritarian impulses residing within some democratic regimes.

Course Format

This course will take place in person. Our class meetings will combine lecture segments with plenty of opportunities for questions and discussion. So, please do show up to our Thursday sessions having read and absorbed the assigned readings, and ready to engage with the material in vigorous and critical fashion. All assigned readings will be made available on the OWL site. There is one book we will read just about entirely: Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz, 2018. *How Dictatorships Work: Power, Personalization, and Collapse*. Cambridge University Press. Course Readings will link to the library's online copy of this book, as will the library website, but you can also access physical copies elsewhere if desired.

Learning Outcomes

In this course, you will develop the ability to: (a) distinguish between types of political regimes and types of authoritarian regimes in particular; (b) identify the ways authoritarians exercise and perpetuate their power; (c) understand the sources of resistance to authoritarianism; (d) explain why dictatorships weaken and fail, and how their legacy affects subsequent regime formation; and (e) make sense of the possible impact of authoritarian influences within democratic regimes.

Requirements and Evaluation

- 1) Midterm Exam (25%)
- 2) Country Case Study (30%)
- 3) Final Exam (35%)
- 4) Participation (10%)

Midterm Exam

The exam will emphasize the material from the early weeks of the course. But it will also require added preparation based on student absorption of at least three high-quality sources (e.g., articles, book chapters) covering the relevant details of an authoritarian regime in a chosen country. The exam will feature a 30-minute question based on our coverage in week 2 – just readings and lectures. This will be followed by a 60-minute essay applying the key typological material to the selected country case – using both the assigned materials and the additional, non-syllabus student research. Although the long essay question will not be available in advance, it will involve applying the case-based material to the conceptual and theoretical material along these lines: What type of authoritarian regime is it? Does it fit easily or with difficulty into its category? What are the indicators that help you to determine this? What are the strengths and weaknesses associated with its character and organization? In what ways is its performance affected by these features? The exam will take place in class on February 12th. This assignment is not eligible for absence without formal accommodation. Students receiving formal accommodation will have the opportunity to write the exam on February 26th at 6 pm.

Country Case Study

Students will be expected to select a country case during a period of authoritarian rule, one *not* covered in the student's midterm exam, and respond to the following questions: What is the nature of the political regime? Does it fall into a single regime category, or is it a hybrid of one sort or another? How, and to what extent, has the regime been institutionalized? How has the regime attempted to sustain itself? What are the regime's strengths and weaknesses? Has it been stable and successful, and why or why not? Have the regime's institutional features been helpful or not in this regard, or have factors external to the regime played the central role in determining key outcomes? Length: 7-8 pages, double-spaced, one-inch margins, standard font size. In addition to syllabus materials, please use at least six high-quality non-syllabus sources (e.g., journal articles, book chapters). The key is to consider the various tools developed in the course as providing the conceptual and theoretical foundations for the paper, and to rely upon your additional research for details on your country case, producing a paper which integrates syllabus and non-syllabus sources. **Due date:** April 3, 11:59 pm, with flexibility to April 5, 11:59 pm. **Late penalty:** 2% per day, beginning after April 5.

Final Exam

Students will write a two-hour formal exam. The exam will take place as determined by the registrar. Details on the structure of the exam will be provided ahead of time.

Participation

Students will be expected to participate regularly and constructively in our weekly meetings. Participation will be evaluated based on the following considerations: relevance, responsiveness to the material laid out in assigned readings and lecture segments, and insightfulness. Keep in mind that a well-informed and helpful question can be an important element in course participation.

***Attendance is required for success in this course.

***Electronic devices will be permissible only for the purpose of note-taking and any other class-related activities. Disruptive use of these devices will not be permitted.

Prerequisite

Political Science 2231E (2531F/G) or 2245E (2545F/G) or International Relations 2701E (2704F/G).

Unless you have either the requisites for this course or written special permission from your Dean to enroll in it, you may be removed from this course and it will be deleted from your record. This decision may not be appealed. You will receive no adjustment to your fees in the event that you are dropped from a course for failing to have the necessary prerequisites.

Plagiarism and AI

Academic offenses such as plagiarism and reliance on AI technologies such as ChatGPT will be taken very seriously. Students are expected to research and write their own assignments in full. All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between The University of Western Ontario and Turnitin.com.

COURSE READINGS:

Week One

Introduction (January 8)

No required readings.

Week Two

Regime Types: Democracy and Dictatorship (January 15)

Jose Cheibub, Jennifer Gandhi, and James Vreeland, 2009. "Democracy and Dictatorship Revisited." *Public Choice* 143 (1-2): 67-101.

Barbara Geddes, 1999. "What Have We Learned About Democratization After 20 Years?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 2: 115-144.

Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz, 2018. *How Dictatorships Work: Power, Personalization, and Collapse*. Cambridge University Press, chapter 1.

Week Three

***Sources of Dictatorship* (January 22)**

Geddes et al., *How Dictatorships Work*, chapters 2 and 3.

Dan Slater, “Violent Origins of Authoritarian Variation: Rebellion Type and Regime Type in Cold War Southeast Asia.” *Government and Opposition* vol. 55 (2020): 21-40.

V. Ximena Velasco Guachalla, Calla Hummel, Sam Handlin, and Amy Erica Smith, “Latin America Erupts: When Does Competitive Authoritarianism Take Root?” *Journal of Democracy* vol. 32, no. 3 (July 2021): 63-77.

Week Four

***Monarchy and Totalitarianism* (January 29)**

John Gerring, Tore Wig, Wouter Veenendaal, Daniel Weitzel, Jan Teorell, and Kyosuke Kikuta, 2021. “Why Monarchy? The Rise and Demise of a Regime Type.” *Comparative Political Studies* 54 (3-4): 585-622.

Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, 1956. *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*. Harvard University Press, chapters 1 and 3.

Antonio Costa Pinto, 2002. “Elites, Single Parties and Political Decision-making in Fascist-era Dictatorships.” *Contemporary European History* 11 (3): 429-54.

Week Five

***Personalist and Military Regimes* (February 5)**

Geddes et al., *How Dictatorships Work*, chapters 4 and 5 (pp. 95-101).

Wonjun Song and Joseph Wright, 2018. “The North Korean Autocracy in Comparative Perspective.” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 18: 157-180.

Week Six

***Midterm Exam* (February 12)**

****Break Week: No session February 19**

Week Seven

***Repression* (February 26)**

Geddes et al., *How Dictatorships Work*, chapter 7.

Sheena Chestnut Greitens, 2016. *Dictators and Their Secret Police: Coercive Institutions and State Violence*. New York: Cambridge University Press, chapter 5.

Eva Bellin, “Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring.” *Comparative Politics* 44 2 (2012): 127-49.

Week Eight

***Information and Influence* (March 5)**

Lisa Wedeen, 1998. “Acting ‘As If’: Symbolic Politics and Social Control in Syria.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 40 (3): 503-523.

Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, 2013. “How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression.” *American Political Science Review* 107 (2): 326-343.

Seva Gunitsky, 2015. “Corrupting the Cyber-Commons: Social Media as a Tool of Autocratic Stability.” *Perspectives on Politics* 13 (1): 42-54.

Péter Krekó, 2021. “How Authoritarians Inflate their Image.” *Journal of Democracy* 32 (3): 109-23.

Week Nine

***The Institutional Turn I: Authoritarian Parties* (March 12)**

Geddes et al., *How Dictatorships Work*, chapters 5 (pp. 101-125), and 6 (pp. 129-37).

Benjamin Smith, 2005. “The Life of the Party: The Origins of Regime Breakdown and Persistence Under Single-Party Rule.” *World Politics* 57 (3): 421-451.

Week Ten

***The Institutional Turn II: Authoritarian Elections* (March 19)**

Geddes et al., *How Dictatorships Work*, chapter 6 (pp. 137-53).

Michael Miller, 2015. “Democratic Pieces: Autocratic Elections and Democratic Development Since 1815.” *British Journal of Political Science* 45 (3): 501-30.

Ellen Lust-Okar, 2009. “Legislative Elections in Hegemonic Authoritarian Regimes: Competitive Clientelism and Resistance to Democratization.” In *Democratization by Elections: A New Mode of Transition*, ed., Staffan I. Lindberg. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Week Eleven

China and Russia Compared (March 26)

Andrew Nathan, 2003. “China’s Changing of the Guard: Authoritarian Resilience.” *Journal of Democracy* 14 (1): 6-17.

Joseph Fewsmith, 2021. “Balances, Norms, and Institutions: Why Elite Politics in the CCP Have Not Institutionalized.” *The China Quarterly* 248: 265-282.

Timothy Frye, 2021. *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin’s Russia* (Princeton University Press, 2021), chapter 5.

Karrie J. Koesel and Valerie J. Bunce, 2018. “Diffusion-Proofing: Russian and Chinese Responses to Waves of Popular Mobilization Against Authoritarian Rulers.” In *Citizens and the State in Authoritarian Regimes*, eds., Karrie Koesel, Valerie J. Bunce, and Jessica Chen Weiss. Oxford University Press.

Week Twelve

Authoritarian Collapse and Democratization (April 2)

Geddes et al., *How Dictatorships Work*, chapter 8.

Dan Slater and Joseph Wong, 2013. “The Strength to Concede: Ruling Parties and Democratization in Developmental Asia.” *Perspectives on Politics* 11 (3): 717-733.

Mark R. Beissinger, 2013. “The Semblance of Democratic Revolution: Coalitions in Ukraine’s Orange Revolution.” *American Political Science Review* 107 (3): 574-592.

Week 13

Authoritarian Legacies and Democratic Backsliding (April 9)

Anna Grzymala-Busse, 2019. “Hoist on their Own Petards? The Reinvention and Collapse of Authoritarian Successor Parties.” *Party Politics* 25 (4):569-82.

Sheri Berman, 2013. “The Promise of the Arab Spring: In Political Development, No Pain Without Gain.” *Foreign Affairs* 92 (1): 64-74.

Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufmann, 2021. “Democratic Backsliding.” *Journal of Democracy* 32 (4): 27-41.

Grzegorz Ekiert, Noah Dasanaike, 2024. “The Return of Dictatorship.” *Journal of Democracy* 35 (4): 177-91.

Milan W. Svolik, 2019. “Polarization Versus Democracy.” *Journal of Democracy* 30 (3): 20-32.