

Issues and Policies in American Government: The U.S. in Comparative Perspective

This course analyzes the United States as a prototype of liberal democracy and contrasts the U.S. model with other versions of democracy and with alternative types of political regimes, especially Communist totalitarianism and authoritarian rule. The basic assumption of the course is that we can only appreciate the distinctive nature of the U.S. political system by contrasting it with other ways of organizing politics. Thus, one needs a comparative perspective in order to understand one's own country. Such a comparative analysis also raises an obvious question: Which one of those different ways of organizing politics is best suited for advancing the variegated goals that people pursue in and through politics, especially political freedom, social justice, and economic development?

To perform such comparative analysis and assessment in a systematic fashion, we will first clarify the concept of democracy and examine some of its different versions on a theoretical level. Then the course will contrast the two most influential models of democracy in the contemporary West, namely liberal democracy (as practiced in the U.S.) and social democracy (as practiced in Sweden); we will also analyze Great Britain as a country that moved from social to liberal democracy. In the second half of the course, we will analyze alternatives to modern democracy, namely the Communist system of the former USSR and the authoritarian system prevailing until recently in Mexico. After analyzing the advantages and disadvantages of those regime types by contrast to Western democracy, we will examine the recent transitions to democracy in both of these countries, examining their causes and assessing the future prospects of these fledgling democracies—or nascent authoritarian regimes, as in contemporary Russia.

Thus, by starting at home and then venturing out into the world, the course will make you familiar with the major types of political rule prevailing in the contemporary world and provide a broad overview of politics in the advanced industrialized countries, the (previously) Communist countries, and the Third World of underdeveloped countries. Such a wide-ranging comparative perspective will give you a better understanding of politics in today's increasingly interdependent world. For citizens of a country as deeply involved in world politics as the U.S., such knowledge is indispensable.

This course will train you to think independently and critically about politics. Politics is by nature controversial. The course deliberately covers issues and discusses readings that are controversial. We will first see that there are several different models of democracy that may diverge considerably from the form of democracy established in the U.S. We will analyze the major models in theory and practice, and then assess and compare their advantages and disadvantages. In the second half of the course, we will discuss issues of great relevance for our future, such as the prospects for democracy in the former USSR and the economic and political fate of the Third World. The course tries to teach you how to make up your own mind on these issues and how to advance your position persuasively.

The textbooks for this course have been placed on reserve at Perry Castañeda Library (PCL). They are also available for purchase in the textbook section of the University Co-op Bookstore. **Please make sure you are buying the correct edition, especially if you buy from another source!**

David Held. *Models of Democracy*, 3rd edition. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.

Benjamin Ginsberg and Martin Shefter. *Politics by Other Means*, 3rd edition. New York: W.W. Norton, 2002.

M. Donald Hancock et al., eds. *Politics in Europe: An Introduction*, 4th edition. New York: Chatham House, 2006.

Daniel Levy and Kathleen Bruhn, Mexico: *The Struggle for Democratic Development*, 2nd edition. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

A course packet with xeroxed articles and book chapters is available for purchase at the University Co-op as well. Since the lectures will complement these texts, you need to do the readings before the week for which they are assigned. In order to guide your reading and thinking, weekly sets of study questions are attached to this syllabus.

Three quizzes and three exams will measure your progress. Keep in mind that I want to assess your depth of **understanding** as well as your **knowledge** of relevant concepts, issues, institutions, political forces, etc. The quizzes count 8%, 8%, and 9% towards the course grade, and each exam counts 25%. Please note: Grading is on a 100-point scale (100-93.1=A; 93-90.1=A-; 90-87.1=B+; 87-83.1=B; 83-80.1=B-; 80-77.1=C+; 77-73.1=C; 73-70.1=C-; 70-67.1=D+; 67-63.1=D; 63-60.1=D-; 60-0=F); thus, failure to take an exam or quiz (without an immediately announced & quickly submitted powerful, water-tight, well-documented, written excuse attesting to a truly unpredictable, life-threatening emergency) will result in 0 points. Also, attendance in class is mandatory.

Students with disabilities may request appropriate academic accommodations from UT's Services for Students with Disabilities, 471-6259. All rules established by SSD (e.g., 5 business days prior notice for accommodations) will be followed strictly. UT's honor code governs all work in this course. Students are encouraged to discuss the issues analyzed in this course among each other and to study together before exams, but are not allowed to cooperate or to receive any kind of "help" when taking exams. Please re-read the honor code carefully and ask me in case of any doubt. Violations, which are not that difficult to detect, will be sanctioned **rigorously**.

This course has three TAs, Ryan Lloyd (office hours: Tues 2:00-3:30 pm; Wed. 3:30-5:00 pm, in BAT 1.118), Jessica Price (office hours: Wed. & Thurs., 11:00 am-12:30 pm; in BAT 1.118), and JoBeth Shafran (office hours: Mon. 2:00-3:30 pm; Wed. 3:30-5:00 pm; in BAT 1.118). Jessica Price will also hold **highly recommended** supplementary instruction (SI) sessions (Wed. 4-5 pm PAR 303; Thurs. 10-11 am RLM 5.122). My own office hours will be in Batts 4.126 on Mon. and Wed., 2:00 – 3:30 pm; on Mon. and Fri., 9:00-10:30 a.m.; or by appointment (232-7253). I will be happy to talk to you about any aspect related to the course.

I. CONCEPTS AND MODELS OF DEMOCRACY

1. Democracy: Basic Principles and Historical Origins

Friday - Monday, January 21 - 24:

David Held. *Models of Democracy*, 3rd ed. Introduction and chs. 1-2, pp. 1 - 55.

2. Liberal Democracy - Promise and Problems

Wednesday - Friday, January 26 - 28:

David Held. *Models of Democracy*, ch. 3; pp. 56 - 95.

3. Alternative Concepts: Marxian Democracy and Social Democracy

Monday – Friday, January 31 – February 4:

David Held. *Models of Democracy*, ch. 4; pp. 96 - 122.

Sheri Berman. *Understanding Social Democracy* (in course packet).

Thomas Meyer. *Libertarian & Social Democracies Compared*, in idem, *The Theory of Social Democracy*, pp. 209-215 (course packet).

Friday, February 4: Quiz (15 minutes)

II. WESTERN DEMOCRACY

1. Liberal Democracy - the U.S.

Monday - Friday, February 7 - 11:

Samuel Huntington. *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony*, ch. 2, pp. 13 – 30 (course packet).

Benjamin Ginsberg and Martin Shefter. *Politics by Other Means*, chs. 1-3, pp. 1 - 101.

Friday, February 18: Exam

Monday - Monday, February 14 - 21:

Benjamin Ginsberg and Martin Shefter. *Politics by Other Means*, chs. 4-6, pp. 102 – 170, 212 - 231. (chap. 6 recommended but *not* required).

Eugene Goodheart. *Obama On and off Base* (course packet).

Robin Sears. *The Surprising Failure of the Obama Presidency* (course packet).

Jeremy Kinsman. *Barack Obama – Too Big to Fail?* (course packet).

2. Social Democracy - Sweden

Wednesday - Wednesday, February 23 - March 2:

M. Donald Hancock, Sweden, in Hancock, ed., *Politics in Europe*, pp. 391 - 449.

3. From Social to Liberal Democracy - Great Britain

Friday - Friday, March 4 - 11:

B. Guy Peters & Christopher Carman, United Kingdom, in M. Donald Hancock ed., *Politics in Europe*, pp. 9 - 98.

Wednesday, March 9: Quiz (15 minutes)

III. ALTERNATIVES TO WESTERN DEMOCRACY?

1. Communist Rule and Its Demise: The Soviet Union & Russia

a. The Establishment of Communism

Monday-Friday, March 21 - 25:

Leszek Kolakowski. *Marxist Roots of Stalinism*. pp. 283 - 298 (course packet).

Joan DeBardeleben. *Russian Politics in Transition*, chs. 1-2, pp. 1-84 (course packet).

b. The Demise of Communism and the Process of Democratization

Monday - Friday, March 28 – April 1:

Stephen White, Russia, in M. Donald Hancock, ed., Politics in Europe, pp. 451 - 514.

Monday, April 4: Exam

c. The Prospects for Democracy in Russia and Other Successor States

Wednesday - Monday, April 6 - 11:

Richard Sakwa. The Dual State in Russia (course packet).

Dmitri Trenin. Russia's Conservative Modernization: A Mission Impossible? (course packet).

Charles Fairbanks, Disillusionment in the Caucasus and Central Asia (course packet)

Michael McFaul, Transitions from Postcommunism (course packet).

2. Authoritarian Rule and Its Demise? Mexico as an Example of the Third World

a. Underdevelopment and the Establishment of Authoritarian Rule in Mexico

Wednesday & Friday, April 13 - 15:

Daniel Levy and Kathleen Bruhn, Mexico: The Struggle for Democratic Development, chs. 1-2, pp. 1 – 65.

Monday, April 18: Quiz (15 minutes)

b. The Decline of Authoritarian Rule and Democratization in Mexico

Monday - Friday, April 18 - 22:

Levy and Bruhn, chs. 3-4, pp. 66 - 148.

c. Mexican Democracy in the Era of Globalization

Monday - Wednesday, April 25 - 27:

Levy & Bruhn, read chs. 5, 8, pp. 149 – 179, 258 - 278; speed-read chs. 6-7, pp. 180–257.

3. The Future of Democracy in the World

Friday - Monday, April 30 – May 2: The Future of Democracy

Wednesday, May 4: Review: Major Themes of the Course

Friday, May 6: Exam

NO Final Exam. Any approved make-up quiz or exam will be held on the day and hour designated by the university administration for a final exam in this course:
Monday, May 16, 9:00 am (no exceptions).

Study Questions

I. CONCEPTS AND MODELS OF DEMOCRACY

1. Democracy: Basic Principles and Historical Origins

1) What IS democracy? How would you define this concept in a way that includes different models (e.g., the contemporary USA as well as ancient Athens)?

2) What are the basic principles and institutional features of direct democracy à la Athens? In what ways are they similar, in what ways do they differ from modern democracy as instituted in the U.S.?

3) In your view, should we try to re-establish (aspects of) direct democracy à la Athens? Why or why not? How could this be done?

2. Liberal Democracy - Promise and Problems

1) In your view, is representative democracy really democratic? Can citizens effectively control what their representatives are doing? For example, are you informed about your Congress(wo)man's activities?

2) What are the basic principles and institutional features of liberal democracy?

3) Liberal democracy is inspired by a distrust of concentrated political authority and skepticism towards “the state” and therefore seeks to limit the sphere of politics. Do you agree with this basic effort? Why or why not?

4) Some models of democracy assume that citizens grow intellectually and morally through political participation. In your view, how realistic is this hope? For example, do election campaigns clarify candidates' positions on issues, or are they totally dominated by sound-bites and scandal stories about the candidates' private life?

5) Democracy is based on principles like autonomy and popular sovereignty. But experts, whose recommendations most citizens do not even understand, play an ever greater role in policy-making. Does this undermine the basic principles of democracy? What could be done to mitigate the power of experts?

6) In your view, are democratic principles valid only for politics, or should they also be applied to social and economic institutions, such as business firms, universities or families? Why (not)? How could this be done (if at all)?

3. Alternative Concepts of Democracy

1) While democracy requires political equality, societies in advanced industrial countries are characterized by considerable social and economic inequality. Is this a problem for democracy? Why or why not?

2) What are the basic divergences of Marx' view of democracy from the other models of democracy analyzed by Held?

3) In your view, how valid is the Marxist criticism of representative democracy and liberal democracy? Do you agree with Marx' alternative model of democracy? Why or why not?

4) In what ways is social democracy similar to Marx' theories, in what ways is it different? In what ways is it similar to liberal democracy, in what ways is it different?

5) Of all the principles listed by Berman and the criteria listed by Mayer, what points do you regard as the most important & distinctive characteristics of social democracy?

6) The early advocates of social democracy wanted to transform the market economy profoundly. Is contemporary social democracy therefore a threat to economic prosperity and political liberty? Why or why not?

7) Which one of the models of democracy that we have examined do you consider best? Why? In general terms, how feasible is the model you prefer?

8) In your view, would it be feasible to institute the model of democracy that you prefer in the U.S.? Why or why not?

II. WESTERN DEMOCRACY

1. Liberal Democracy - the U.S.

1) What do you think about Huntington's thesis that liberal values have had unchallenged predominance in the U.S.? Has this been true for the whole course of U.S. history? And is it still true today, e.g., after 9/11? Why or why not?

2) According to Ginsberg and Shefter, why exactly have elections become less important in American politics? Why has "institutional combat" become more important? Does their explanation leave out any important factor?

3) In your view, have the Democratic party and the Republican Party really pursued coherent long-term strategies, as Ginsberg & Shefter suggest in chaps. 3 and 4?

4) Do you find Ginsberg & Shefter's emphasis on partisan self-interests – rather than on policy goals or ideology – valid? That is, is U.S. politics driven primarily by partisan self-interests?

5) What characteristics of liberal democracy in the U.S. do the developments analyzed by Ginsberg and Shefter accentuate, and how?

6) In your view, does “RIP” enhance or weaken democratic accountability in the U.S.? Why?

7) Do the developments analyzed by Ginsberg and Shefter make American democracy better or worse? Specifically, how do these developments affect the responsiveness and accountability of "the government" to the people?

8) Are Ginsberg & Shefter's arguments still valid today? How do changes like the end of the Cold War affect their arguments? Has President Obama’s presidential election victory of 2008 led to a reduction of institutional combat? Why or why not?

9) In your view, did the George W. Bush administration make U.S. democracy more or less “liberal” (in the specific way we understand the concept in this class, i.e., à la classical liberalism)? Why?

10) In your view, how successful has the Obama administration been so far, both in terms of policy (reform initiatives) and of politics (e.g., reelection chances)? Why?

11) Considering the political patterns analyzed by Ginsberg & Shefter and recent developments under President Obama, how good is liberal democracy as practiced in the U.S.? What reforms—if any—would you advocate? Why?

2. Social Democracy - Sweden

1) What are the values and principles underlying Sweden's social democracy? In what aspects are they similar and in what aspects do they differ from the "liberal tradition in America"?

2) What are the social-structural and organizational roots and preconditions of social democracy in Sweden?

3) In what ways has Sweden's parliamentary system of government facilitated the development of social democracy (by contrast to the obstacles posed by U.S. presidentialism)?

4) What have been the main socio-political forces pushing for social democracy in Sweden? Why was the opposition to social democracy not more successful in hindering its advance? Why did it, in fact, accept many social-democratic policies once they were enacted?

5) What have been the principal policy programs of social democracy in Sweden? In your view, how successful have these programs been?

6) What are the benefits and advantages of social democracy in Sweden, what are its costs and problems? Compare with liberal democracy in the USA.

7) For what reasons has Swedish social democracy run into political and economic difficulties in the last couple of decades?

8) In your view, do these problems doom social democracy, or can it recover? I.e., does the “Swedish model” continue to be viable? Why or why not?

9) In your view, could and should the “Swedish model” be emulated by other countries, e.g., the U.S.? Why or why not?

3. From Social to Liberal Democracy - Great Britain

1) Ch.1: What elements of the context of British politics furthered the advance of social democracy up to the 1970s, and what elements hindered this advance? And in what ways did the context of British politics influence the country's move to liberal democracy in the 1980s and 1990s?

2) Ch.2: What are the basic principles of Britain's parliamentary system of government? Where is power effectively concentrated in the British system? And how did this influence the initial advance towards social democracy and the later move away from it? How does this all differ from the presidential system in the U.S.?

3) Ch.3: Where have, over the course of recent history, Britain's major socio-political forces stood on the issues that distinguish liberal democracy from social democracy? How much effective power do the various socio-political forces have and how has this changed over time?

4) Ch.4: How easy is it to get a bill approved in Britain? Why? What are the main stages of the process of decision-making and implementation?

5) Ch.5: In your view, will Britain stay fairly close to liberal democracy or do you foresee another round of change? Why? And how do you expect the influence of the various socio-political forces to change in the foreseeable future? Why?

Overarching issues: 6) How did Margaret Thatcher manage to transform Britain from a social to a liberal democracy? In particular, how did she maintain sufficient power and win reelections although her tough economic and social policies hurt many people?

7) In your view, did Britain's move from social democracy to liberal democracy improve the country's prospects for economic, social, and political development? And was this transformation worth the costs?

8) In what ways is European integration affecting both the processes of British politics and the outputs of policy-making?

III. ALTERNATIVES TO WESTERN DEMOCRACY?

1. Communist Rule and Its Demise: The (former) Soviet Union

a. The Establishment of Communism

1) The Soviet leaders claimed to implement Marx's vision of direct democracy and socialism (cf. Held ch.4), but they installed a type of Communist despotism that looks very different from Marx's idyllic idea. How come? Was there any problem in Marx's vision that made this "perversion" possible or likely?

2) Was Stalin's despotism the logical outcome of Marx' vision (as Kolakowski claims, see course packet), or did it emerge from an unfortunate coincidence of unfavorable circumstances (as De Bardeleben suggests, see course packet)?

3) What were Lenin's main modifications of Marxism? How did they affect Marx's vision of direct democracy in a classless society?

4) Did the Russian Revolution of 1917 correspond to or differ from the predictions of classical Marxist theory? What were the similarities, what were the differences?

5) What were the main causes and motives of Stalin's "revolution from above"? In what ways did it advance Communism and fulfill tasks which Lenin had left unfinished?

6) Where was power concentrated in the political system of the USSR between the 1950s and the early 1980s?

7) Were a) terror or b) the economic advances and social benefits of socialist development more important for the stability of Communism in the USSR between the 1950s and the early 1980s?

8) Why, exactly, was Soviet Communism so inefficient in economic terms?

b. The Demise of Communism and the Process of Democratization

1) Ch.6.1: In your view, to what extent do historical legacies continue to burden Russia (for instance, by shaping its political culture)? In particular, to what extent do these legacies pose obstacles to the development of a functioning market economy and a true, full democracy?

2) Ch.6.2: To what extent is there an effective separation of powers (“checks and balances”) in contemporary Russian politics? What institutions are particularly powerful, what institutions are comparatively weak? Why?

3) Ch.6.2: To what extent do institutions really guide and determine politics in contemporary Russia, and to what extent can personal leaders or personalistic cliques (“clans”) bend, override, or constantly reshape institutions?

4) Ch.6.3: How does Russia’s contemporary party system differ from that of Sweden and Great Britain? Why?

5) Ch.6.4: Why has it been so difficult to institute a properly functioning market economy in Russia? What are the prospects for the future, in your view?

6) Ch.6.4: How has Russia coped with the collapse of its “empire” (i.e., the dissolution of the USSR)? In what direction do you think relations with “the West” will develop – do you foresee basic friendship or increasing tensions and conflicts? Why?

7) Ch.6.5: Why, in your view, has democracy remained so “incomplete” in contemporary Russia? What are its future prospects – a move toward full liberal or social democracy, the persistence of a very limited democracy, or a slide into authoritarian rule?

c. Democracy or Authoritarianism in the former Soviet Union?

1) In your view, can contemporary Russia be classified as a democracy? Or has Russia clearly abandoned democracy? What aspects of Russia’s political regime are democratic, what aspects are undemocratic – and what does this add up to?

2) In a stable political system (be it democratic or not), the established institutional framework is supposed to constrain what individual political leaders can do. To what extent is this happening in contemporary Russia? Why or why not?

3) Russia’s executive branch currently has two heads – President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin. In your view, is this a formula for political success? Why or why not?

4) How similar is Russia’s type of economic development to a market economy as practiced in the U.S.?

5) Is the type of economic development that Russia is pursuing likely to move the country closer to or farther away from democracy? Why?

6) What are the main reasons for the serious deficiencies plaguing the (market?) economies, political regimes, and even the states of the Caucasus and Central Asia? Do you see any chance of improvement in the foreseeable future? From where could such change emerge?

7) What are the crucial factors that drove the second wave of democratization in part of the post-Communist world (“color revolutions,” see McFaul’s article)? Have these changes installed true democracies? Why or why not?

8) What are the prospects that that second wave of democratization reaches Russia, reversing the concentration of power promoted under Presidents Putin & Medvedev and guaranteeing full democracy?

9) Can and should the U.S. do anything to promote democracy in Russia and the rest of the former Soviet Union? Why or why not? And if so, how? What will the prospects for success be?

2. Authoritarian Rule and Its Demise? Mexico as an Example of the Third World

a. Underdevelopment and the Establishment of Authoritarian Rule in Mexico

1) What do Levy and Bruhn mean by characterizing Mexico during the last two decades of the 20th century as a “semi-democracy”? In your view, does it make sense to use such “half-way” terms?

2) What are the main obstacles that economic and social underdevelopment has posed to the advance of democracy in Mexico? In what ways did economic and social underdevelopment prop up the un-democratic, authoritarian regime prevailing in Mexico until the 1980s?

3) For decades, scholars have debated whether U.S. interest in Mexico furthers or hinders that country’s economic and political development. What is your view on this controversial issue?

4) What are the historical origins of Mexico’s undemocratic development? In your view, to what extent did these legacies hinder the advance of democracy during the last two decades?

5) Why did the Mexican Revolution have a very different outcome than the Russian Revolution (authoritarianism vs. totalitarianism; capitalism with significant state intervention vs. Communism)?

6) How did Mexico manage to maintain such a surprising degree of political stability (compared to other Third World countries, which suffered frequent military coups)? In your view, will Mexico manage to maintain such stability in the foreseeable future? Why or why not?

b. The Decline of Authoritarian Rule and Democratization in Mexico

1) According to Levy and Bruhn, what role did different social sectors play during the 1980s and 1990s in pushing for greater political competitiveness in Mexico?

2) What are the main characteristics of Mexico's party system (by comparison to other countries we have studied)?

3) How did the Mexican state change during the 1980s and 1990s? Which ones of these changes will enhance democracy and governability in Mexico, which changes pose potential problems or threats? Why?

4) What role did the media play during Mexico's lengthy process of democratization and what role are they likely to play in the new democracy? In your view, can they fulfill their important functions for democracy?

5) What are the chances for Mexican citizens to hold their political leaders and governing institutions accountable? What could be done to improve these chances? And how likely are those changes to be adopted?

6) How do the striking status differences prevailing in Mexico affect the quality of the country's democracy? Essentially, can democracy persist in such an unequal social setting? Why or why not?

7) In sum, what are the prospects for a high-quality democracy in Mexico in the foreseeable future? Why?

c. Mexican Democracy in the Era of Globalization

1) According to Levy and Bruhn, what were the central features of Mexico's development and economic policies from the 1940s to the 1970s? What were the accomplishments and limitations of this model?

2) What were the main changes in economic development policy enacted during the 1970s and early 1980s? Did they bring more improvements or more problems?

3) What were the core elements of the market-oriented reforms enacted during the 1980s and 1990s?

4) Neoliberal reforms impose high short-term costs on important sectors of the population. What allowed the Mexican government to enact such costly policies?

5) In your view, has the neoliberal development model, which includes close economic integration with the U.S., opened up a promising avenue of economic development for Mexico? Why or why not?

6) In your view, what are the future prospects of Mexico's new democracy? Will the country manage to maintain political stability--and will it be able to do so without sliding back into authoritarian rule again? Why or why not?

7) In your view, how effectively did President Vicente Fox manage to govern? Why? Why did his party win the presidential contest of July 2006?

8) In your view, what are the chances for the survival of democracy in Mexico and for future improvements in its quality? What are the main forces pushing for such improvements, and what are the main obstacles they face?