States, regimes and parties: 
Comparative government and politics in the 21st century

Course convenors: Dr Chis Bickerton & Dr Pieter van Houten
Seminar times: Wednesdays 2-4pm (Michaelmas), Thursdays 11-1pm (Lent)

What explains the formation and development of states (the main ‘units’ of politics in recent centuries)? How are states governed, and what determines whether they are democratic or autocratic (or somewhere in between)? How do we account for movements from authoritarian to democratic regimes (or the other way around)? What explains the emergence of political parties, which are crucial actors – as the main vehicles to represent particular interests – in the politics of most states? What accounts for the nature of party systems and how parties function in different types of states, and how has this changed over time?

These are among the perennial questions addressed in the study of comparative politics. This course focuses on some ‘classical’ work (from the second half of the 20th century when comparative politics came into its own as a field of study in the study of politics) and various recent contributions that address these questions. The covered themes have generated large literatures, and this course does not aim to provide comprehensive overviews of these literatures. Instead, it gives an indication of possible answers to the questions indicated above by highlighting some of the key works in the field. The course readings focus on different parts of the world, and employ a wide range of methodological approaches and tools (esp. the readings in Part II of the course). After completing the course, students will have gained a good understanding of the empirical reality of and comparative politics scholarship on the formation and functioning of states, political regimes and political parties; and, more broadly, will have developed a deeper appreciation of the field of comparative politics and some of its main approaches and methods.

The course is broken down into three parts. The first part focuses on the state, the second on political regimes and the third on political parties. There are, of course, many other themes and topics covered in the field of comparative politics. However, the focus on these three key areas is intended to make the course manageable and to allow students to go into some depth. A number of sessions are focused on each of the three main themes. The sessions and the relevant readings are set out below.

Teaching Format

This class will be taught in the form of seminars organised around the critical discussion and analysis of assigned readings. Students are expected to actively participate in these seminars, and some seminars may have group exercises. Depending on the number of students taking the course and the seminar dynamics, students may be asked to prepare a short (10 minutes or so) introduction of the readings for one of the sessions, setting out in particular the key issues they would like the class discussion to address. Discussions will focus on both theoretical and empirical issues.

Assessment

Students are required to submit a 5,000-word essay, on a question taken from a provided list. For
dates and the deadline for the provision of essay titles and the submission of the essays, see the MPhil course handbook.

Students are expected to write a 2,000-word practice essay earlier in the course, also on a question from a provided list (for submission dates for these practice essays, see the general MPhil course handbook). The course convenors will provide students with feedback on their practice essays.

**Course Structure and Reading Lists**

The entries below indicate the specific topics and required readings for each seminar. Students are required to do these readings before the seminar. All listed articles are available online (when connected to the university network) and many of the used books are available as e-books through Cambridge's library catalogue. The Politics Library (part of the Seeley Library) and the University Library will have some hard copies of the books. An attempt will be made to make readings available through the course’s Moodle site.

[Note: More suggested ‘Further readings' may be added later for the various themes that the course covers, which will be useful for students when preparing their course essays.]

**Background reading**

If students want to do some background and preparatory reading for the course, we recommend the following books (most of these books are written for a broader audience, so their styles and approaches may differ from many of the required readings in the course, but they give good indications of the themes and questions covered in the course):


Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing Out of Western Democracy* (Verso, 2013)

This is a graduate-level course (not an introductory course) in comparative politics. It is certainly open to students who have not taken comparative politics courses before, but students may want to consider consulting a general comparative politics textbook before or during the course. There are many such textbooks; a good one is Rod Hague and Martin Harrop, *Comparative Government and Politics: An Introduction*, 10th ed. (published in the US as *Political Science: A Comparative Introduction*, 8th ed.) (Palgrave, 2016) [or an earlier edition].
PART I: The state: obstinate, obsolete or in transition?

Session 1: The ‘state of the art’ on the state (10th Oct) [Bickerton]

Where are we today we in comparative research on the state? What are the main dynamics of state formation and transformation today? Have developments in the field of political economy made the state a redundant unit of analysis or one that is more relevant than ever?

Readings:


Adam Tooze, Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World (Penguin, 2018), Introduction (‘The First Crisis of a Global Age’).

Further readings:


Session 2: State formation – comparing the classics (17th Oct) [Bickerton]

So central to the development of comparative politics, work on the state has often been approached in terms of competing theories of state formation. This session looks at three ‘classic’ authors (Tilly, Spruyt and Mann) and evaluates and compares their different treatment of the process of state formation.

Readings:


Session 3: State formation beyond Europe (24th Oct) [Bickerton]

Theories of state formation have often rested on cases drawn from European experience. Are there significant differences between this experiences and the experiences of non-European states? How do non-European processes of state formation challenge traditional theories?
Readings:

Tuong Vu, *Paths to Development in Asia: South Korea, Vietnam, China and Indonesia* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), Chapter 1.


Further reading:


**Session 4: State formation in the 21st century (31st Oct)** [Bickerton]

*What does state formation look like at the beginning of the 21st century? To answer this question, this session focuses on two sets of cases: secession attempts in Western European states and new state formation dynamics in the Middle East (focusing on ISIS and the Kurdish region). What can these examples tell us about the nature of contemporary statehood?*

Readings:


Further readings:


PART II: Political regimes: democratisation and authoritarianism

Session 5: The development of political regimes – questions and ‘classical’ works (7th Nov) [Van Houten]

What are (some of) the main questions that the literature on political regimes (that is, on issues related to democratisation and to authoritarian and hybrid systems of government) tries to answer? Especially the literature on democratisation is enormous, and this session looks at some of the ‘classic’ comparative works on this issue.

Readings:


Barrington Moore, The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), Chapters 7 and 8 (pp. 413-52).


Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies (Johns Hopkins Press, 1986), Chapters 2-4 (pp. 6-47).

Session 6: Democratisation – examples of recent work (14th Nov) [Van Houten]

Until recently, the main focus in the comparative politics literature on regime dynamics has clearly been on democratisation. One prominent strand of explanations in this literature focuses on economic factors, although there are different views on which economic conditions are crucial. In this session, we look at some recent work on this, and also at criticisms of economic explanations and at other approaches to the study of democratisation (and how these relate to the ‘classical’ works discussed in session 5). More generally, what do we think of the attempt and ambition to develop general theories of the development of democracies and dictatorships?

Readings:

Ben W. Ansell and David J. Samuels, Inequality and Democratization: An Elite-Competition Approach (Cambridge University Press, 2014), Chapters 1 and 3.


Session 7: Authoritarian regimes – their workings and (lack of) stability (21st Nov) [Van Houten]

Until relatively recently, the majority of the literature on regime dynamics focuses on democratisation, and much of this literature (implicitly or explicitly) assumes that most countries exhibit a general development towards more democratic regimes. However, authoritarian states still exist (and may be growing in number again) and many of them appear to be relatively stable. This has generated more attention in comparative politics to the workings of authoritarian regimes and the factors and strategies that sustain them. This session looks at some of this work.

Readings:

Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright and Erica Frantz, How Dictatorships Work: Power, Personalization, and Collapse (Cambridge University Press, 2018), Chapter 5 (‘Dictatorial survival strategies in challenging conditions: factionalized armed supporters and party creation’). [It is also worth looking at the Introduction of this book as further background reading.]


Session 8: The breakdown of democratic regimes – a re-emerging concern? (28th Nov) [Van Houten]

Concerns about the prospects of developed democracies have clearly grown in recent years. Are existing (including long-standing) democracies in crisis, or even in danger of breaking down? In this session we look at some recent literature that has started to investigate this question.

Readings:


Session 9: Hybrid regimes – an increasingly prominent phenomenon? (17th Jan) [Van Houten]

It has become increasingly clear that the political systems of some states combine democratic and autocratic features. This has given rise to a focus on ‘hybrid’ states. How should we conceptualise and think about such states? Are they simply temporary arrangements (and if so, what determines whether they move towards ‘fuller’ democracy or autocracy), or can they be stable over longer periods of time? This session focuses on these questions, with some
specific emphasis on the post-communist region (although the choice of empirical chapter in Levitsky & Way allows students to focus on other regions).

Readings:

Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), Chapters 1 and 2, and read one of the empirical chapters (chapters 3-7).


Further readings:


PART III: Political parties: past, present and future

**Session 10: Political parties and the theory and practice of societal cleavages (24th Jan)**

[Behreton]

How successfully do parties translate social conflicts into competing party programmes? How have they done this in the past and is the content of party competition changing under the pressures of globalization and regional integration? The main focus in this session, as in the majority of the political party literature, is on Western Europe.

Readings:

Peter Mair (ed), *The West European Party System* (Oxford University Press, 1990), Chapters 9, 12 and 15 (pp. 91-138, 185-194, 218-231) [pieces by Lipset & Rokkan, Rose & Urwin, and Wolinetz].


Further reading:

**Session 11: Parties and changing party systems (31st Jan)** [Van Houten]

Except in one-party states, political parties are part of a ‘system’ in which parties compete and cooperate. Analysing the nature and dynamics of ‘party systems’ has been a long-standing concern in comparative politics. This session looks at some of the newer work on this (focusing on various parts of the world), and how social and institutional factors combine in shaping competitive party systems.

Readings:


Further readings:


**Session 12: Rebels, guerrillas and bureaucrats – the political party in an African context (7th Feb)** [Bickerton]

Political parties have become an almost universal vehicle for the capturing and exercise of power. However, what we mean by a party differs greatly depending on the part of the world that we are talking about. How do legacies of colonialism affect party formation? What do we mean by the political party in one party states? What about independence and liberation movements that have transformed themselves into hegemonic political parties? This session focuses on the political party in African politics as a case of thinking through the origins and functions of political parties outside of the traditional empirical terrain of Western Europe and North America. Students are encouraged to read around other countries and regions of interest to them, e.g. Latin America or Asia.

Readings:


Adrienne LeBas, From Protest to Parties: Party Building and Democratization in Africa (Oxford University Press, 2013), Chapters 1 and 2.

**Session 13: Populism and the crisis of party democracy (14th Feb) [Bickerton]**

Populism has in recent years become a key concept in comparative politics. From the United States through to Western and Eastern Europe, South East Asia and Latin America, work on populism has multiplied. What does populism mean and how useful a concept is it for understanding the challenges facing advanced democracies and the rest of the developing world? Should we welcome populism as an antidote to the problems faced by representative democracy (and 'traditional' political parties) or is populism itself the problem? And can populism be studied in isolation from other trends that are reshaping democratic politics across the globe?

Readings:


Jan-Werner Müller, What is Populism? (University of Pennsylvania Press/Penguin, 2016), Chapters 1 and 2.


Further readings:


**Conclusion**

**Session 14: The nature of comparative politics research and its future (21st Feb) [Van Houten]**

This session serves as conclusion to the course, and will reflect on the nature of comparative politics as exemplified by the topics and readings covered in the course (different approaches, differences and similarities between ‘classical’ and recent work, etc.). It is also an opportunity to tie up loose ends from the earlier sessions.

Readings:
