

Challenges for Developing Democracies Political Science

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

Why do many new democracies suffer from poor governance and weak accountability? What are the central challenges facing developing democracies from South Asia to Latin America to sub-Saharan Africa? What are the strategies to improve these governance challenges?

Since World War II, the number of electoral democracies has increased dramatically with many new democracies being established in poorer, non-western countries with different histories of institutional and economic development than was the case with the first wave of democratization in Europe. The challenges (amid substantial progress and some backsliding) of these cases reminds us of the difficulties of providing accountable democratic governance in countries where state and political institutions can be weak, corruption can be rampant, and inequalities in wealth and information pose challenges for voters to hold their governments accountable.

This course examines the challenges developing democracies face to provide good governance to their people and considers strategies for addressing these problems. We will also contrast politics and political accountability in these contexts with a focus on the comparison between India, Brazil, and Kenya (among other relevant cases). We begin the course considering the consequences of weak electoral, party, and state institutions. Then we move onto implications of weak institutions on outcomes including corruption, political manipulation of public policy, ethnic conflict, and democratic accountability. After spending a week diagnosing these problems (or challenges) and examining them in particular countries, we examine research on policies and social changes that address these problems in the subsequent week.

The goals of the course are as follows. First, the course is designed to encourage students to think critically about the course's overarching questions. The reading assignments are not particularly heavy, but students will be expected to have reflected carefully on all required readings and on the broad themes and applications they introduce. Second, the organization of the course—alternating between diagnosing problems and solutions—is designed to push students to think about how a conceptual understanding of the “challenges” we discuss can be employed to critically assess plausible policy solutions. Third, students will learn to connect theory to country cases through presentations that cover a course theme with attention to one country. By the end of the course, students will not only develop a vocabulary for understanding the range of difficult challenges for good governance in developing democracies but will be able to participate in debates over how to address them. Intended outcomes are provided below.

Goals/Objectives of the Course (intended outcomes):

1. Students will come to understand major debates underlying comparative politics.
2. Students will engage in effective written expression.
3. Students will learn about the politics of different cultures across the globe.
4. Students will learn to analyze complex political phenomena through careful engagement with theory and evidence.
5. Students will learn to actively read political science articles.
6. Students will learn to apply political science concepts to countries in the Global South.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Your final grade will be based on the following components:

10% - Attendance. Since this is a seminar course, attendance is obligatory. Each student is permitted one unexcused absence (i.e. without a written note from a doctor or a dean). Additional unexcused absences will affect the participation grade.

10% - Class Participation and Weekly Online Posts. Participation is based on the following components:

- *Paying attention in class.* Whether it is a student presentation, class discussion, or mini-lecture, students are expected to pay attention in class (not looking at your laptop doing unrelated activities).
- *Regular participation in class discussions.* Students should be prepared to participate regularly in a way that shows preparation and engagement with course material. Plan to participate at least once per class (if 2 weeks go by without a comment that will impact your participation grade).
- *Completing weekly responses on Courseworks.* Students will be asked to post reactions and a question related to one or more of the required readings each week on CourseWorks. Responses should be 150 to 200 words and the question should follow from the readings.

5% - Follow a Country in the News. You will be asked to follow the news related to governance and domestic politics in the news throughout the term in a country in the post-colonial world (not Europe or the US). Be sure to focus on news about domestic politics including how domestic politics and a country's leaders react to domestic and international events if applicable. I'll ask you to post one paragraph summarizing and reacting to news in your country 5 times during the semester (with posts due every other week starting week 3). Attempt to read at least one article every other week to keep up with your country. A 3-page memo identifying themes in the news and connecting the news to course insights will be due by the last day of class. We'll discuss what you are seeing in the news at the start of class the week each post is due (about bi-weekly).

10% - Paired Presentation Case Studies on Course Themes – A pair of students will be asked to present a case study of a course topic in one country or two countries if it is a comparison. This might include corruption in Nigeria; clientelism in Mexico, climate change policies in Brazil, ethnic conflict in Iraq, etc. Presentation should be 8 to 10 minutes (not longer) and carefully examine the dynamics of a problem or policy solution in a specific context. Each pair should meet the professor in office hours after preliminary work on the topic so I can help you focus the presentation. Presentations will take place during the class when the selected topic is covered. The presentation will require a minimum of five outside readings on the country or countries you choose for your application.s

5% - Referee Report on a required academic article. Students will be asks to write a 3-page referee report similar to what a reviewer would write for a submission to an academic journal. This will include a clear summary of the argument, results, and conclusions, and a critical assessment of arguments, evidence, assumptions (if applicable), methods, and conclusions. In your critique, consider making suggestions that would improve the article (as reviewers do). In the conclusion you will write whether you consider the needed revisions to meet your approval to be major, minor, or to fundamental to approve the article.

25% - Midterm. Students will be required to write a take-home midterm. It will involve showing an understanding and ability to apply course themes. You will have one week to write the exam. You will need to sign a pledge promising that you worked independently and did not use AI on the exam in any way. Note that exams that violate the signed pledge will be severely penalized.

35% - Final Paper. Students will be required to a final paper 12 to 15 pages in length. The paper will include application of course topics to 1-2 countries. A handout and rubric will be posted to CourseWorks. s

Extra Credit - NYC Civic Bootcamp. As students of politics nothing is more important than gaining direct experience with democracy. Although this is a comparative politics class, I am a firm believer that direct experience with governance in your backyard is a valuable experience. This assignment (at the end of the syllabus) asks you to complete 100 points on Civic Bootcamp. This involved engaging with local government here in NYC. To complete the assignment, you will be asked to both complete activities that add up to 100 points and to write a few sentences about what you learned from each activity. Successfully completing this task will increase your grade by one percentage point (this can make the difference with borderline grades e.g., 89% to 90%).

Classroom Etiquette

To make sure that we have a hospitable learning environment, I ask students to follow three simple rules:

- 1) Arrive on time
- 2) Turn your cell phones off when you enter the classroom.

- 3) Unless you are speaking in groups about readings or taking notes (slides will be provided before class), close your laptops in class. This will help everyone focus on class discussion and will help you focus on the discussion. I will make slides available in advance so you will not need to take notes on the slides for the most part.
- 4) Respect your classmates. Debate is welcome but disagree respectfully by engaging ideas rather getting personal. This also means paying attention during student presentation and thinking about questions to ask.
- 5) Coffee/beverages are acceptable but food is not permitted in class since it can distract your classmates.

*****Warning on Plagiarism and Cheating*****

As goes without saying, it will not be possible to pass this course if I find any evidence of plagiarism/cheating of any kind for any assignment. At minimum, this will result in a zero for that assignment and will be referred to the Dean without exceptions. If you do the work each week, and think a lot about the material, you'll do fine.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

By joining this class, students agree to adhere to Columbia's Standards of Intellectual Integrity, reproduced below: "The intellectual venture in which we are all engaged requires of faculty and students alike the highest level of personal and academic integrity. As members of an academic community, each one of us bears the responsibility to participate in scholarly discourse and research in a manner characterized by intellectual honesty and scholarly integrity.

Scholarship, by its very nature, is an iterative process, with ideas and insights building one upon the other. Collaborative scholarship requires the study of other scholars' work, the free discussion of such work, and the explicit acknowledgement of those ideas in any work that inform our own. This exchange of ideas relies upon a mutual trust that sources, opinions, facts, and insights will be properly noted and carefully credited.

In practical terms, this means that, as students, you must be responsible for the full citations of others' ideas in all of your research papers and projects; you must be scrupulously honest when taking your examinations; you must always submit your own work and not that of another student, scholar, or internet agent.

Any breach of this intellectual responsibility is a breach of faith with the rest of our academic community. It undermines our shared intellectual culture, and it cannot be tolerated. Students failing to meet these responsibilities should anticipate being asked to leave Columbia."

<https://www.college.columbia.edu/facultyadmin/academicintegrity>

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONSs

If you are a student with a disability and have an DS-certified ‘Accommodation Letter’ please come to my office hours to confirm your accommodation needs. If you believe that you might have a disability that requires accommodation, you should contact Disability Services at 212-854-2388 and disability@columbia.edu.

READINGS

All required readings will be posted on Courseworks or via library e-reserves. Recommended articles are optional based on your interest and may be useful for presentations. This course requires you to carefully read all required readings before class and be prepared to discuss them. Generally, 3-4 articles or book chapters are assigned each week with occasional media pieces or documentaries to illustrate course concepts. Recommended readings will be likely included in lecture but are optional. They also may be useful for presentations.

Make sure you not only understand the basic argument of each reading, but also give yourself time to think critically about them. You should complete the reading worksheet provided at the end of this syllabus on at least one reading per week to get practice reading actively and critically.

Required Book(s):

Acemoglu, Daron, and James A. Robinson. 2012. *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*. New York: Crown Publishers.

TOPICS AND READINGS

PART I: INSTITUTIONS AND INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

1/20: Introduction and Democracy

Sen, Amartya. 1999. “Democracy as a Universal Value.” *Journal of Democracy* 10 (3): 3–17.

Recommended: Dahl, Robert A. 1998. “What Political Institutions Does Large-Scale Democracy Require?” *Political Science Quarterly* 113 (2) 187–197.

1/27: State Building

Assignment: Complete the reading worksheet on Tilly.

Tilly, Charles. 1985. "War-Making and State-Making as Organized Crime." In Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (Eds). *Bringing the State Back In*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Herbst, Jeffrey. 1990. "War and the State in Africa." *International Security* 14 (4) 117-139.

O'Donnell, Guillermo. 1993. "On the State, Democratization and Some Conceptual Problems: A Latin American View with Glances at Some Postcommunist Countries." *World Development* 21 (8): 1355–1369.

Recommended: Centeno, Miguel Angel. 1997. "Blood and Debt: War and Taxation in Nineteenth-Century Latin America." *American Journal of Sociology* 102 (6): 1565–1605

2/3: Colonial Legacies for Poverty in the Developing World

Take Home Midterm Handed Out in Class

Acemoglu, Daron, and James A. Robinson. 2012. *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*. New York: Crown Publishers. Chapter 3, 9, 12.

Nunn, Nathan. 2008. "The Long-Term Effects of Africa's Slave Trades." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 123 (1): 139–176.

2/10: State Capacity and Service Delivery in Developing Democracies

Assignment: Complete the reading worksheet for Dasgupta and Kapur. Post the completed worksheet on CourseWorks.

Andrews, Matt, Lant Pritchett, and Michael Woolcock. 2017. *Building State Capacity: Evidence, Analysis, Action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Introduction.

Dasgupta, Aditya, and Devesh Kapur. 2020. "The Political Economy of Bureaucratic Overload: Evidence from rural development officials in India." *American Political Science Review* 114 (4) 1316-1334.

Brass, Jennifer N. 2012. "Blurring Boundaries: The Integration of NGOs into Governance in Kenya." *Governance* 25 (2): 209–235.

Bersch, Katherine, Sérgio Praça, and Matthew M. Taylor. 2017. "Bureaucratic Capacity and Political Autonomy Within National States: Mapping the Archipelago of Excellence in Brazil." In *States in the Developing World*, edited by Miguel A. Centeno, Atul Kohli, and Deborah J. Yashar, 157–183. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

2/17: Parties and Programmatic Politics

Keefer, Philip, and Stuti Khemani. 2005. "Democracy, Public Expenditures, and the Poor: Understanding Political Incentives for Providing Public Services." *World Bank Research Observer* 20 (1): 1–27.

Mainwaring, Scott, Timothy J. Power, and Fernando Bizzarro. 2018. "The Uneven Institutionalization of a Party System: Brazil." In *Party Systems in Latin America: Institutionalization, Decay, and Collapse*, edited by Scott Mainwaring, 164–199. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Levitsky, Steven, and Maxwell A. Cameron. 2003. "Democracy Without Parties? Political Parties and Peru's Populist Breakdown." *Comparative Political Studies* 36 (10): 1219–1239.

Cheeseman, Nic. 2008. "The Kenyan Elections of 2007: An Introduction." *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 2 (2): 166–184.

PART 2: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

2/24: Democratic Backsliding and Resilience

MIDTERM DUE AT THE START OF CLASS

Bermeo, Nancy. "On Democratic Backsliding." 2016. *Journal of Democracy* 27 (1) 5-19.

Lendvai, Paul. 2022. "How Viktor Orbán Wins." *Journal of Democracy* 33 (3): 45–59.

Riedl, Rachel Beatty, Paul Friesen, Jennifer McCoy, and Kenneth Roberts. 2024. "Democratic Backsliding, Resilience, and Resistance." *World Politics* 77 (1) 151–177.

Galicia, Bailey. 2026. "[Magyar's victory in Hungary should be studied by other opposition movements.](#)" *Atlantic Council*.

3/3: Social Policy and Poverty Alleviation

Scott, James C. 1998. "Chapter 1: Nature and Space." In *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, 11–52. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Banerjee, Abhijit V., and Esther Duflo. 2007. "The Economic Lives of the Poor." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 21 (1): 141–167.

Heller, Patrick. 2006. "Politics of Redistribution in Kerala." In *The State and Development in the Global South: Essays in Honour of Atul Kohli*, edited by Atul Kohli and Miguel Centeno, 163–190. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sugiyama, Natasha Borges. 2012. "The Diffusion of Conditional Cash Transfer Programs in the Americas." *Global Social Policy* 11 (2–3): 250–278.

Recommended: Krishna, Anirudh. 2010. *One Illness Away: Why People Become Poor and How They Escape Poverty*. OUP Oxford. Chapter 1.

3/10: Corruption

Complete the reading worksheet on Bertrand et al. and post it on Courseworks.

Olken, Benjamin A., and Rohini Pande. 2012. "Corruption in Developing Countries." *Annual Review of Economics* 4 (1) 479–509. [Focus on the model of bureaucratic corruption and what each variable represents conceptually, 479-88].

Witsoe, Jeffrey. 2012. "Everyday Corruption and the Political Mediation of the Indian State: An Ethnographic Exploration of Brokers in Bihar." *Economic and Political Weekly* 47 (6): 47–54.

Bertrand, Marianne, Simeon Djankov, Rema Hanna, and Sendhil Mullainathan. 2008. "Corruption in Driving Licensing Process in Delhi." *Economic and Political Weekly*, 71-76.

Recommended: D'Arcy, Michelle, and Agnes Cornell. 2016. "Devolution and Corruption in Kenya: Everyone's Turn to Eat?" *African Affairs* 115 (459): 246–273.

3/17: No Class. Spring Break.

3/24: Anti-Corruption Strategies

Ferraz, Claudio, and Frederico Finan. 2008. "Exposing Corrupt Politicians: The Effects of Brazil's Publicly Released Audits on Electoral Outcomes." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 123 (2): 703–745.

Melo, Marcus André, Carlos Pereira, and Carlos Mauricio Figueiredo. 2009. "Political and Institutional Checks on Corruption: Explaining the Performance of Brazilian Audit Institutions." *Comparative Political Studies* 42 (9): 1217–1244.

Bussell, Jennifer. 2012. "Why Get Technical? Corruption and the Politics of Public Service Reform in the Indian States." *Comparative Political Studies* 45 (10): 1230–1257.

3/31: Clientelism

Hicken, Allen. 2011. "Clientelism." *Annual Review of Political Science* 14: 289–310.

Stokes, Susan C., Thad Dunning, Marcelo Nazareno, and Valeria Brusco. 2013. "Clientelism and Poverty." In *Brokers, Voters, and Clientelism: The Puzzle of Distributive Politics*, 185–214. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Oliveros, Virginia. 2016. "Making It Personal: Clientelism, Favors, and the Personalization of Public Administration in Argentina." *Comparative Politics* 48 (3): 373–391.

Recommended: Schneider, Mark. 2019. "Do Local Leaders Know Their Voters? A Test of Guessability in India." *Electoral Studies* 59: 102044.

4/7: Transitions from Clientelism to Programmatic Politics

Weitz-Shapiro, Rebecca. 2012. "What Wins Votes: Why Some Politicians Opt Out of Clientelism." *American Journal of Political Science* 56 (3): 568–583.

Rizzo, Tesalia. "Breaking the Clientelist Feedback Loop: Evidence from a Field Experiment in the Yucatán Peninsula." Forthcoming, *American Journal of Political Science*.

Wantchekon, Leonard. 2003. "Clientelism and Voting Behavior: Evidence from a Field Experiment in Benin." *World Politics* 55 (3): 399–422.

Recommended: Zucco, Cesar. 2013. "When Payouts Pay Off: Conditional Cash Transfers and Voting Behavior in Brazil 2002–10." *American Journal of Political Science* 57 (4): 810–822.

4/14: Ethnic Identity and Ethnic Conflict

Chandra, Kanchan. 2006. "What Is Ethnic Identity and Does It Matter?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 9: 397–424.

Posner, Daniel. 2004. "The Political Salience of Cultural Difference: Why Chewas and Tumbukas are allies in Zambia and adversaries in Malawi." *American Political Science Review* 98 (4) 529-545.

Wilkinson, Steven. 2002. "Putting Gujarat in Perspective." *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1579-1583.

Klopp, Jacqueline M. 2001. "'Ethnic Clashes' and Winning Elections: The Case of Kenya's Electoral Despotism." *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 35 (3): 473–517.

4/21: Ethnic Conflict Management

Lijphart, Arend. 2004. "Constitutional Design for Divided Societies." *Journal of Democracy*, 15 (2) 96-109.

Miguel, Edward. 2004. "Tribe or Nation? Nation building and public goods in Kenya versus Tanzania." *World politics* 56 (3) 327-362 [Read 327-47 only].

Chandra, Kanchan. 2005. "Ethnic Parties and Democratic Stability." *Perspectives on Politics* 3 (2): 235–252.

Salamey, Imad. 2009. "Failing Consociationalism in Lebanon and Integrative Options." *International Journal of Peace Studies* 14 (2): 83–105.

4/28: Climate Change + Conclusion

Final handed out at the start of class. Due May 12 at 11:59 PM

Grossman, Guy, and Xu Xu. 2026. "The Politics of Climate Change in the Developing World." *Annual Review of Political Science* 29.

Thachil, Tariq, and Shikhar Singh. 2026. "Why Is Air Pollution Not a Political Issue? Evidence from India." Working paper / OSF Preprint.

Reading Worksheet

For each book, chapter, or article assigned in this course, you should fill out the following (nongraded) worksheet. Many of these points can be addressed in a sentence or two (e.g. Questions 1 and 2; in some cases answers will not need even to be full sentences (e.g., Question); and in some cases the answers may overlap. These worksheets should be retained: they will be useful for future reference. We will use this worksheet twice in the semester but it is a good tool for preparation for any dense reading.

Copy this worksheet as a template and use it for the reading worksheet assignments and for your own reading as a tool!

1. State the central question that the reading addresses.
2. State the central argument(s) defended in the paper in response to this question.
3. What type of reasoning or evidence is used to support these arguments? If it is an analytical paper, what is the logic that undergirds the argument? If an empirical paper, what type of data is employed? Are there other data sources that you think might be more appropriate?
4. Do you find the claims of the reading convincing? What do you see as the main gaps that need to be filled?
5. Why (if at all) is the reading interesting?
6. Do you agree with the main claims? What are your hesitations? (This may simply involve restatement of previous points.)
7. Identify one or two implicit premises or background assumptions in the paper that you think are especially controversial or objectionable.
8. When you have done this for individual readings, take some time to think about the various readings you have been assigned in relation to each other. See if you can write or imagine a summary table for all the readings taken together which compares and contrasts them.

Civic Bootcamp NYC (Extra Credit Assignment)

Goal: Earn 100 points across at least 8 activities (roughly one in-person action every two weeks).

Note: This is optional and an extra credit assignment. To receive extra credit (1/3 increase in your participation grade), please write 2 sentences on each activity you complete including what you did, what you learned, and any reactions to the experience. Also note that you need to obtain 100 points and can choose any activities to get to 100 points. The peer teaching activity can count

Learn and Engage

- **5** — Sign up for your Community Board newsletter (nyc.gov/site/cau/community-boards)
- **5** — Sign up for your City Council Member’s newsletter
- **5** — Follow your City Council Member and State Assembly Member on social media
- **5** — Find a bill or resolution your Council Member is sponsoring
- **5** — Subscribe to a local news outlet
(*THE CITY, Gothamist, NY Daily News, Hell Gate, City Limits, New York Times – Metro*)
- **10** — Write a short memo (½ page) on a local office that isn’t Mayor
(*e.g., Borough President, Comptroller, Public Advocate, DA, Community Board*)
- **10** — Write an email to a local or state official about an issue you care about.
- **10** — Attend a Community Board, City Council, School Board (CEC), or zoning meeting (in person or online) [Highly Recommended to do this at least once].
- **10** — Attend a meeting of a civic or advocacy group (ask one question or make one comment) [Highly Recommended to do this at least once].
- **10** — Meet (office hours / Zoom) with a local representative or civic org staffer
- **10** — Attend a lecture, panel, or talk on NYC government or policy
- **10** — Attend a public event with the Mayor, a city council member, or any other public official at the local, state, or congressional level.
- **15** — Attend a protest on a local or state issue.
- **15** — Volunteer for a local organization involved in advocacy or activism on a local issue.

Build Community

- **10** — Create a **GroupMe / WhatsApp / Discord** for 5+ classmates or neighbors around a local or state issue.
- **10** — Bring 5 friends to a local government, policy, or civic event (ideally including some people not from this class)
- **20** — Organize a small **campus event** (film screening, dorm discussion, teach-in) related to a local issue (housing, climate, local response to federal actions, etc.)
- **20** — Plan a volunteer day
(*park cleanup, mutual aid pantry, housing court watch, food distribution*)
- **20** — Join a student or community group tied to a civic or social issue
- **20** — Start a short **newsletter / flyer / Substack** for your dorm, building, or student org

- **30** — Run for a leadership role in any organization (if you held this position before, consider a new position or plan an event in your role. Please do not claim points if you are doing the same thing you normally would do).

Teach

- **10** — Recruit a friend or classmate to participate in the Bootcamp
- **15** — Have a structured conversation about NYC politics or state politics with a family member or friend (*submit 5 bullet takeaways*)
- **20** — Teach family or friends about how one country, state, city, or county differs from another on a particular issue of institution (example: health care, welfare programs, homelessness)
- **20** — Create a 2-3 minute video explaining government at national, state, or local levels and post it on social media.
- **30** — Lead a dorm, club, or community event on a civic issue

Influence

- **10** — Register to vote in **New York** (or update your registration) [if a US citizen]
- **10** — Sign a petition on a NYC issue you care about (*housing, transit, climate, education, public safety*)
- **10** — Volunteer for a local cause (*mutual aid, housing advocacy, environmental justice, court watch*)
- **20** — Convince **5+ classmates** to register to vote before the deadline [Also relevant to US Citizens of course]
- **10** — Join a civic or student organization with a NYC focus
- **20** — Attend a rally, workshop, or teach-in
- **30** — Volunteer on a local campaign (*City Council, DA, State Assembly, Congressional race, ballot initiative*)
- **20** — Give a 5-minute dorm or class talk on why NYC local politics matters.
- **10** — Share an article or post about NYC government on social media and tag your Council Member
- **30** — Create and share an **online video** about NYC local politics