

# POLISCI 120: Introduction to Comparative Politics

Department of Political Science  
University of Wisconsin–Madison  
Professor Rikhil R. Bhavnani

Spring 2026

Class times: Mon & Wed, 4–5:15 pm  
Class location: Ingraham 19  
Class website: [canvas.wisc.edu/courses/495201](https://canvas.wisc.edu/courses/495201)

Office hours: Wed & Thurs, 10–11 am  
(Sign up at [calendly.com/rikhil/](https://calendly.com/rikhil/))  
E-mail: [bhavnani@wisc.edu](mailto:bhavnani@wisc.edu)

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## Teaching Assistants

The class teaching assistants (TAs) will conduct sections and help you with the course material, answer questions, host office hours, and assist with course logistics. TA names, sections, and email contacts are:

- Shakiba Bakhtiari
  - Email: [sbakhtiari@wisc.edu](mailto:sbakhtiari@wisc.edu)
  - Sections: DIS 303, 305, 306
- Mario Pino Flores
  - Email: [pinoflores@wisc.edu](mailto:pinoflores@wisc.edu)
  - Sections: DIS 304, 307, 308
- Tal Tzur
  - Email: [tal.tzur@wisc.edu](mailto:tal.tzur@wisc.edu)
  - Sections: DIS 302, 309, 310

## Objectives

This course serves as an introduction to the subfield of Comparative Politics, which is colloquially defined as the study of the internal or domestic politics of countries around the world. Over the semester, we will use examples drawn from around the world to examine major questions, including:

- Why do some countries have strong and effective states, while others do not?
- Why are some countries democratic, while others are not?
- What should we make of the retreat from democracy globally?
- Why do some countries develop successful economies, while others do not?
- Where do people's identities, such as nationalism, come from?

Additionally, you will learn basic theoretical, conceptual, and methodological issues about the study of politics.

## **Course credits**

This is a four-credit course. This credit standard is met by an expectation of a total of 180 hours of student engagement with the course learning activities. These include regularly scheduled lectures (two 75-minute lectures per week), as well as discussion sections. This course also presumes reading, writing, completion of exercises, study and review, and other responsibilities as described in this document.

## **Learning outcomes**

- Identify key research questions in comparative politics and demonstrate a command of the most influential answers to those questions.
- Analyze questions about politics using the comparative politics “toolbox,” including case selection, research design, and comparative analysis.
- Improve your writing and communication skills and participate in class debates constructively and respectfully.
- Cultivate an interest in comparative politics and social science more broadly.

## **Honors students**

Students taking the course for honors will meet with me as a group immediately after class three times: on 1/21 (after Class 1), 3/11 (after Class 15), and 4/22 (after Class 25). Additionally, students will complete an independent project analyzing a country other than the United States using the theories on state strength, regime type, development, or identity introduced in class. Findings will be shared in a 15-minute presentation during the final meeting on 4/22, which will extend to 2 hours.

## **Office hours**

Your TAs and I are happy to meet with you. To meet with me, please sign up for office hours at [calendly.com/rikhil](https://calendly.com/rikhil). My office hours are Wednesdays and Thursdays from 10–11 am in 322B North Hall or on Zoom. You can select where you wish to meet with me when you sign up. If you need an alternative time for a meeting due to a class conflict, please email me with 2–3 potential times to meet and I will email you to confirm what will work.

## **Classroom policies**

To maintain a productive learning environment and minimize distractions, the use of cell phones, tablets, and laptops is prohibited.

Students do not need to worry about capturing every detail during the lecture; I will post the lecture slides to Canvas at the end of each week. This policy is intended to help you focus on the discussion and the course concepts.

To encourage open and free discussion and unless you have a documented accomodation, the video or audio recording of class lectures and discussions is strictly prohibited.

## Artificial intelligence use policy

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools and applications (including, but not limited to, Copilot, DALL-E, Claude, Gemini and others) for course assignments and assessments does not support the learning objectives of this course and is prohibited. Using them in any way for this course is a violation of the course's expectations and will be addressed through UW–Madison's [academic misconduct policy](#), specifically UWS 14.03(1)(b) Uses unauthorized materials or fabricated data in any academic exercise.

## Class requirements and grading

Regular class and section attendance is critical. Exams draw heavily on lectures. Students are expected to have read the assigned material and watched the assigned videos prior to class. The final class grade will be determined by the total number of points earned out of 400 possible points.

Component	Percentage	Points	Details
Section participation	15%	60	Attendance and active contribution
Quizzes	15%	60	Best 15 scores (4 pts each)
News reports	20%	80	4 reports (20 pts each)
Midterm 1	25%	100	IDs and essay
Midterm 2	25%	100	IDs and essay
Total	100%	400	

### Section participation (60 Points)

Discussion sections are vital for deep learning. Instead of a subjective assessment, your 60 participation points are earned through a combination of attendance and quality of contribution:

- Attendance (30 points):
  - 0–1 unexcused absence: 30 points
  - 2–3 unexcused absences: 25 points
  - 4–5 unexcused absences: 20 points
  - 5+ unexcused absences: 0 points
- Discussion contribution (30 points): Your TA will assess your engagement throughout the semester.
  - 30 pts (Excellent): Frequent, thoughtful contributions; connects comments to readings; respectful of others.
  - 20 pts (Good): Regular contribution; occasionally connects to readings.

- 10 pts (Fair): Rare contribution or mainly passive listening.
- 0 pts (Poor): Disruptive or completely disengaged.

## Quizzes (60 Points)

Administered in Canvas, these online multiple-choice quizzes must be completed after every lecture, except for classes the week before Spring break and the last lecture.

- There are 20 multiple-choice quizzes throughout the semester.
- Each quiz consists of four questions worth one point each.
- We will count only your best 15 quiz scores toward your final grade (15 quizzes x 4 points = 60 points). This allows you to miss a few quizzes or have "off days" without penalty.
- You will have 15 minutes to complete each four-question quiz (in fact, the quiz should take less than 5 minutes to complete.)
- You should complete each quiz after you have read the assigned readings, attended lecture, and reviewed the lecture slides. Quizzes must be completed by the Sunday of the week they are assigned.

## News reports (80 Points)

To connect course concepts to the real world, you will submit four one-page news reports (20 points each) via Canvas due at the end of the class modules on the state, regimes, development and identities. You are prohibited from using AI tools for this or any other assignment in this class.

- Content: Select an article published in 2026 regarding an event outside the US.
- Sources: You must use *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *The Economist*, *The Guardian*, *NPR*, or the *BBC*. Access to these news sources may be obtained directly or via the UW–Madison library.
- Grading Rubric (20 points per report):
  - 5 pts: Valid source and link provided.
  - 5 pts: Clear description of the event.
  - 10 pts: Insightful connection to one or more concepts discussed in the course module.

## Exams (200 Points)

There are two in-class midterm exams, each worth 100 points. Each exam will have two parts.

- Part 1 (40 points): Answer 4 out of 6 Identification (ID) questions (10 points each). You must define the term, identify the relevant author (please note that you are only

expected to know the names of the authors of the class readings, and not the names of others mentioned in the class lectures), and state its significance for the course.

- Part 2 (60 points): Answer 1 out of 2 essay questions.

## Final grading scale

Your final letter grade is calculated by summing your total points earned and converting this total to a letter grade using this table.

Grade	Total Points	Percentage Equivalent
A	372–400	93–100%
AB	352–371	88–92%
B	332–351	83–87%
BC	312–331	78–82%
C	280–311	70–77%
D	240–279	60–69%
F	0–239	< 60%

## Grading disputes

Your TAs and I occasionally make mistakes or otherwise misinterpret answers. If you believe an error has occurred in the grading of your work, please email a request for a change to your TA and copy me. To allow for a "cooling-off" period, please wait at least 24 hours after grades are posted before reaching out. All such requests must be submitted within 72 hours of the grade's initial release. In the appeal, please clearly and concisely explain why the grade is incorrect, based on the merit of the work rather than comparisons to other students or various adverse consequences. Please note that re-grading may result in an increase or a decrease in the initial grade.

## Deadlines

Students must take the online quizzes—posted on Canvas—after every class, except for the classes the week before Spring Break and the Concluding lecture. The quizzes must be completed by the Sunday of the week they are assigned. The due dates for the other assignments are as follows:

Date	Item
February 4	News Report #1 (The State)
March 4	News Report #2 (Regimes)
March 9	Midterm Exam 1
March 25	News Report #3 (Development)
April 27	News Report #4 (Identities)
April 29	Midterm Exam 2

## Course schedule and readings

*Note: Readings for each topic are posted on Canvas. Canvas quizzes are due after every class, except for reviews, midterms, and the classes in the week before spring break.*

## I. Getting Started

### Class 1 (Wed, 1/21): Introduction

### Class 2 (Mon, 1/26): The scientific and comparative methods

Clark, William Roberts, Matt Golder, and Sona Nadenichek Golder. 2013. *Principles of Comparative Politics*, chapter 2.

## II. The State

### Class 3 (Wed, 1/28): What is the state?

Weber, Max. 1946. "Politics as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (eds. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills), pp. 77–83.

### Class 4 (Mon, 2/2): How did the state emerge?

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*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 169-91.

### Class 5 (Wed, 2/4): State building

Herbst, Jeffrey. 2000. *States and Power in Africa*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 11-31.

News Report #1 on the state due.

## III. Regimes

### Class 6 (Mon, 2/9): Regimes and their types

Dahl, Robert A. 1971. *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, chapter 1.

### Class 7 (Wed, 2/11): The origins of democracy: Macro accounts

Lipset, Seymour Martin. 1960. *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 27-58.

### Class 8 (Mon, 2/16): The origins of democracy: Micro accounts

Acemoglu, Daron, and James A. Robinson. 2005. *Economic origins of dictatorship and democracy*. Cambridge University Press, chapter 1.

### Class 9 (Wed, 2/18): Political participation, representation and accountability

Sen, Amartya. 1999. *Development as Freedom*. New York: Knopf, chapter 6 pp. 146-159.

### Class 10 (Mon, 2/23): Deepening democracy

Duflo, Esther. 2004. "Why Political Reservations?": MIT.

### Class 11 (Wed, 2/25): Democratic backsliding

Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. *How Democracies Die*. New York: Crown, chapter 1, pp. 1-20.

**Class 12 (Mon, 3/2): How are autocracies sustained?**

Guriev, Sergei, and Daniel Treisman. 2019. "Informational Autocrats." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 33(4): 100-127.

**Class 13 (Wed, 3/4): Review**

News Report #2 on regimes due.

**Class 14 (Mon, 3/9): Midterm 1**

## IV. Development

**Class 15 (Wed, 3/11): What is development?**

Lerner, Daniel. 1958. "The Grocer and the Chief: A Parable" in *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East*. London: Collier Macmillan.

**Class 16 (Mon, 3/16): Proximate causes of development**

Easterly, William. 2001. *The Elusive Quest for Growth: Economists' Adventures and Misadventures in the Tropics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, chapter 3.

**Class 17 (Wed, 3/18): Deep causes of development: Institutions**

North, Douglass C., and Barry R. Weingast. 1989. "Constitutions and Commitment: The Evolution of Institutions Governing Public Choice in Seventeenth-Century England." *The Journal of Economic History* XLIX (4):803-32

**Class 18 (Mon, 3/23): Deep causes of development: Culture**

Guest Lecture by Professor Soeren Henn

**Class 19 (Wed, 3/25): Command economies**

News report #3 on development due.

**Spring Break (3/30 - 4/3): No class**

## V. Identities

**Class 20 (Mon, 4/6): The origins of nationalism**

Anderson, Benedict. 2006. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised edition. London: Verso, chapters 1-2, pp. 1-36.

**Class 21 (Wed, 4/8): Ethnic identification**

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.

### **Class 22 (Mon, 4/13): Religion and politics**

Grzymala-Busse, Anna. 2012. "Why Comparative Politics Should Take Religion (More) Seriously." *Annual Review of Political Science* 15: 421-442.

### **Class 23 (Wed, 4/15): Identity and violence**

Wilkinson, Steven I. 2004. *Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots in India*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-26.

### **Class 24 (Mon, 4/20): Special topic: Climate change**

Harrison, Kathryn and Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom. 2007. The Comparative Politics of Climate Change. *Global Environmental Politics* 7(4): 1-18.

### **Class 25 (Wed, 4/22): Concluding remarks**

### **Class 26 (Mon, 4/27): Review**

News report #4 on identities due.

### **Class 27 (Wed, 4/29): Midterm 2**

## **Course evaluations**

Students at the University of Wisconsin–Madison have the opportunity to evaluate their learning experiences and the courses they are enrolled in through course evaluations. Many instructors use a [digital course evaluation tool](#) to collect feedback from students. Students typically receive notifications two weeks prior to the end of the semester requesting that they complete course evaluations. Student participation is an integral component of course development, and confidential feedback is important. UW–Madison strongly encourages student participation in course evaluations.

## **North Hall**

The Political Science department is located in North Hall, the oldest building on campus. Due to its age, this building is not accessible to individuals with mobility disabilities and does not have an elevator or accessible restroom. The department is committed to equal opportunity for all students to attend office hours, advising, and other department-related events. Please contact me if North Hall presents a disability-related barrier to you, and the department will gladly work to ensure access. If you require a disability-related accommodation for the academic requirements of this course unrelated to North Hall, please review the "Accommodations for students with disabilities" section below.

## **Academic calendar and religious observances**

View the full [academic calendar](#) in addition to information about religious and election day observances. Students are responsible for notifying instructors within the first two weeks of classes about any need for flexibility due to [religious observances](#).

Establishment of the academic calendar for the University of Wisconsin–Madison falls within the authority of the faculty as set forth in [Faculty Policies and Procedures](#). Construction of the academic calendar is subject to various rules and laws prescribed by the Board of Regents, the Faculty Senate, State of Wisconsin and the federal government. Find [additional dates and deadlines for students](#) on the Office of the Registrar website.

## Academic integrity

By virtue of enrollment, each student agrees to uphold the high academic standards of the University of Wisconsin–Madison; academic misconduct is behavior that negatively impacts the integrity of the institution. Cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration and helping others commit these previously listed acts are examples of misconduct which may result in disciplinary action. Examples of [disciplinary sanctions](#) include, but are not limited to, failure on the assignment/course, written reprimand, disciplinary probation, suspension or expulsion.

## Accommodations for students with disabilities

The University of Wisconsin–Madison supports the right of all enrolled students to a full and equal educational opportunity. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Wisconsin State Statute (36.12) and UW–Madison policy ([UW-855](#)) require the university to provide reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities to access and participate in its academic programs and educational services. Faculty and students share responsibility in the accommodation process. Students are expected to inform faculty of their need for instructional accommodations during the beginning of the semester, or as soon as possible after being approved for accommodations. Faculty will work either directly with the student or in coordination with the [McBurney Disability Resource Center](#) to provide reasonable instructional and course-related accommodations. Disability information, including instructional accommodations as part of a student’s educational record, is confidential and protected under FERPA.

## Diversity and inclusion

Diversity is a source of strength, creativity, and innovation for the University of Wisconsin–Madison. We value the contributions of each person and respect the profound ways their identity, culture, background, experience, status, abilities, and opinion enrich the university community. We commit ourselves to the pursuit of excellence in teaching, research, outreach, and diversity as inextricably linked goals. UW–Madison fulfills its public mission by creating a welcoming and inclusive community for people from every background – people who as students, faculty, and staff serve Wisconsin and the world. (Source: [Institutional Statement on Diversity](#))

## Mental health and well-being

Students often experience stressors that can impact both their academic experience and personal well-being. These may include mental health concerns, substance misuse, sexual

or relationship violence, family circumstances, campus climate, financial matters, among others.

UW–Madison students are encouraged to learn about and utilize the university’s mental health services and/or other resources as needed. Student can visit [uhs.wisc.edu](https://uhs.wisc.edu) or call University Health Services at (608) 265-5600 to learn more.

## **Privacy of student records and the use of audio recorded lectures**

Lecture materials and recordings for this course are protected intellectual property at UW–Madison. Students enrolled in this course may use the materials and recordings for their personal use related to participation in the course. Students may also take notes solely for their personal use. If a lecture is not already recorded, students are not authorized to record lectures without permission unless they are considered by the university to be a qualified student with a disability who has an approved accommodation that includes recording. [Regent Policy Document 4-1] Students may not copy or have lecture materials and recordings outside of class, including posting on internet sites or selling to commercial entities, with the exception of sharing copies of personal notes as a notetaker through the McBurney Disability Resource Center. Students are otherwise prohibited from providing or selling their personal notes to anyone else or being paid for taking notes by any person or commercial firm without the instructor’s express written permission. Unauthorized use of these copyrighted lecture materials and recordings constitutes copyright infringement and may be addressed under the university’s policies, UWS Chapters 14 and 17, governing student academic and non-academic misconduct. View [more information about FERPA](#).

## **Students’ rules, rights and responsibilities**

View more information about [student rules, rights and responsibilities](#) such as student privacy rights, sharing of academic record information, academic integrity and grievances.

## **Teaching & learning data transparency**

The privacy and security of faculty, staff and students’ personal information is a top priority for UW–Madison. The university carefully reviews and vets all campus-supported digital tools used for teaching and learning, including those that support [data empowered educational practices](#) and proctoring. View more information about [teaching and learning data transparency](#) at UW–Madison.