

GOV 312L  
Unique 37265  
MWF 1-2 pm, JES A121A

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BAT 4.126  
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## 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 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 a 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, the personalistic authoritarianism of contemporary Russia, and the institutionalized authoritarianism persisting for decades in Mexico. After analyzing the advantages and disadvantages of those different regime types by contrast to Western democracy, we will also examine the (temporary) transitions to democracy that occurred in both of these countries and assess the future prospects of Mexico's new, challenged democracy and of Russia's ever more authoritarian regime.

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 Global South of "developing" 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 global 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 Global South. 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 are available for purchase in the textbook section of the University Co-op Bookstore. **Please make sure you buy the correct edition, especially if you buy from another source!**

David Held. *Models of Democracy*, **3<sup>rd</sup> edition**. Stanford: Stanford University Press, **2006**.

William Howell and Terry Moe, *Relic: How Our Constitution Undermines Effective Government*. New York: Basic Books, 2016.

Emily Edmonds-Poli and David Shirk, *Contemporary Mexican Politics*, **4<sup>th</sup> edition**. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, **2020**.

Our required readings also include several xeroxed articles available in a thin course packet from JENN's Copies, 2518 Guadalupe; PLUS some longer textbook chapters posted electronically on Canvas, MODULES, in the sequence we'll read them. Since the lectures will complement these texts, you need to do all the readings **before** the week for which they are assigned. In order to guide and thus facilitate your reading and thinking, weekly sets of study questions are attached to this syllabus.

Three quizzes and three (**cumulative**) 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 (100-93.01=A; 93-90.01=A-; 90-87.01=B+; 87-83.01=B; etc... 63-60.01=D-; 60-0=F) and the whole scale is in use. Thus, failure to take an exam or a quiz (without an immediately announced & reliably documented excuse attesting to an unavoidable and serious incapacitating problem) will result in 0 points. Also, attendance in class is mandatory.

Students with disabilities may request appropriate academic accommodations from UT's DDCE – D&A at [ddce.utexas.edu/disability/](http://ddce.utexas.edu/disability/). All rules established by DDCE (e.g., prior & timely 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**.

NOTE: **No laptop usage in class**, for pedagogical reasons, i.e., better learning.

This course has a Government PhD student as teaching assistant & grader: Danissa Contreras, who will hold office hours in BAT 1.118 (times to be announced). The TA will also hold two voluntary discussion sessions per week (parallel – same content; Wed. & Thurs. 2 pm; places to be announced): **HIGHLY** recommended.

My own office hours will be in Batts 4.126 on Mon. and Wed., 2:00 – 3:30 pm; and Wed., 9:30 – 10:30 am. I will be happy to talk to you about any aspect related to the course. You can also email me at [kweyland@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:kweyland@austin.utexas.edu).



## I. CONCEPTS AND MODELS OF DEMOCRACY

### 1. Democracy: Basic Principles and Historical Origins

Friday - Monday, January 19 - 22:

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

### 2. Liberal Democracy - Promise and Problems

Wednesday - Friday, January 24 – 26:

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

### 3. Alternative Models: Marxian Democracy and Social Democracy

Monday - Wednesday, January 29 – 31:

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

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

Thomas Meyer. *Libertarian & Social Democracies Compared* (course packet).

### **Friday, February 2: Quiz (15 minutes)**

## II. WESTERN DEMOCRACY

### 1. Liberal Democracy - the U.S.

Monday - Friday, February 5 - 9:

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

William Howell and Terry Moe, *Relic: How Our Constitution....* pp. 1 – 60.



Monday - Friday, February 12 – 16:

William Howell and Terry Moe, *Relic: How Our Constitution ...*, pp. 60 – 142 [you can read the case studies pp. 121 – 140 very “fast”].

Steven Levitsky & D. Ziblatt. *Is Donald Trump a Threat to Democracy?* (course packet).

### **Wednesday, February 21: Exam**

#### **2. Social Democracy - Sweden**

Monday, February 19 and Friday, February 23 - Wednesday, February 28:

M. Donald Hancock. Sweden, in Hancock, ed., *Politics in Europe*, pp. 451 – 516 (posted in Canvas under MODULES).

### **Wednesday, March 6: Quiz (15 minutes)**

#### **3. From Social to Liberal Democracy - Great Britain**

Friday, March 1 – Friday, March 8: **[NOTE: March 8 lecture NOT in-person, but will be pre-recorded & available on Canvas, to be watched whenever you prefer]:**

B. Guy Peters & Christopher Carman. United Kingdom, in M. Donald Hancock ed., *Politics in Europe*, pp. 3 – 72, 88 – 96 (Canvas under MODULES).

### **III. ALTERNATIVES TO WESTERN DEMOCRACY**

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

##### **a. The Establishment of Communism**

Monday-Friday, March 18 - 22:

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

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



b. The Demise of Communism and Precarious Moves toward Democracy

Monday - Friday, March 25 - 29:

Stephen White. Russia, in M. Donald Hancock, ed., *Politics in Europe*, pp. 519 – 581 (Canvas).

**Wednesday, April 3: Exam**

c. Political Prospects in Russia & the Successor States: An Authoritarian Future?

Monday, April 1 - Monday, April 8: **[NOTE: April 5 lecture NOT in-person, but will be pre-recorded & made available on Canvas, to be watched at any time you prefer]:**

M. Steven Fish. What Is Putinism? (course packet).

Timothy Frye. Russia's Weak Strongman (course packet).

Maria Snegovaya. Why Russia's Democracy Never Began (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 Global South

a. Development Problems & the Establishment of Authoritarian Rule in Mexico

Wednesday - Friday, April 10 - 12:

Emily Edmonds-Poli & David Shirk, *Contemporary Mexican Politics*, chs. 1 - 2, pp. 7, 13 – 50.

**Wednesday, April 17: Quiz (15 minutes)**

b. Authoritarian Rule, its Decline, and Democratization in Mexico

Monday - Friday, April 15-19:

Edmonds-Poli and Shirk, *Contemporary Mexican Politics*, chs. 3-5, pp. 51 - 106.



c. The Serious Challenges Facing Mexican Democracy

Monday – Wednesday, April 22 – 24:

Edmonds-Poli and Shirk, *Contemporary Mexican Politics*, chs. 6 - 7, pp. 109 – 123, 126 – 141, 143 – 156.

Review: Major Themes of the Course

Friday, April 26

**Monday, April 29: Exam**

**NO Final Exam.** If any student is, exceptionally, approved for a make-up exam, that test will be held on the day and hour designated by the university if we had a final exam in this course: Saturday, May 4, 1:00 pm (no exceptions). [NOTE: Inconvenient. Best to take tests as scheduled during the semester!]



# **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 all the different models and that covers both ancient Athens and the contemporary U.S.?
- 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, e.g. as instituted in the U.S.?
- 3) Why does no modern country use direct democracy as its main framework?
- 4) In your view, should the U.S. try to re-establish some aspects of direct democracy à la Athens? Why or why not? How could this be done? And which aspects?

### **2. Liberal Democracy - Promise and Problems**

- 1) In your view, is representative democracy really democratic? Can citizens effectively guide and 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 political action and regulation. 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 dominated by sound-bites, conspiracy theories, emotions, and resentments?
- 5) Democracy is based on the principle of popular sovereignty. But experts, whose recommendations most citizens do not understand, play an ever greater role in policy-making. Does this undermine the basic principles of democracy?
- 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 Models of Democracy**

- 1) While democracy requires political equality, all 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's view of democracy from the other models of democracy analyzed by Held?



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

4) In what ways is social democracy similar to Marx's 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, which 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, e.g. by nationalizing big business. Is 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? Is it still true today, after 9/11 ("war on terror") and with Donald Trump's populism, which critics call illiberal? Why or why not?

2) According to Howell and Moe, why exactly did the U.S. adopt a constitutional and institutional framework that widely disperses power?

3) In Howell and Moe's view, have the socioeconomic and political developments of the last 200 years made the U.S.'s power-dispersing institutional framework more or less successful? Do you agree?

4) According to Howell and Moe, what are the governance problems arising from the institutional organization and political operations of the U.S. Congress?

5) In your view, is "ineffectiveness by design" good or bad – for what political goals? Overall, do the disadvantages outweigh the advantages? Why?

6) In Howell & Moe's view, what exactly is "the promise of presidential leadership"? In your own view, does presidential leadership hold problems and risks as well? On balance, do you think that the U.S. presidency should be strengthened? Why or why not?

7) In addition to the problems highlighted by Howell and Moe, what other crucial issues affect the functioning and quality of American democracy? On the other hand, are there positive trends and developments that our authors underestimate or neglect?

8) Are Howell & Moe's arguments and recommendations still valid today, especially in light of Donald Trump's determined efforts to boost presidential powers?

9) Considering the political problems analyzed by Howell & Moe and the populism of Donald Trump, how good is liberal democracy as practiced in the U.S.? Do its advantages significantly outweigh its disadvantages? Why or why not?



11) How persuasive do you find Levitsky & Ziblatt's – continuing – concern that liberal democracy in the U.S. may be threatened by the rise of populism? Do you see a risk of authoritarian backsliding? Why or why not?

12) In your view, how could U.S. democracy be protected (even) better? What additional safeguards or other reforms would you advocate, if any? 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?

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 few 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, especially the U.S.? Why or why not?

## 3. From Social to Liberal Democracy - Great Britain

1) Ch.1.1: 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 from 1979 onward?

2) Ch.1.2: 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 all of this differ from the presidential system in the U.S.?

3) Ch.1.3: 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.1.5: 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) How is Brexit likely to affect the processes of British politics and the outputs of policy-making over the long term?

### III. ALTERNATIVES TO WESTERN DEMOCRACY?

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

##### 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, or did it emerge from an unfortunate coincidence of unfavorable circumstances, as De Bardeleben suggests?

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, did Soviet Communism – after an initial stretch of quick progress toward industrialization and urbanization – end up so inefficient in economic terms?



### b. The Demise of Communism and Precarious Moves toward Democracy

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 real democracy?

2) Ch.6.2: Is there any 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 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? What are the domestic repercussions of this big loss?

7) Ch.6.5: Why, in your view, did democracy remain so “incomplete” in post-Communist Russia? Why has the country slid into authoritarian rule?

### c. Political Prospects in Russia & the Successor States: An Authoritarian Future?

1) How profound was the political change that Russia experienced from 1985 onward? In other words, do you find Snegovaya’s emphasis on non-democratic continuity, especially the role of entrenched regime elites, convincing? Why or why not?

2) How has the political regime of Russia evolved under President Putin? What components look democratic, what components are undemocratic? What regime type does this “add up to,” overall?

3) On balance, is President Putin strong or weak? What are the positions of Fish and Frye on this question?

4) Institutions are supposed to empower, yet also constrain what individual political leaders can do. To what extent do contemporary Russia’s institutions serve this purpose?

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

6) What are the main reasons for the serious deficiencies plaguing the economies, political regimes, and states of the Caucasus and Central Asia? What are the chances for moves toward a competitive market economy and a Western-style democracy?

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 a new wave of democratization could eventually reach Russia, reversing the concentration of power promoted under President Putin?



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 Global South

### a. Development Problems and the Establishment of Authoritarian Rule in Mexico

1) How do Mexico's historical experiences compare/contrast to Huntington's argument about the liberal background of the U.S.? Have Mexico's historical legacies helped or hindered the emergence of democracy? Why?

2) What are the main obstacles that economic and social underdevelopment has posed to democracy in Mexico? In what ways did underdevelopment prop up the authoritarian regime prevailing in Mexico until the 1990s?

3) For decades, scholars have debated whether U.S. involvement in Mexico has furthered or hindered that country's economic and political development. What is your view on this controversial issue?

4) Why did the Mexican Revolution have a very different outcome than the Russian Revolution (authoritarianism – not totalitarianism; capitalism with significant state intervention – not Communism)?

5) How did political order and long-lasting stability emerge out of the violent chaos of the Mexican Revolution? What accounts for this striking turnaround?

6) How did Mexico's authoritarian regime manage to maintain such a surprising degree of political stability for many decades (compared to other developing countries, which suffered frequent military coups)?

### b. Authoritarian Rule, its Decline, and Democratization in Mexico

1) According to Edmonds-Poli and Shirk, what were the foundations and mainstays of the long-lasting stability of Mexico's authoritarian regime?

2) How was political power distributed under Mexico's authoritarian system? How does this compare to the U.S. political system?

3) To maintain power, did Mexico's authoritarian system employ more "carrots" or more "sticks"? Why?

4) What developmental trends and what sociopolitical forces were mainly responsible for Mexico's lengthy process of democratization?

5) How did, despite these push factors, the authoritarian regime hang on to power for so long? And why did Mexico maintain political stability throughout its transition from authoritarian rule to democracy?

6) Citizens tend to have high hopes when a country finally establishes democracy. Have these hopes been fulfilled in Mexico from 2000 onward? What have been the main achievements, what the main limitations and failures of Mexico's new democracy?

7) Why did a contentious populist win the presidency in 2018? What reforms and transformations has he effected? Overall, have AMLO's efforts brought more improvements or more problems? How have they affected Mexico's democracy?



8) In your view, does AMLO's populism hold good prospects for dealing with the developmental problems and serious challenges facing Mexico, including entrenched drug trafficking and widespread crime? Why or why not?

9) To combat these serious problems, should Mexico privilege strong, determined leadership, or insist on strict "checks and balances," which per Howell and Moe can hinder effective governance? Why?

### c. The Serious Challenges Facing Mexican Democracy

1) According to Edmonds-Poli and Shirk, how has democratization changed the Mexican presidency and its role in the political system? Since 2000, how strong or weak have Mexican presidents been?

2) Compared to the U.S. Congress, how important and powerful has Mexico's legislature been, and how has this changed with democratization?

3) How well has Mexico's system of "checks and balances," which includes the judiciary, worked? Has Mexico avoided the problems that Howell and Moe highlight in the U.S. case? On the other hand, has Mexico experienced problems that the U.S. system has avoided?

4) How did Mexico's party system change in the course of the lengthy process of democratization? How does this compare to the process of political reform and democratization in the USSR?

5) Why did the vibrant multi-party system that emerged in the 1980s weaken and decay in the 2010s already?

6) In your view, is AMLO's party MORENA on course to establish the kind of political hegemony that the PRI maintained for many decades in the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Why or why not?

7) During most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, did electoral reform in Mexico do more to facilitate democratization or to safeguard and extend authoritarian rule? How and why?

8) In your view, are Mexico's institutional framework and its party system well-suited for dealing with the serious developmental problems and resulting challenges facing the country, including massive drug trafficking and crime? Why or why not?

9) Given all the issues and problems that Mexico is facing, do you think the country will sustain democracy, or do you foresee a move toward and into authoritarianism, as it happened in contemporary Russia? Why?