Introduction to Comparative Politics

PS 240A-B is a two-course sequence designed to introduce graduate students to comparative politics. We survey a broad range of different literatures. Sometimes topics flow naturally from one week to the next, but not always. Comparative politics is a vast field. In some ways, it touches on every aspect of political science, and it overlaps with economics, sociology, and anthropology, as well as other disciplines. We cannot make this course comprehensive, and even our coverage of the topics we have chosen to address is unavoidably cursory. We hope that these short introductions will whet your appetites for deeper study.

Although necessarily superficial, this will be a demanding course. The reading list for each week is formidable and we will expect every student to be prepared to discuss any reading when called upon, so some items might need to be read more than once. Your goal should be to come to class prepared to summarize the main point of each item assigned as well as to be able to present a brief and accurate review of the approach, argument, and evidence — all in two to three minutes. If it takes you longer than that, you haven’t properly mastered the material. We have uploaded all required readings on the course website. We reserve the right to make some last-minute changes, in which case we will of course upload the new readings at least a week before they are required.

Before approaching each reading think about what the key questions are for the week and about how the questions from this week relate to what you know from previous weeks. Then skim over the reading to get a sense of the themes it covers, and, before reading further, jot down what questions you hope the reading will be able to answer for you. Next, read the introduction and conclusion. This is normally enough to get a sense of the big picture. Are the claims surprising? Do you believe them? Can you think of examples of places that do not seem consistent with the logic of the argument? … Next ask yourself: What types of evidence or arguments would you need to see in order to be convinced of the results? Now read through the whole text, checking as you go through how the arguments used support the claims of the author. It is rare to find a piece of writing that you agree with entirely. So, as you come across issues that you are not convinced by, write them down and bring them along to class for discussion. Also note when you are pleasantly surprised, when the author produced a convincing argument that you had not thought of. In all cases when it is possible you are encouraged to download this data, replicate results and use it to probe and test the arguments you bring to class. … Try to articulate succinctly what you know now that you didn't know before you read the piece. Often a quick summary can draw attention to strong features you were not conscious of, or makes you realize that what you were impressed by is not so impressive after all. Is the theory internally consistent? Is it consistent with past literature and findings? Is it novel or surprising? Are elements that are excluded or simplified plausibly unimportant for the outcomes? Is the theory general or specific? Are there more general theories on which this theory could draw or contribute?¹

Evaluation for the course will consist of two parts. First, all students will be expected to participate actively in every meeting, including but not limited to “cold-call” oral summaries of the readings. In-class performance will count for 25 percent of your grade. The other 75 percent will be based on your performance on an end-of-quarter day-long written examination. In nearly any other graduate program in political science, students must sit comprehensive exams in two or more fields before they are permitted to move on to dissertation work. The final exams for PS240A and for PS240B will be along the same lines, although we will hold you responsible only for the topics covered in the course that quarter and for the readings that were assigned. We plan to give you a handful of “big questions” from the literature that was covered during the quarter. You will be asked to choose two questions to answer in an 8-hour take-home exam.

Students may elect to take either PS240A or PS240B or both. We strongly encourage students, especially those in their first year of graduate education, to take both.

Finally, a companion course, a Pro-Seminar in Comparative Politics (PS258), will span all three quarters. It will consist of a speaker series featuring prominent guests from other institutions. We cannot require students who enroll in 240A and/or 240B also to enroll in PS258, but we strongly encourage you to do so. PS258 is a 2-unit S/U course that requires short “response papers” to speaker presentations. Whether you enroll or not, we hope you will attend the Pro-Seminar in addition to the introductory course. With the occasional exception, the Pro-Seminar will meet on selected Fridays 2:00-3:30. Please see the course website for information on the dates.

¹This paragraph is cribbed from the syllabus for a similar course taught by Macartan Humphreys at Columbia University.

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Fall Quarter PS240A

Week 1. State of the Discipline (Oct. 1) (Golden, Thies, and Treisman)


Week 2. Accountability and Responsiveness (Oct. 8) (Thies and Treisman)


Week 3. Collective Action/Social Capital (Oct. 15) (Golden and Thies)


Week 4. Democracy and its Origins (Oct. 22) (Treisman and Thies)


**Week 5. Electoral Systems and Voting (Oct. 29) (Thies and Golden)**


**Week 6. Parties and Party Systems (Nov. 5) (Thies and Golden)**


**Week 7. Corruption and Governance (Nov 12) (Golden and Treisman)**


Week 8. Authoritarian Regimes (Nov. 19) (Treisman and Thies)


Week 9. Social Movements and Protest (Nov. 26) (Treisman and Thies)


Week 10. Patronage and Clientelism (Dec. 3) Golden and Treisman


-Diaz-Cayeros, Alberto, Beatriz Magaloni, and Federico Estevez, Strategies of Vote Buying: Clientelism and Poverty Relief in Mexico (forthcoming), chs. 4 and 8.


Week 1. Rich and Poor Nations (Jan. 7) (Golden and Thies)


Week 2. Inequality and Redistribution within Nations (Jan. 14) (Golden and Terisman)


Week 3. Ethnic Politics and Conflict (Feb. 21) (Treisman and Thies)


Week 4. Interest Groups and Representation (Jan. 28) (Golden and Treisman)


Week 5. Natural Resources (Feb. 4) (Treisman and Golden)


Week 6. Distributive Politics (Feb. 11) (Thies and Golden)


Week 7. Fundamental Sources of Economic Growth (Feb. 18) (Treisman and Golden)


Week 8. Civil Wars (Feb. 25) (Thies and Treisman)


Week 9. Gender and Political Economy (Jan. 22) (Thies and Golden)


Week 10. Methods and Inference in Comparative Politics (Mar 12) (Golden, Thies, and Treisman)


- Thad Dunning, Natural Experiments in the Social Sciences: A Design-Based Approach. New York: Cambridge University Press, chs. TO COME