

# POSC-360: Comparative Political Institutions

## Syllabus (Spring 2026 — USC)

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### Course Information

<b>Units</b>	4
<b>Meeting Time</b>	Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2:00–3:20 pm
<b>Location</b>	DMC 102
<b>Term</b>	Spring 2026
<b>Instructor</b>	Pablo Argote
<b>Office</b>	DMC 313
<b>Office Hours</b>	By email
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### Course Description

This course introduces students to the comparative study of political institutions—that is, the study of how the rules that govern democracies are generated and how these rules shape political outcomes. We examine constitutions, political regimes, electoral and voting systems, party systems, and executive–legislative relations across democracies.

The course emphasizes theoretical approaches and empirical applications. Students will critically assess how institutions structure incentives, constrain actors, and influence accountability and representation.

### Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. Identify major theoretical approaches to the study of political institutions.
2. Analyze how institutional design affects representation, accountability, and stability.
3. Critically assess empirical research on institutional performance and outcomes.
4. Strengthen analytical and writing skills for advanced undergraduate coursework.

### Required Readings

**Required Book:**

Gandhi, Jennifer, and Rubén Ruiz-Rufino, eds. 2015. *The Routledge Handbook of Comparative Political Institutions*. New York: Routledge.

Additional readings will be posted on Brightspace.

## Lectures

Each class combines lecture and in-class discussion. Lectures typically last no more than 60 minutes. There is a zero-tolerance policy for cell phones or electronic devices. Laptops are allowed only for note-taking.

## Description and Assessment of Assignments

### Participation, Attendance, and Reading Questions (20%)

This component includes attendance, in-class participation, and submission of reading questions. Before each Tuesday class, students must post two to three questions engaging with the assigned readings on Brightspace.

### In-Class Quizzes (20%)

There will be four short in-class quizzes focused on the required readings. The best three quizzes will count toward the final grade.

### Paper Presentations (15%)

Students will present one assigned paper in small groups of two to three students. Each presentation lasts ten minutes, followed by five minutes of discussion.

Presentations will take place in **Week 6** and **Week 14**. *During the paper presentation weeks, we will cover topics that extend beyond the material covered in the lectures.*

### Midterm Exam (20%)

The midterm exam covers lectures and readings from Weeks 1–6 and will be taken in class.

### Final Exam (25%)

The final exam covers material from Weeks 8–13 and will be taken in class.

## Grading

### Grading Breakdown

Participation, Attendance, and Questions	20%
In-Class Quizzes	20%
Paper Presentations	15%
Midterm Exam	20%
Final Exam	25%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>

### Grading Scale

A	95–100
A-	90–94
B+	87–89
B	83–86
B-	80–82
C+	77–79
C	73–76
C-	70–72
D+	67–69
D	63–66
D-	60–62
F	59 and below

## Assignment Submission and Late Policy

All written work must be submitted via Brightspace by the posted deadlines. Make-up evaluations will be administered only in cases of family emergency or serious illness (documentation required). Other circumstances do not qualify.

Late assignments will be penalized by one-third of a letter grade per day, including weekends. Assignments submitted more than two days after the deadline will not be accepted.

## A Note on the Readings

The reading load is intentionally limited. The goal is to learn and apply concepts rather than read excessively. Some readings may include technical sections, such as statistical analysis or formal theory; students may skip these sections unless otherwise indicated. For empirical papers, focus on the introduction, results, and conclusion. Selective reading is encouraged.

## Classroom Norms

This course addresses political topics that may be controversial. The following norms apply: the primary commitment is to learn from one another; students should build on others' comments and work toward shared understanding; ideas may be challenged, but not individuals; the tone of discussion must remain respectful and productive.

## Academic Integrity

The University of Southern California is a learning community committed to academic honesty. Students are expected to submit original work prepared specifically for this course. Academic misconduct, including plagiarism, cheating, fabrication, or assisting others in dishonest acts, will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity and may result in course failure and university sanctions. Students are responsible for understanding USC's academic integrity policies.

## Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence tools, such as ChatGPT, are not allowed in this course. AI tools may not be used to answer quizzes or exams. Using AI-generated content will be treated as plagiarism and reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.

## Course Content Distribution and Recording Policies

USC policies prohibit recording and distributing course content without the instructor's explicit permission. Unauthorized recording or distribution of lectures, notes, or exams is strictly prohibited and may be treated as academic misconduct.

## Course at a Glance

Week	Main Topic	Deliverable
1	Introduction to Political Institutions	—
2	Institutions as Rules	—
3	Historical Institutionalism	In-class Quiz 1
4	Endogenous Institutional Change	—
5	Formal and Informal Institutions	In-class Quiz 2
6	Paper Presentations	Paper Presentations (Group)
7	Review and Midterm Exam	Midterm Exam
8	Constitutions	—
9	Executive–Legislative Relations	
10	Electoral Systems	In-class Quiz 3
11	Types of Democracy	
12	Party Systems	In-class Quiz 4
13	Voting Regimes	—
14	Paper Presentations	Paper Presentations (Group)
15	Review and Final Exam	Final Exam

## Course Schedule (Week by Week)

### Unit 1: Approaches to Studying Institutions

#### Week 1 — Introduction: What Are Political Institutions?

##### Readings:

- Gandhi, Jennifer, and Rubén Ruiz-Rufino. 2015. “Introduction.” In *The Routledge Handbook of Comparative Political Institutions*, 1–12. New York: Routledge.
- David, Paul A. 1985. “Clio and the Economics of QWERTY.” *American Economic Review* 75(2): 332–337.

#### Week 2 — Institutions as Rules

##### Readings:

- March, James G., and Johan P. Olsen. 2006. “Elaborating the ‘New Institutionalism.’” In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Institutions*, edited by R. A. W. Rhodes, Sarah A. Binder, and Bert A. Rockman, 3–20. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shepsle, Kenneth A. 2008. “Rational Choice Institutionalism.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Institutions*, 23–38. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

#### Week 3 — Historical Institutionalism and Critical Junctures

##### Readings:

- North, Douglass C., and Barry R. Weingast. 1989. “Constitutions and Commitment.” *Journal of Economic History* 49(4): 803–832.
- Jenkins, Stephen, and Jared Rubin. 2024. “Historical Political Economy: What It Is and What It Is Not.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Historical Political Economy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

#### Week 4 — Endogenous Institutional Change

##### Readings:

- Przeworski, Adam. 2015. “Endogenous Change of Institutions.” In *The Routledge Handbook of Comparative Political Institutions*, 43–55. New York: Routledge.
- Boix, Carles. 1999. “Setting the Rules of the Game.” *American Political Science Review* 93(3): 609–624.

**Week 5 — Formal and Informal Institutions****Readings:**

- Lauth, Hans-Joachim. 2015. “Formal and Informal Institutions.” In *The Routledge Handbook of Comparative Political Institutions*, 56–70. New York: Routledge.
- Nunn, Nathan, and Leonard Wantchekon. 2011. “The Slave Trade and the Origins of Mistrust in Africa.” *American Economic Review* 101(7): 3221–3252.

**Week 6 — Paper presentations.****Week 7 — Midterm Exam****Unit 2: Comparative Political Institutions****Week 8 — Constitutions****Readings:**

- Ginsburg, Tom. 2015. “Constitutions as Political Institutions.” In *The Routledge Handbook of Comparative Political Institutions*, 117–131. New York: Routledge.
- Persson, Torsten, and Guido Tabellini. 2003. *The Economic Effects of Constitutions*. Chapters 1 and 2.

**Week 9 — Executive–Legislative Relations****Readings:**

- Alemán, Eduardo. 2015. “Legislative Organization and Outcomes.” In *The Routledge Handbook of Comparative Political Institutions*, 145–162. New York: Routledge.
- Saiegh, Sebastián M. 2015. “Executive–Legislative Relations.” In *The Routledge Handbook of Comparative Political Institutions*, 162–181. New York: Routledge.

**Week 10 — Electoral Systems****Readings:**

- Shugart, Matthew S., and Rein Taagepera. 2017. *Votes from Seats: Logical Models of Electoral Systems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Chapters 2–4.
- Persson, Torsten, and Guido Tabellini. 2003. “Electoral Rules.” In *The Economic Effects of Constitutions*, 89–138. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Thursday March 26th: In-class Quiz 3

**Week 11 — Electoral Systems and Types of Democracy****Readings:**

- Lijphart, Arend. 1999. *Patterns of Democracy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, Chapters 2–3.
- Mainwaring, Scott. 1993. “Presidentialism, Multipartyism, and Democracy.” *Comparative Political Studies* 26(2): 198–228.

**Week 12 — Party Systems****Readings:**

- Lupu, Noam. 2015. “Party Systems.” In *The Routledge Handbook of Comparative Political Institutions*, 103–116. New York: Routledge.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin, and Stein Rokkan. 1967. “Cleavage Structures, Party Systems, and Voter Alignments.” In *Party Systems and Voter Alignments*, 1–64. New York: Free Press.
- Gethin, Amory, Clara Martínez-Toledano, and Thomas Piketty. 2022. “Brahmin Left vs. Merchant Right.” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 137(1): 1–48.
- Thursday April 9th: In-class Quiz 4

**Week 13 — Voting Regimes****Readings:**

- Lijphart, Arend. 1997. “Unequal Participation.” *American Political Science Review* 91(1): 1–14.
- Fowler, Anthony. 2013. “Electoral and Policy Consequences of Voter Turnout.” *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 8(2): 159–182.
- Cepaluni, Gabriel, and F. Daniel Hidalgo. 2016. “Compulsory Voting Can Increase Political Inequality.” *Political Analysis* 24(2): 273–280.

**Week 14 — Paper presentations.****Reading List: Electoral Accountability and Responsiveness****Week 15 — Review and Final Exam**