

POSC-120: Comparative Politics

Syllabus (Spring 2026 — USC)

Course Information

Units	4
Meeting Time	Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9:00–10:20 am
Location	SOS B44
Term	Spring 2026
Discussion Section	Friday 9:00 - 9:50 am; Friday 10:00 - 10:50 am.
Instructor	Pablo Argote
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Course Description

Political science is the study of politics in a scientific and systematic manner. An example of a research question in political science is: What is the impact of democratic institutions on economic growth? Comparative politics is a subfield of political science that studies politics within countries, not between nations. This subfield is not limited to the contemporary world; it ranges across time, back to periods for which reliable evidence is available.

In most political science departments in the United States, comparative politics is distinguished from American politics, which focuses on the United States. Accordingly, this course emphasizes political phenomena in “the rest of the world.” We will discuss many examples from Latin America and Europe, which are closer to the instructor’s area of expertise.

Comparative politics is based on the logic of comparing “apples to oranges”: countries that differ in important ways but can still be compared systematically. For example, to analyze whether natural resources affect democracy, we would compare countries with different natural resource endowments. In other cases, we compare countries that are similar in many respects but differ on one key dimension in order to isolate a causal relationship.

Learning Objectives

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

1. Explain key concepts in comparative politics and the relationships between them.
2. Apply political science concepts to contemporary political discussions.
3. Strengthen analytical and writing skills for advanced undergraduate coursework in political science and related social sciences.

Required Textbook

Clark, William Roberts, Matt Golder, and Sona Nadenichek Golder. *Foundations of Comparative Politics*. Sage, 2nd edition.

The textbook provides a common framework of basic concepts and definitions that will serve as a starting point for each class. Some authors may disagree with these definitions. Additional readings, podcasts, and short videos will be posted on Brightspace. We will rely more heavily on the textbook during the first half of the course.

Lectures

Each class combines lecture and in-class discussion. Since attention declines after about one hour, lectures will typically last no more than approximately 60 minutes. There is a zero-tolerance policy for cell phones, laptops, iPads, or any other electronic device use. In a world of constant distractions, attention and concentration are essential skills; students should be able to focus for roughly 45 minutes.

Description and Assessment of Assignments

Participation, Attendance, and Discussion Questions (20%)

Attendance is not mandatory, but not attending class or discussion section will directly affect the participation grade. This component includes attendance, in-class participation, and posting discussion questions.

Before each Tuesday class, students must post two to three questions about the readings on Brightspace. Questions may clarify concepts, critique arguments, or connect ideas across readings. These questions help guide class discussion.

In-Class Quizzes (20%)

There will be four short in-class quizzes focused on the readings. Quizzes are designed to be straightforward if the assigned materials have been completed. Details regarding format and timing will be posted on Brightspace. Most likely, we will count the best three quizzes out of four.

Paper Presentations (15%)

Students will present one assigned paper in small groups of three students. Each presentation lasts ten minutes, followed by five minutes of questions and discussion. Presentations will take place in Week 6 and Week 14. The list of papers and sign-up instructions will be posted on Brightspace. The paper presentation weeks will focus on topics that extend beyond the material covered in the lectures

Half of students must sign up to present in Week 6, and the other half in Week 14. During Week 2, you have to (i) gather in groups of three people, (ii) check the list of articles, and (iii) enroll in either Week 6 or Week 14. More details will be provided in class.

Midterm Exam (20%)

The midterm exam covers lectures, readings, podcasts, and discussion section material from Unit 1. The exam must be taken at USC facilities, using pen and paper.

Final Exam (25%)

The final exam covers lectures and required readings after the midterm, corresponding to Units 2 and 3. The exam must be taken at USC facilities, using pen and paper.

Grading

Grading Breakdown

Component	Weight
Participation, Attendance, and Questions	20%
In-Class Quizzes	20%
Paper Presentation	15%
Midterm Exam	20%
Final Exam	25%
Total	100%

Grading Scale

Letter Grade	Range
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.

Discussion Section

Discussion section is designed to engage critically with course material and to address topics that require deeper treatment than lecture allows. Material covered in discussion section may appear on exams.

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 / Assessment
1	Introduction to Comparative Politics; The Science of Politics	—
2	The State and State Capacity	—
3	Institutions: Rules of the Game	In-class Quiz 1
4	Democracy and Democratization	—
5	Varieties of Democracies and Electoral Systems	In-class Quiz 2
6	Paper Presentations	Paper Presentations (Group)
7	Review and Midterm Exam	Midterm Exam
8	Collective Action and Free Riding	—
9	Political Parties and Cleavages	—
10	Voting Behavior: Accountability, Ideology, and Identity	In-class Quiz 3
11	Immigration	—
12	Populism and Gender Gaps	In-class Quiz 4
13	Flex Week (TBA)	—
14	Paper Presentations	Paper Presentations (Group)
15	Review and Final Exam	Final Exam

Course Schedule (Spring 2026 — USC)

Unit 1: Conceptual Foundations

Week 1 — Overview and Approaches

January 13 (Tuesday): No class

January 15 (Thursday): The Science of Politics

Readings:

- Clark, William Roberts, Matt Golder, and Sona Nadenichek Golder. 2018. *Foundations of Comparative Politics*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press. Chapters 1–2 (skim Chapter 3).

Week 2 — The State and State Capacity

January 20 (Tuesday): The State

Readings:

- Clark, William Roberts, Matt Golder, and Sona Nadenichek Golder. 2018. *Foundations of Comparative Politics*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press. Chapter 4.
- “The History of Ideas.” Podcast episode: “Hobbes on the State.”
- Tilly, Charles. 1985. “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime.” In *Bringing the*

State Back In, edited by Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, 169–191. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

January 22 (Thursday): State Capacity

Readings:

- Huntington, Samuel P. 1968. *Political Order in Changing Societies*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. Chapter 1 (pp. 1–24).

Week 3 — Institutions

January 27 (Tuesday): Institutions as Rules of the Game

Readings:

- Shepsle, Kenneth A. 2008. “Rational Choice Institutionalism.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Institutions*, edited by R. A. W. Rhodes, Sarah A. Binder, and Bert A. Rockman, 23–38. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Clark, William Roberts, Matt Golder, and Sona Nadenichek Golder. 2018. *Foundations of Comparative Politics*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press. Chapter 13.

January 29 (Thursday): The Impact of Institutions

In-class Quiz 1

Readings:

- Acemoglu, Daron, and James A. Robinson. 2012. *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*. New York: Crown Publishing Group. Chapter 3.
- Acemoglu, Daron, and James A. Robinson. 2006. *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapters 1–2.

Week 4 — Democracy and Democratization

February 3 (Tuesday): Democracy

Readings:

- Clark, William Roberts, Matt Golder, and Sona Nadenichek Golder. 2018. *Foundations of Comparative Politics*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press. Chapters 5–6.
- Przeworski, Adam. 1991. *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 1.
- Putnam, Robert D., Robert Leonardi, and Raffaella Y. Nanetti. 1993. *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Chapter 5.

February 5 (Thursday): Democratic Transitions

Readings:

- Przeworski, Adam. 1991. *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 2.
- Kuran, Timur. 1991. “Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989.” *World Politics* 44(1): 7–48.
- Clark, William Roberts, Matt Golder, and Sona Nadenichek Golder. 2018. *Foundations of Comparative Politics*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press. Chapter 7.

Week 5 — Varieties of Democracies

February 10 (Tuesday): Presidential, Parliamentary, and Semi-Presidential Democracies

Readings:

- Clark, William Roberts, Matt Golder, and Sona Nadenichek Golder. 2018. *Foundations of Comparative Politics*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press. Chapter 10.
- Cheibub, José Antonio. 2007. *Presidentialism, Parliamentarism, and Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapters 1–2.
- Linz, Juan J. 1990. “The Perils of Presidentialism.” *Journal of Democracy* 1(1): 51–69.

February 12 (Thursday): Electoral Systems

In-class Quiz 2

Readings:

- Clark, William Roberts, Matt Golder, and Sona Nadenichek Golder. 2018. *Foundations of Comparative Politics*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press. Chapters 11 and 14.
- Cox, Gary W. 1997. *Making Votes Count: Strategic Coordination in the World’s Electoral Systems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapters 2 and 4.

Week 6 — Paper Presentations

February 17 (Tuesday): Paper presentations

February 19 (Thursday): Paper presentations

Week 7 — Midterm Exam

February 24 (Tuesday): Review

February 26 (Thursday): Midterm exam

Unit 2: Political Behavior

Week 8 — Collective Action

March 3 (Tuesday): Free Riding and the Collective Action Problem

Readings:

- Olson, Mancur. 1965. *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Chapters 1–2.

March 5 (Thursday): Protests as Complements or Substitutes**Readings:**

- Cantoni, Davide, David Y. Yang, Noam Yuchtman, and Y. Jane Zhang. 2019. “Protests as Strategic Games: Experimental Evidence from Hong Kong’s Antiauthoritarian Movement.” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 134(2): 1021–1077.
- King, Gary, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts. 2013. “How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression.” *American Political Science Review* 107(2): 326–343.

Week 9 — Political Parties**March 10 (Tuesday):** Political Parties and Cleavages**Readings:**

- Clark, William Roberts, Matt Golder, and Sona Nadenichek Golder. 2018. *Foundations of Comparative Politics*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press. Chapter 12.
- Bornschier, Simon. 2009. “Cleavage Politics in Old and New Democracies: A Review of the Literature and Avenues for Future Research.” Florence: European University Institute, Working Paper.

March 12 (Thursday): Class and Political Representation**Readings:**

- Gethin, Amory, Clara Martínez-Toledano, and Thomas Piketty. 2022. “Brahmin Left versus Merchant Right: Changing Political Cleavages in Twenty-One Western Democracies, 1948–2020.” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 137(1): 1–48.

Spring Recess: March 17 and March 19 — no class

Week 10 — Voting Behavior**March 24 (Tuesday):** Selection versus Sanctioning**Readings:**

- Fearon, James D. 1999. “Electoral Accountability and the Control of Politicians.” In *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation*, edited by Adam Przeworski, Susan C. Stokes, and Bernard Manin, 55–97. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Singer, Matthew M., and Ryan E. Carlin. 2013. “Context Counts: The Election Cycle, Development, and the Nature of Economic Voting.” *Journal of Politics* 75(3): 730–742.

March 26 (Thursday): Ideology and Identity

In-class Quiz 3

Readings:

- Downs, Anthony. 1957. “An Economic Theory of Political Action in a Democracy.” *Journal of Political Economy* 65(2): 135–150.
- Sánchez-Cuenca, Ignacio. 2008. “How Can Governments Be Accountable If Voters Vote Ideologically?” In *Controlling Governments: Voters, Institutions, and Accountability*, edited by José María Maravall and Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca, 65–90. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Unit 3: Contemporary Topics in Political Behavior

Week 11 — Immigration

March 31 (Tuesday): Theories of Immigration

Readings:

- Pettigrew, Thomas F., and Linda R. Tropp. 2008. “How Does Intergroup Contact Reduce Prejudice? Meta-Analytic Tests of Three Mediators.” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 38(6): 922–934.
- Scheve, Kenneth F., and Matthew J. Slaughter. 2001. “Labor Market Competition and Individual Preferences over Immigration Policy.” *Review of Economics and Statistics* 83(1): 133–145.

April 2 (Thursday): Empirical Evidence

Readings:

- Adida, Claire L. 2011. “Too Close for Comfort? Immigrant Exclusion in Africa.” *Comparative Political Studies* 44(10): 1370–1396.
- Argote, Pablo, and Sarah Zukerman Daly. 2024. “The Formation of Attitudes toward Immigration in Colombia.” *International Interactions* 50(2): 370–384.

Week 12 — Populism and Gender Gaps

April 7 (Tuesday): Populism

Readings:

- Hawkins, Kirk A., and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. 2017. “The Ideational Approach to Populism.” *Latin American Research Review* 52(4): 513–528.
- Mudde, Cas, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. 2013. “Exclusionary versus Inclusionary Populism.” *Government and Opposition* 48(2): 147–174.

April 9 (Thursday): Gender Gaps

In-class Quiz 4

Readings:

- Inglehart, Ronald, and Pippa Norris. 2000. "The Developmental Theory of the Gender Gap: Women's and Men's Voting Behavior in Global Perspective." *International Political Science Review* 21(4): 441–463.
- Kaufmann, Karen M., and John R. Petrocik. 1999. "The Changing Politics of American Men: Understanding the Sources of the Gender Gap." *American Journal of Political Science* 43(3): 864–887.

Week 13 — Flex Week

April 14 (Tuesday): TBA

April 16 (Thursday): TBA

Week 14 — Paper Presentations

April 21 (Tuesday): Paper presentations

April 23 (Thursday): Paper presentations

Week 15 — Review

April 28 (Tuesday): Review for the final exam

April 30 (Thursday): Final exam