

# DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE: THINKING ABOUT POLITICS

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PSY B55

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Why are some countries well-governed while others are poorly governed? This is, arguably, the central question of political science. And yet, it is one that we do not have a clear answer to. Or perhaps it would be more correct to say that the discipline has *many* answers to this question, with no clear consensus on their relative importance.

Our attention will also be focused primarily at the national level, though quite obviously the aggregate quality of governance in a country is a product of its governance at multiple levels, and some attention will be devoted to governance at regional and local levels.

We will *not* discuss international influences on the quality of governance, e.g., war, colonialism, trade, aid, international institutions. Nor will we pay much attention to foreign policy as an output. The course is about domestic sources of governance and domestic governance outcomes.

**ORGANIZATION.** In the past, when I've taught this class I've done so in a conventional fashion – with lectures, readings, and discussions focused on the readings. Over the years, I have become increasingly dissatisfied with this time-honored framework.

There is, to begin with, a problem of finding appropriate readings. Available readings on most social science subjects take the form of academic publications (narrowly focused, inaccessible to the general reader) or textbooks (generally focused, dry, devoid of controversy). Neither format encourages thinking on the part of students. Of course, one can combine a number of readings on a given subject, presenting different views. But this imposes a very heavy reading load and usually requires the inclusion of specialized academic publications. Books that highlight “debates” by including contending views of a subject are usually fairly polemical and don't seriously engage the social science literature on those subjects. Thus, there is a dearth of appropriate reading material for upper-division undergraduate courses.

Even if one could find appropriate readings I do not think they would serve much of a purpose. This is because (in my view) the presentation of substantive knowledge about a social science topic is not terribly important at the undergraduate level. To be sure, if one continues in a field one will sooner or later need to learn a good many of the details about that subject, whether it is electoral politics in the European Union or the epidemiology of HIV/AIDS. I do not wish to demean the value of substantive knowledge. The point is that whatever one is studying at age 20 is probably not the same topic one will be working on at age 30. Political science majors go on to do all sorts of things; only a very few go on to graduate work in political science, and those that do often change subfields.

The value of a wide-ranging liberal arts education is, thus, not in the facts that it imparts but rather in the capabilities that it imparts. A successful college experience involves learning skills that can be applied across a wide range of settings – e.g., reading, writing, analysis. All of this could be placed under the rubric of *thinking*, which is why I have subtitled this course “thinking about politics.” After graduating from a liberal arts program one should have learned how to learn. This is the most valuable skill of all, given the diverse and continually evolving nature of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century world economy.

In keeping with this general goal, I have re-crafted this course to involve less reading, more social science methodology, more in-class interaction, and more original research.

The first section of the course introduces methodological principles that we shall bring to bear in our discussion of substantive topics. This is the only section of the course with regular readings. However, you should note that these readings are extensive and quite complex, at least for those without prior exposure to social science methodology.

The second section introduces various substantive topics connected with democratic governance. My lectures will be limited to what is necessary in order to set up class discussion, which will be structured around a series of queries that I will pose to the class. Sometimes, I may ask the class to split up into small groups to discuss the material. Other times, I may ask students to write down their responses, perhaps even handing it in as a pop quiz.

The final section of the course focuses on students' projects. Each student will present a Powerpoint-based talk based on their research, which will also be crafted into a written paper. (See below for details.)

**REQUIREMENTS.** The course is open to advanced undergraduate and graduate students. Class size is limited so as to preserve a seminar format. There are no pre-requisites. However, it will be a challenging course for those without some background in comparative politics. You should also be aware that this class will require a good deal of time and effort on your part. If you are unable to make this commitment you may be happier in a different course.

**PROTOCOL.** Please arrive on time. Do not read, sleep, or chat with your neighbors. Put your cell phones away. Unless there is some material that you need to access, please put your laptops, notepads, and other PDAs away as well. (You can take notes on paper.) Be respectful of others in your comments. Do not leave until class is dismissed.

**ACADEMIC CONDUCT.** Plagiarism or cheating of any kind (e.g., consulting notes during a closed-book exam) is strictly forbidden. Please be aware of the following Boston University policy: "All students are responsible for having read the Boston University statement on plagiarism, which is available in the Academic Conduct Code. Students are advised that the penalty for cheating on examinations or for plagiarism may be '...expulsion from the program or the University or such other penalty as may be recommended by the Committee on Student Academic Conduct, subject to approval by the dean.'"

**ABSENCES, EXTENSIONS.** Students are expected to take exams and complete written work at their scheduled times. No excused absences or extensions will be given without documentation of medical, religious or personal reasons, or official Boston University business. If you will be missing additional classes for religious reasons you must inform me of these dates during the first week of class; otherwise, I cannot excuse your absence.

**GRADES.** Grades will be based on three components, weighted equally: (a) class participation and in-class assignments/quizzes; (b) oral presentation and written paper based on original research; and (c) a final exam.

**PAPER.** You are responsible for a research paper that is roughly ten pages in length. I am not concerned with the number of pages in the paper, so do not strain to alter the format of the paper. The topic must be chosen from one of the subjects listed in the syllabus. But this gives you plenty of latitude. Just make sure that I have approved the topic before you do a lot of work on it.

**PARTICIPATION.** I expect active participation from all students in every session. I do *not* wish to lecture extensively, though I will do a bit of lecturing every week (more or less depending upon the topic). Nor do I intend to act as quiz-master, in the fashion of Harvard Law courses – though I will play this role if necessary (and perhaps will call names randomly like John Houseman in *Paper Chase*). *You must participate regularly and intelligently in order to get a top grade in this class.* Shyness, or unfamiliarity with the English language, is no excuse. This is a talking profession. Yadayadayada.

More important, do not think of participation simply as a matter of "saying something." There are insightful comments and questions, and there is irrelevant drivel. You know what I'm getting at. Be especially

judicious in the use of anecdotes drawn from your personal life. We all have stories, but these are not always relevant to the subject matter. (Granted, some students may have lived in the developing world or worked for an organization engaged in the developing world. Stories drawn from these contexts may be *very* relevant.)

Let me say a word about my own responses to your comments. You should realize that any professor who incorporates discussion into classroom activity is in a somewhat awkward position. I want to encourage open and frank discussion, but I must also be sure to correct any misperceptions that arise from such discussion. If a comment is factually or logically wrong it is my duty to call attention to this, of no one else does. The purpose is not to embarrass the speaker but simply to clarify the point – for that person and for everyone else, many of whom may share the confusion. Making mistakes is part of the learning experience. If you do not allow yourself to make mistakes you are preventing yourself from learning. I make mistakes all the time. There is nothing wrong with a wrong answer. Oftentimes, the most productive sort of answer or question is one that reveals what is *not* clear in people's minds. It is problematic, however, if your answer reveals that you have not done the assigned reading or that you have not been paying attention to previous class discussions.

Please be attentive to standard rules of decorum: avoid dogmatism, respect others' views, and try to move class discussion forward (pay attention to what others say and respond to the previous point). We may impose the 1-finger/2-finger rule. (When you raise two fingers it means that your comment follows directly upon the preceding point.) Use the locution "like" only when comparing things – not, like, when pausing in the middle of a sentence.

**FINAL EXAM.** A final, end-of-semester exam will require you to engage in the sort of active theorizing that we will be doing in-class throughout the semester. That is, I will pose a question about a set of institutions and ask you to evaluate its probable effect on political behavior.

**READINGS.** Assigned readings will be posted on the Blackboard web site.

For daily news of the world, try the *New York Times* (available on the web) or the *BBC World News*, available on TV, radio, or on-line. For the on-line version of the NYT, make sure you click on "International News" and then on "All Headlines" or on the region of the world that you are most interested in learning about. Likewise, when navigating the BBC on the web click through to some particular region of the world to get all available stories.

For weekly news of the world, I suggest subscribing to *The Economist* if you can afford it (there may be student specials). It has a distinct point of view but is perhaps the only weekly with extensive coverage of the world. The prose is engaging and the articles are short and to the point.

**SCHEDULE.** It is possible that the dates and assignments shown below will be altered. If so, an announcement will be made in class and an email will be sent to all registered students. It is your responsibility to keep track of these changes. If there are fundamental changes to the syllabus during the course of the semester a new version of the syllabus will be sent to your email and posted on my homepage. (Note that the syllabus is posted only on my web site, not on the course web site, so as to avoid the confusion of multiple versions.)

9/3      **Introduction**

## METHODOLOGY

9/5      **Building Blocks**

Gerring, Christenson, *Applied Guide to Social Science Methodology*, Preface, Chs 1-2.

9/10     **Concepts, Measures, Analyses**

Gerring, Christenson, *Applied Guide to Social Science Methodology*, Chs 3-4.

9/12     **Causality**

Gerring, Christenson, *Applied Guide to Social Science Methodology*, Chs 5-7.

9/17     **Causal Research Designs**

Gerring, Christenson, *Applied Guide to Social Science Methodology*, Chs 8-10. [Reading is heavy; please allocate extra time]

9/19     **Reading, Brainstorming, Writing**

Gerring, Christenson, *Applied Guide to Social Science Methodology*, Chs 12, 13, 16.

## THEORIES OF GOVERNANCE

9/24     **Governance: Definition and Measurement**

Questions: What is governance? Can one measure it?

9/26     **Leadership, Culture**

Questions 1: What is leadership? Does it matter? Can features of leadership be measured and generalized, or is it inevitably contextual, ineffable? Can we theorize about the impact of leaders?

Questions 2: What is culture? Does it affect governance? Does it offer a satisfactory explanation for the quality of governance?

10/1     **Geographic Factors**

Questions: To what extent does geography affect the quality of governance? Which aspects of geography are most important?

10/3     **Economics**

Question 1: How might economic development, and the attendant processes grouped together under the rubric of modernization theory, affect governance?

Question 2: What is the connection(s) between revenue and governance?

10/8     **(In)Equality**

Question: How might inequality affect governance?

Clip from Monty Python and the Search for the Holy Grail: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Xd\\_zkMEgkI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Xd_zkMEgkI)

10/10    **Democracy as an outcome**

Questions: What is democracy and how might it be measured? What are the causes of democracy? Are there different causes for democratization and democratic breakdown?

10/17    **Democracy as a cause**

Questions: Are democracies better governed than autocracies?

10/22    **Film: *An African Election*** (dir. Jarreth Merz) <http://anafricanelection.com/>

10/24    **Writing**

Guest lecturer: Joshua Yesnowitz

- 10/29    **Executives: Parliamentary/Presidential**  
 Questions: What does it mean for an executive to be parliamentary, presidential, or semi-presidential? Why are these systems chosen? What consequences for governance might they have?
- 10/31    **Electoral Systems**  
 Questions: What is an electoral system? Why are different systems chosen? What are their consequences for governance?
- 11/5    **Political Parties and Electoral Competition**  
 Questions 1: What is a political party? Is democracy possible without political parties? What causes parties to be “strong” or “weak”? Does it matter?  
 Questions 2: What is electoral competition and how might it be measured? Does it capture essential elements of democracy?
- 11/7    **Responsiveness, Accountability, Representation**  
 Questions: What do these terms mean? How might they be measured? How do they contribute to good governance? Which aspects might be harmful to governance? What is the difference between vertical and horizontal accountability? Is transparency always a good thing?
- 11/12    **Corruption**  
 Questions: How should we define corruption? What explains corruption (and what, by extension, can be done about it)?
- 11/14    **Social capital, Civil society, Participation**  
 Questions: What is social capital? How might it matter for governance? Does popular participation improve the quality of governance?
- 11/19    **Decentralization, Local Governance**  
 Questions: Does decentralization improve governance?
- 11/21    **The Public Sector/Bureaucracy**  
 Questions: How does one create a well-functioning bureaucracy? What are the different organizational models? Does down-sizing and out-sourcing enhance the quality of governance? How is governing a public organization different from governing a private-sector organization?

## PRESENTATIONS, CONCLUSIONS

- 11/26    **Presentations I**
- 12/3    **Presentations II**
- 12/5    **Presentations III**
- 12/10    **Summary**
- TBA    **Papers due**
- TBA    **Final exam**

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