

Course information 2026-27

PS1172 Introduction to Political Science

General information

MODULE LEVEL: 4

CREDIT: 30

NOTIONAL STUDY TIME: 300 hours

MODE: Locally Taught, Independent Learner Route and Online Taught

Summary

The course is taught as an introduction to politics in a globalised world, with a focus on how political science tries to understand and explain cross-country and cross-time differences between countries. The course introduces students to some of the basic theoretical ideas and research methods in modern political science, and then looks at how these ideas help explain patterns of political behaviour, political institutions, and policy outcomes

Conditions

Please see Programme Regulations for a list of Prerequisites, Corequisites and Exclusions.

Aims and objectives

This course is designed to:

- introduce students to the main differences between democratic and non-democratic regimes,
- and between different models of democratic government
- introduce students to how political preferences are formed, how voters behave, how parties compete, how interest groups form, and how electoral systems shape behaviour
- explain how political institutions work, such as presidential and parliamentary systems, singleparty and coalition governments, federalism, and courts and central banks
- explain how political behaviour and institutions shape policy outcomes, such as economic performance, public spending, and immigration and environmental policies
- prepare students for further courses in political science

Learning outcomes

At the end of this course and having completed the essential reading and activities students should be able to:

- explain patterns of voting behaviour and party competition in different countries, and how electoral systems influence voters and parties
- explain how different institutional designs of democracy work
- describe how political science explains policy outcomes
- critically evaluate rational choice and institutional theories in political science
- explain the pros and cons of quantitative and qualitative methods in political science

Employability skills

Below are the three most relevant employability skills that students acquire by undertaking this course which can be conveyed to future prospective employers:

1. Complex problem solving
2. Communication
3. Creativity and innovation

Essential reading

For full details, please refer to the reading list

Clark, W.R., M. Golder and S. Nadenichek Golder Principles of Comparative Politics. (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2018) [ISBN 9781506389790].

Assessment

This course is assessed by a three-hour and fifteen-minute closed-book written examination.

Syllabus

Basics: Why Are Some Countries Democratic?

Procedural and substantive conceptions of democracy. Measuring democracy, and the number of democracies across time. Explanations of democratization: political culture, economic and social modernisation, and institutional ‘contracts’ between social groups.

Basics: Political Science Explanations and Methods

Historiography of modern political science. Difference between rational choice and institutional explanations. Difference between qualitative and quantitative methods. Basic understanding of regression.

Non-Democratic Regimes

Explaining the different forms of dictatorship. Explaining policy outcomes in different kinds of dictatorships. Introducing Selectorate Theory. Why non-democratic regimes have elections and legislatures.

Behaviour: Political Preferences and Voting Behaviour

The two main ‘dimensions’ of preferences: economics, and social. Why the ‘Left-Right’ is a universal phenomenon. Difference between ‘expressive’ and ‘strategic’ voting. Class dealignment and post-materialism.

Behaviour: Political Parties and Electoral Systems

The Downsian model of electoral competition versus the ‘cleavage model’ of party systems. The number and location of parties in democracies. Two main types of electoral systems: majoritarian, and proportional. Trade-offs in the design of electoral systems. How electoral systems shape party competition and voting behaviour.

Institutions: Presidents and Parliaments, Coalitions and Single-Party Governments

Difference between presidential, parliamentary, and semi-presidential systems and their performance, e.g. regime survival, policy-making, and accountability.

Patterns of single-party and coalition government across the world. Theories of coalition formation. Policy implications of single-party, coalition, and minority government.

Institutions: Federalism and Independent Institutions

Difference between unitary, decentralised, and federal systems. Causes and consequences of centralisation and decentralisation. Principal-agent theory and why politicians delegate to independent institutions. Design of courts and central banks, and policy consequences of granting power to independent institutions.

Outcomes: Economic Performance and Public Spending

Patterns of economic performance and public spending. How political institutions and party preferences shape economic policy outcomes. Models of welfare states. Whether citizens choose redistributive policies, or whether redistributive policies shape citizens' attitudes towards these policies.

Outcomes: Accountability and Representation

Explaining the different types of representation. The reasons why some governments are more corrupt or more responsive to citizen interests. The principle-agent model of electoral accountability.