

# Comparative Political Regimes

**Semester: Fall 2025 / Spring 2026**

**Program: International and Comparative Studies (English track)**

**Instructor: Anne-Laure Mahé**

**Total number of hours: 20 hours**

**ECTS: 5**

## **COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

---

This course examines how political regimes develop, function, and shape societies in a comparative perspective. In doing so, it provides insights into why some regimes, either democratic or autocratic, endure while others are short-lived, why some are better at delivering services than others, and how political regimes and state institutions interact. It will tackle current political questions such as the root causes (and reality) of a global wave of democratic backsliding, the foreign policies of autocracies, and why some nondemocratic regimes seem to do better for gender equality. The course will look at a vast array of cases located in the Global North and the Global South, highlighting connections and circulations as well as similarities and differences.

## **ASSESSMENT:**

---

**Final exam:** short-answer questions on course content, including lectures and readings.

## **COURSE CONTENT:**

---

### **Week 1: Introduction. What is comparative politics, and why do we compare?**

What does it mean to compare political regimes? Why do we compare, and what are the main challenges in doing so? What are the main questions in this field of research?

### **Week 2: Defining political regimes: beyond typologies?**

How do we define political regimes? What are the different types of political regimes, and how can we think beyond types and categories (and do we need to)? How do we observe political regimes empirically, “in real life”?

**Reading:** Anckar, C., Fredriksson, C. Classifying political regimes 1800–2016: a typology and a new dataset. *Eur Polit Sci* 18, 84–96 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-018-0149-8>

**Week 3: Democracies and democratization**

What is democracy and how did it become a dominant form of political regime in the 20th century? And did it really start in Athens?

**Week 4: Understanding democratic backsliding**

Are we in the midst of a global wave of democratic backsliding? How do democracies die? What is the distinction between the concept of backsliding and the concept of autocratization?

**Week 5: Authoritarianism and totalitarianism**

What are authoritarianism and totalitarianism and how do they differ? Are today's autocracies different from their predecessors? Is totalitarianism still a relevant concept?

**Week 6: Understanding authoritarian resilience**

What factors explain the survival of authoritarian regimes? What and who threatens those regimes? How do they breakdown?

**Week 7: A focus on democracy, decentralization and development**

Decentralization has long been hailed as a way to foster democracy, peace and development: what is the evidence? How does decentralized authoritarianism work?

**Week 8: A focus on gender equality and political regimes**

We tend to think that democracies are better for gender equality (and civil rights in general): is that so? What do recent research on the topic tell us?

**Week 9: Conclusion and exam prep**

**Week 10: Exam**

**BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

---

Anckar, C., Fredriksson, C. Classifying political regimes 1800–2016: a typology and a new dataset. *Eur Polit Sci* 18, 84–96 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-018-0149-8>

Bermeo, Nancy. 2016. "On democratic backsliding." *Journal of Democracy* 27(1): 5-19

Bunce, Valerie, Stephen Watts, and Philip G. Roeder. "Managing diversity and sustaining democracy: Ethnofederal versus unitary states in the postcommunist world." *Sustainable peace: Power and democracy after civil wars* (2005): 133-158.

Diamond, Larry. 2002. "Thinking about Hybrid Regimes". *Journal of Democracy* 13(2): 21-35. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2002.0025>

Donno, D., Fox, S., & Kaasik, J. (2021). International incentives for women's rights in dictatorships. *Comparative Political Studies*, 55(3), 451-492. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140211024306> (Original work published 2022)

Gandhi, Jennifer et Adam Przeworski. 2007. "Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats". *Comparative Political Studies* 40(11): 1279-1301. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414007305817>

Levitsky, Steven et Lucan Way. 2002. "The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism". *Journal of Democracy* 13(2): 51-63. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2002.0026>

Lijphart, Arend. 1971. "Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method." *American Political Science Review* 65(3): 682-93. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1955513>

Morgenbesser, Lee. 2020. "The Menu of Autocratic Innovation." *Democratization* 27 (6): 1053–72. doi:10.1080/13510347.2020.1746275.

Schmitter, Philip et Lynn Karl Terry. 1991. "What Democracy Is... and Is Not". *Journal of Democracy* 2(3): 75-88. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1991.0033>

Waldner, David et Ellen Lust. 2018. « Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding ». *Annual Review of Political Science* 21: 93-113. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurevpolisci-050517-114628>