1 Overview

This is a graduate-level survey course in political economy. It is the second course in the Political Economy sequence that started in the Fall Quarter with Econ 220/PolSci 460A, taught by Matthew Gentzkow and Andrew Hall. Although ideally students will have taken the Fall Quarter course, this course can be taken as a “stand alone” with permission of the instructors.

The Fall Quarter course focused on the political economy of democracies, covering work on electoral politics in countries where the presumption is that elections are basically fair. This course focuses mainly on the political economy of non-democracies, including clientelism, repression, censorship and control of media, and autocratic politics. We also consider work on protests, transitions to democracy, democratic stability and instability, and economic implications. We include some discussion of work on the political economy of armed conflict, which is more relevant for these issues than in contexts where fair elections can be assumed.

This is principally a theory-oriented class, although most weeks feature at least some empirical work.

Prerequisite The class will assume familiarity with game theory at the level of ECON 203. No specific background in political economy is needed. Some topics build on knowledge in basic micro- and macroeconomics (at the 1st year economics PhD level), but such background will not be systematically required to understand the course.

Materials There is no textbook; we use original papers.
Class structure

- Each class will consist of

  1. two or three student presentations of the central idea/argument/evidence of a selected paper (15–20 minutes), with brief discussion afterward (typically 10–15 minutes);
  2. a short presentation by Gabriel or Jim (typically 10–15 minutes) to provide a general background for the next class, before you read the papers.

- We do not require every student to read the two or three papers for each class. Presentations are meant to convey the main idea to those who haven’t read the paper. However, we do ask each student (besides the presenters) to commit to read at least one of these papers in detail, so that we can ensure a minimum level of informed discussion. (And of course, reading more is encouraged and to your advantage!) We will have a sign-up system for these commitments, to be discussed in the first class.

- Starred (*) papers are our suggestions for papers to be presented. We are open to choice of different articles based on your interests, but only with advance permission.

Requirements and grading  Evaluation will be based on (1) presentations; (2) participation and effort in class discussions; and (3) a 5–10 page proposal for a research project involving a political economy model, including discussion of relation to the literature. Grading will place weights roughly (1/4, 1/4, 1/2) on these three components.

Presentations should absolutely not be more than 20 minutes long, and more succinct presentations are preferable. Presenters should have read the paper carefully and made a serious attempt to understand models, broader arguments, evidence advanced, and author claims about the relationship of the paper to prior work. It may be useful to consult other papers as background. The presentations should be reasonably organized: speakers should practice the entire presentation aloud at home, at least once, before presenting in class, and make sure it fits in the time allotted. Presentations can use slides, or handouts, but do not need to. No need to dwell on details of notation; the key is to get across the main ideas. It may sometimes be helpful, rather than describing a model from the paper in detail, to write your own simplified version of the model, or just a toy example.

We also strongly urge that each student meet with one or both of us during the first three weeks of class, to discuss research interests and directions. If you already have an idea about the final proposal for the class, this will also be a chance to get early feedback so that you can iterate on it later in the quarter.

More detailed instructions on the research proposal will appear later.
2 Reading List and Agenda

We have listed here our planned focus papers for each class meeting (starred), along with some other relevant “classics” and more recent articles on the topic.

This reading list is a more-or-less complete version. However we will continue to make changes before the quarter starts, and may make minor revisions during the quarter. The syllabus posted on Canvas should always be the most current one.

(1/6) Course introduction.


(1/8) Institutions and development, 1


(d) Daron Acemoglu, James A. Robinson, and Ragnar Torvik. The political agenda effect and state centralization. Unpublished ms., 2016


(1/13) Institutions and development, 2


(c) Daron Acemoglu. Politics and economics in weak and strong states. *Journal of monetary Economics, 52*(7):1199–1226, 2005


(1/15) Rule of law and legal order


(c) Roland Benabou and Jean Tirole. Laws and norms. NBER working paper, 2011


(f) *Daron Acemoglu and Alexander Wolitzky. A theory of equality before the law. unpublished paper, 2019

(1/20) MLK Day. No class.

(1/22) Flawed democracy: Clientelism


(1/27) Democratization


(1/29) Protests, revolutions, coups.


(g) Salvador Barbera and Matthew O. Jackson. A model of protests, revolution, and information. Unpublished ms., 2018


(k) Ruben Enikolopov, Alexey Makarin, and Maria Petrova. Social media and protest participation: Evidence from russia. *Available at SSRN 2696236*, 2019


(2/3) Electoral fraud and manipulation


(g) Chris Edmond and Yang K. Lu. Creating confusion. November, 2018


(2/5) Ethnic politics


(2/10) Factions


(2/12) Censorship, autocratic media


(2/19) Corruption, 1: Economic consequences


(2/24) Corruption, 2: Causes and cures

(a) *Daniel Treisman. What have we learned about the causes of corruption from ten years of cross-national empirical research? Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci., 10:211–244, 2007


(g) Juan Ortner and Sylvain Chassang. Making corruption harder: asymmetric information, collusion, and crime. *Journal of Political Economy*, 126(5):2108–2133, 2018


(2/26) Conflict, 1: Explaining costly fighting.


(3/2) Conflict, 2: Contest models, and some economic implications.


(d) Joshua Blumenstock, Tarek Ghani, Sylvan Herskowitz, Ethan B Kapstein, Thomas Scherer, and Ott Toomet. Insecurity and industrial organization: Evidence from Afghanistan. The World Bank, 2018


(3/4) Conflict, 3: Asymmetric information and conflict


(3/9) State and society, 1: Culture and norms


