

PS 149W: DICTATORSHIP AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Version 8/28/2025

Lecture: M 2-5pm, 166 SSB

Section: 101: W 10-11am, 56 SSB

Section: 102: W 11am-12pm, 175 SSB

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COURSE DESCRIPTION: The overwhelming majority of governments throughout history have been dictatorial. Even the recent spread of democracy has not extirpated authoritarian rule: as of 2023 Freedom House rates only 43% of countries as fully free. Whatever the benefits of democracy, dictatorship remains resilient. This course explores the characteristics and dynamics of non-democratic regimes: how and why they come about, what sustains them, why some people resist and others do not, and the future of dictatorship. We will explore a variety of examples from across the world. We explore these topics using documentaries and novels and consider both theoretical approaches and case studies.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS: Students are expected to attend lectures regularly, do the assigned reading, complete all exams, and participate in any discussions. The grade for this course will be based on two midterms (35% for the first, 45% for the second), and class/section participation (20%). You are not competing with your classmates for A's. Everyone who does A-level work will receive an A.

Please note that the second midterm is **not** cumulative; it will cover material not covered on the first midterm. To get the most out of the lectures it is best if you do the reading beforehand. Required videos may sometimes be shown during lecture. If not, they should be considered homework. Exams will assume you have viewed all required videos.

Academic misconduct, also known as cheating and/or plagiarism, will not be tolerated. If you are caught cheating, we reserve the right to fail you in the course. For information on what constitutes misconduct please click [here](#).

THE FOLLOWING BOOKS ARE REQUIRED:

Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith, *The Dictator's Handbook: Why Bad Behavior is Almost Always Good Politics*. (Public Affairs, 2011). Link on bCourses.

Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*. (Any edition). Link on bCourses.

IMPORTANT NOTE: New and better readings are always coming to my attention. I therefore reserve the right to add and subtract from the syllabus.

Answers to Frequently Asked Questions

1. I do not use lecture notes, but lecture slides will be posted on bCourses.
2. I do not allow students to make announcements to the class regarding any extracurricular activity.
3. I do not hand out study sheets before exams, but we will engage in an extensive review of the material and answer any questions you might have.
4. Please report any suspected errors in the grading of an assignment within one day of receiving the grade. I reserve the right not to effect a grade change if an issue is reported after more than one day has passed.
5. The answer is in the syllabus.
6. Unless otherwise specified no appointment or notification to me is necessary to attend office hours. Just show up. Attend as often as you like.

SCHEDULE OF LECTURES/READING

Sept 1: No Class (Labor Day)

Sept 8: Introduction and a Premonition

Jason Wittenberg, Syllabus for POLITICAL SCIENCE 149W: Dictatorship and its Discontents.

Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*. (Modern Library, 2006)

Sept 15: The Origins and Dilemmas of Dictatorship

Bueno de Mesquita and Smith, Chap. 1.

Stephen Haber, "Authoritarian Government," in Barry Weingast and Donald Wittman, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Political Economy*. (Oxford University Press, 2006).

Mancur Olson, *Power and Prosperity: Outgrowing Communist and Capitalist Dictatorships*. (Basic Books, 2000), pp. 1-14.

Ronald Wintrobe, "How to understand, and deal with dictatorship: an economist's view," *Economics of Governance* 2 (2001), pp. 35-58. Skip part 3: "Dealing with dictatorship."

Required: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rStL7niR7gs> (The Rules for Rulers, first 6:22 minutes).

Sept 22: The Temptations of Tyranny

Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. (Secker & Warburg, 1957), pp. 1-32.

Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*. (Avon Books, 1964 [1941]), pp. xii-38.

Mark Lilla, "The Lure of Syracuse," *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 48, Issue 14, Sept. 2001.

Arthur Koestler, "Arthur Koestler," in Richard Crossman, ed., *The God That Failed*. (Harper & Brothers, 1949), pp. 15-75 (Skim).

Required: The Wave: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICng-KRxXJ8>

Sept 29: Maintaining and Transferring Power

Bueno de Mesquita and Smith, Chaps. 3-6.

E.A. Rees, "Leader Cults: Varieties, Preconditions and Functions," in Balázs Ápor et al., eds., *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships: Stalin and the Eastern Bloc*. (Palgrave, 2004), pp. 3-26.

John H. Herz, "The Problem of Successorship in Dictatorial Régimes: A Study in Comparative Law and Institutions," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 14, No. 1, February 1952, pp. 19-40.

Required:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ig_qpNfXHIU&list=PLqs5ohhass_QPOfhvhl_zxas3Vr9k31Vaz (Death and Dynasties. 5:38)

Required: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdhp5JeZkKY> (Documentary: The Africans: A Triple Heritage: A Commentary. Part 6: In Search of Stability, 58 mins. Also DVD X6377)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OpCb_Yg_qJA (Mobutu: King of Zaire. From minute 26 to minute 51:23)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S_LhXEOsqoE (North Korea: The Cult of the Kims, 8:31 mins)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lem1bJvi3SM> (Stalin Cult of Personality, 44 mins.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7aEzLJdzi9w>

(King of Communism Nicolae Ceausescu, 55 minutes)

Oct 6: Totalitarian Aspirations: North Korea

Robert Collins, *Marked for Life: Songbun, North Korea's Classification System*. (Washington, DC: The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2012), excerpts.

B.R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves—and Why it Matters*. (Melville House, 2009), pp. 25-66.

Barbara Demick, *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*. (Spiegel & Grau, 2009), pp. 36-73; 174-184.

UNHRC, "Report of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea." Summary, February 7, 2014, pp. 1-21.

Required: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JS2BK91u69g> (Life in North Korea).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YgHh6f1GYx0> (Never before seen real life footage inside North Korea).

Oct 13: Autocracy and Prosperity: China

Frederick C. Teiwes, "Mao Zedong in Power (1949-1976)," in William A. Joseph, ed., *Politics in China: An Introduction*. Second Edition. (Oxford University Press, 2014), selections.

Susan Shirk, "China in Xi's 'New Era'" The Return to Personalistic Rule," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 29, No. 2, April 2018, pp. 22-36.

Yuen Yuen Ang, "Autocracy with Chinese Characteristics," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2018, pp. 39-46.

Rana Mitter and Elsbeth Johnson, "What the West Gets Wrong About China," *Harvard Business Review*, May-June 2021.

Required: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OubM8bD9kck> (Xi Jinping: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, 20 minutes)

Required: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P0_QeD4W98A (The China Complex Part 2, 49 minutes)

Oct 20: Midterm Exam (2-3:30pm)

Oct 27: Strategies of Popular Resistance (and the Dictator's Response)

Bueno de Mesquita and Smith, Chap. 8.

James C. Scott, "Everyday Forms of Resistance," in Forrest D. Colburn, ed., *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. (M.E. Sharpe, 1989), pp. 3-33.

Jason Wittenberg, *Crucibles of Political Loyalty: Church Institutions and Electoral Continuity in Hungary*. (Cambridge University Press, 2006), selections.

Timur Kuran, "Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989," *World Politics* 44, October 1991, pp. 7-48.

Required: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cM695veBSUU> (A Force More Powerful: Poland and Chile). Poland from 27:00-51:53. Chile from 51:54-1:17:35.

Nov 3: Coping with Autocratic Legacies

Jan Elster, "On Doing What One Can: An Argument Against Post-Communist Restitution and Retribution," *East European Constitutional Review* Vol. 1, No. 2 (Summer 1992), pp. 15-17.

Naomi Roht-Arriaza, "From Amnesty to Accountability: Transitional Justice in Latin America," *World Politics Review*, Dec 23, 2014.

African Union Panel of the Wise, "Peace, Justice, and Reconciliation in Africa: Opportunities and Challenges in the Fight Against Impunity," The African Union Series, New York: International Peace Institute, February 2013, pp. 10-46.

Required:

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<https://avplayer.lib.berkeley.edu/Video-UCBOnly-MRC/b24597897> (You need full library access to view it. Link is also available in bCourses.)

Nov 10: Liberal Democratic Decline and the "New Authoritarianism"

Daniel Treisman and Sergei Guriev, "Fear and Spin", Chapter 1 of Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century*. Princeton University Press, 2022.

Ivan Krastev, "Eastern Europe's Illiberal Revolution," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2018, pp. 49-56.

Yascha Mounk, "The Undemocratic Dilemma," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 29, No. 2, April 2018, pp. 98-112.

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, "Subverting Democracy," in *How Democracies Die* (Crown, 2018), pp. 72-96.

Nov 17: Hungary: Nascent Dictatorship?

Ivan Krastev, "Eastern Europe's Illiberal Revolution," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2018, 49-56.

János Kornai, "Hungary's U-Turn: Retreat from Democracy," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.

26, No. 3, July 2015, pp. 34-48.

George Schöpflin, "Hungarian Elections and After," *Hungarian Review*, July 2014, pp. 8-15.

Required: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q7cHap-cGfM> (Rise of Illiberalism in Hungary, 33 minutes)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k_7EjaMu0ic (Political chaos on the streets of Budapest, 28 minutes)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QrfbtUpWOsc> (Viktor Orban's 'illiberal democracy', 14 minutes).

Nov 24: United States: Whence and Whither Democracy?

TBD

Dec 1: The Future of Dictatorship and a Review Session

TBD

Dec 18, 3-4:30pm. Second Midterm. Location TBD.