**Political Science 449: Informal Institutions**

Northwestern University  
Department of Political Science  
Fall 2021  
Mon. 2:00-4:50PM, Scott Hall #201 (Ripton Room)

Instructor: Jordan Gans-Morse  
Office Hours: Tuesday 9:30-10:30AM and Thursday 1:30-2:30PM  
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**COURSE SUMMARY**

This course will examine informal institutions — rules and procedures that lack formal codification yet effectively structure political behavior. The first part of the course will provide an overview of institutional analysis. Existing institutionalist approaches focus primarily on *formal* institutions, yet in many developing and transition countries formal rules and procedures have a marginal influence on *actual* political practices. We will examine recent efforts to define, conceptualize, and empirically analyze informal institutions and informal politics more broadly.

The second part of the course will consider informal institutions in the context of several areas of highly active research in contemporary comparative politics and political economy, including (1) clientelism, (2) institutions and economic growth, (3) corruption, (4) state building, and (5) institutions in non-democratic regimes.

The study of informal institutions entails inherent methodological challenges, in that many of the practices we will examine are illicit and/or covert. Throughout the course we will focus on innovative methodological approaches, ranging from interviewing techniques to statistical tools, designed to overcome these challenges.

The course is designed for graduate students preparing for the comprehensive examination in comparative politics or designing a dissertation prospectus for study of the developing world, but students from other sub-disciplines are welcomed and encouraged to enroll.

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

*Participation*

Students are expected to complete all readings prior to each session and attend every seminar. Seminar participation will count for 30% of the overall grade. Students are expected to make multiple comments in every session, but more is not necessarily better; the objective is to make thoughtful contributions to the discussion.
Assignments

(1) **Short essays**: During some weeks, students will be asked to prepare a brief essay on a particular reading. Additional information about the content of these essays will be provided later in the quarter. The essays should be *no more than two single-spaced pages* and should be *distributed via Canvas to all seminar participants no later than noon on the day before the seminar meets*. The aim of these essays is to introduce the rest of the group to as broad of range of material as possible while keeping the mandatory reading at a reasonable level. Students should be prepared to discuss and answer questions regarding their essay during seminar. The short essay assignments will count for 20% of the overall grade.

With respect to the seminar’s primary assignment, students will have two options:

(2a) **Writing assignment option**: The writing assignment may consist of a research paper or a critical literature review, and you may choose your own topic related to the study of development. If producing a research paper, then you should clearly specify an empirical puzzle, synthesize the relevant literature, posit hypotheses, and analyze and discuss whether available evidence (quantitative and/or qualitative) supports your hypotheses versus alternative hypotheses. If you do not have sufficient evidence, time and data constraints may necessitate writing a paper that is somewhere between a research design and a research paper. In this case, you may discuss the type of evidence you would collect were you to proceed with this project and the types of analyses you would conduct to evaluate different hypotheses. If you choose to write a critical literature review, it should have an overall argument. There is no set number of books and/or articles that reviews must cover, but they should assess influential works representing multiple perspectives. The paper should be approximately 4,000 to 6,000 words (excluding references) and will count for 50% of the overall grade. Please discuss your project with me no later than the fifth week of the quarter, and preferably sooner. I will also provide additional information about interim deadlines once the quarter begins.

(2b) **Exam + journal review option**: In place of the writing assignment, students may elect to write two mock journal reviews on readings of their choice from the syllabus and take a written exam. The exam will be designed to simulate field exam questions. The reviews will count for 15% and the exam for 35% of the overall grade. Reviews must be submitted prior to the meeting in which we discuss the particular reading, and the two reviews cannot be done for the same week of readings.

For most students, my strong preference is for you to choose the writing assignment, but I am happy to discuss on an individual basis how each option fits your specific circumstances.

**Deadlines**: The exam will be held on **Monday, December 6th at 2:00PM** and the paper will be due via Canvas on **Wednesday, December 8th by noon**.
COVID-19 POLICIES

COVID-19 Classroom Expectations

Students, faculty, and staff must comply with University expectations regarding appropriate classroom behavior, including those outlined below and in the COVID-19 Code of Conduct. With respect to classroom procedures, this includes:

- Policies regarding masking and social distancing evolve as the public health situation changes. Students are responsible for understanding and complying with current masking, testing, Symptom Tracking, and social distancing requirements.
- In some classes, masking and/or social distancing may be required as a result of an Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accommodation for the instructor or a student in the class even when not generally required on campus. In such cases, the instructor will notify the class.
- No food is allowed inside classrooms. Drinks are permitted, but please keep your face covering on and use a straw.
- Faculty may assign seats in some classes to help facilitate contact tracing in the event that a student tests positive for COVID-19. Students must sit in their assigned seats.

If a student fails to comply with the COVID-19 Code of Conduct or other University expectations related to COVID-19, the instructor may ask the student to leave the class. The instructor is asked to report the incident to the Office of Community Standards for additional follow-up.

COVID-19 Testing Compliance Statement

To protect the health of our community, Northwestern University requires unvaccinated students who are in on-campus programs to be tested for COVID-19 twice per week. Students who fail to comply with current or future COVID-19 testing protocols will be referred to the Office of Community standards to face disciplinary action, including escalation up to restriction from campus and suspension.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Students in this course are required to comply with the policies found in the booklet, “Academic Integrity at Northwestern University: A Basic Guide.” All papers submitted for credit in this course must be submitted electronically unless otherwise instructed by the professor. Your written work may be tested for plagiarized content. For details regarding academic integrity at Northwestern or to download the guide, visit: https://www.northwestern.edu/provost/policies/academic-integrity/index.html
ACCESSIBILITY

Northwestern University is committed to providing the most accessible learning environment as possible for students with disabilities. Should you anticipate or experience disability-related barriers in the academic setting, please contact AccessibleNU to move forward with the university’s established accommodation process (email: accessiblenu@northwestern.edu; phone: 847-467-5530). If you already have established accommodations with AccessibleNU, please let the professor know as soon as possible, preferably within the first two weeks of the term, so we can work together to implement your disability accommodations. Disability information, including academic accommodations, is confidential under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act.

SUPPORT FOR WELLNESS AND MENTAL HEALTH

Northwestern University is committed to supporting the wellness of our students. Student Affairs has multiple resources to support student wellness and mental health. If you are feeling distressed or overwhelmed, please reach out for help. Students can access confidential resources through the Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), Religious and Spiritual Life (RSL) and the Center for Awareness, Response and Education (CARE). Additional information on all of the resources mentioned above can be found here:

https://www.northwestern.edu/counseling/
https://www.northwestern.edu/religious-life/
https://www.northwestern.edu/care/

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of the course, the aim is that students will:

- Possess a rigorous conceptual command of the institutionalist approach to political science.
- Be prepared to develop research focused on the role of informal institutions.
- Be familiar with methodological tools for analyzing illicit or informal political behavior.
COURSE MATERIALS

The course draws on a wide range of sources, and there are no books that we will read in their entirety. Many of the readings are journal articles that are available in electronic form through the Northwestern library. For excerpts from books, I will make copies available via the course website on Canvas.

That said, you may find it useful – for this class, for your exam preparation, and/or for your own research – to purchase some or all of the following books:

COURSE OVERVIEW

Week 1: Alternatives to Institutionalism: Structuralism, Functionalism, Behavioralism
Monday, September 27

Key questions:

- What are the alternative approaches to institutionalism?
- How distinct are these different approaches? Is it productive to consider these distinctions?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of each approach?

Readings:

- Andrew Janos, Politics and Paradigms: Changing Theories of Change in Social Science (Stanford University Press, 1986)
  - Chapter 2, skim Chapters 1 & 3
  - Chapter 1

Further Background Reading:

- Andrew Janos, East Central Europe in the Modern World: The Politics of the Borderlands from Pre- to Post-Communism (Stanford University Press, 2002) (see Chapter 1)
Week 2: Varieties of Institutionalism

*Monday, October 4*

Key questions:

- How do various scholars define the term “institutions”? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each definition?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of institutionalist approaches?
- What precipitated the trend toward institutionalism in political science?
- What are the differences between the major approaches to institutionalism, and what, if anything, do they share in common?
- What is “institutionalization”? Is it a fruitful concept?
- How do institutions form and evolve?

Readings:

- Peter Hall and Rosemary Taylor, “Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms,” *Political Studies* 44 (1996): 936-957
  - Chapter 1
  - Chapters 1, 3, and 4
- Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (Yale University Press, 1968)
  - Skim pages 1-8, read pages 8-24, skim pages 78-92
  - Skim pages 369-381, read pages 381-401

Further Background Reading:

• Ira Katznelson and Barry Weingast, eds., *Preferences and Situations: Points of Intersection Between Historical and Rational Choice Institutionalism* (Russell Sage Foundation Publications, 2005)
Week 3: Conceptualizing Informal Institutions

Monday, October 11

Key questions:

- What are informal institutions?
- How do informal and formal institutions interact?
- How are informal institutions different from informal practices, culture, networks, and other related concepts? Is the concept of “informal institutions” useful?

Readings:

- Walter Powell and Paul DiMaggio, eds., The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis (University of Chicago Press, 1991)
  - Read pages 1-2, 11-22
  - Chapter 1
  - Read pages 1-10
  - Introduction and Chapter 1

Further Background Reading:

Week 4: Enforcement, Compliance, and Institutional Change
Monday, October 18

Key questions:

- How are weak institutions different than informal institutions?
- What are the differences between enforcement mechanisms for formal and informal institutions?
- How are enforcement and compliance related to institutional change?
- What factors underlie enforcement and compliance problems?

Readings:

  - Chapters 5-7
  - Introduction and Chapter 7

Further Background Reading

**Week 5: Clientelism**  
*Monday, October 25*

Key questions:

- What is clientelism?
- How is clientelism different than related concepts such as corruption, electoral fraud, patrimonialism?
- Is the concept of “informal institutions” fruitful for understanding clientelism?
- How does clientelism affect the formal institutions of democracy? How do various configurations of formal institutions affect the extent or type of clientelism?
- How can illicit phenomena like clientelism be studied?

Readings:

  o Chapter 1
- Simona Piattoni, “Clientelism in Historical and Comparative Perspective,” in *Clientelism, Interests, and Democratic Representation: The European Experience in Historical and Comparative Perspective*, Simona Piattoni, ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2001)

Readings for Short Essay #1: Methodological Approaches to the Study of Clientelism

Further Background Reading:

**Overviews**


**Classics**


**On Monitoring and Credible Commitment Issues**


**On Vote Brokers**


**Examples of Studies Drawing on the Democratic Accountability and Linkages Project (DALP)**


**Recent Books on Clientelism**

• Frederic Schaffer, ed., *Elections for Sale: The Causes and Consequences of Vote Buying* (Lynne Rienner, 2007)


• Daniel Corstange, *The price of a vote in the middle east: Clientelism and communal politics in Lebanon and Yemen* (Cambridge University Press, 2016)

• Eric Kramon, *Money for votes: The causes and consequences of electoral clientelism in Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 2018)

• Simeon Nichter, *Votes for survival: Relational clientelism in Latin America* (Cambridge University Press, 2018)
**Week 6: Institutions for Growth**

*Monday, November 1*

Key Questions:

- How do informal institutions affect economic development?
- How do informal institutions interact with the formal institutions needed for economic development?
- When is formalization of informal practices beneficial for economic development? When, if ever, is it detrimental?
- How is law related to formal and informal institutions?

Readings:

  - Skim pages 388-421
  - Chapters 1 and 2
  - Introduction and Chapters 3 and 8
  - Chapter 5

Readings for **Short Essay #2**: Methodological Approaches to the Study of Informal Institutions and Growth

  - Preface, Chapter 1, and pages 27-53
Further Background Reading:

**Background for Assigned Readings**


**Institutions and Growth**

- James Mahoney, *Colonialism and Postcolonial Development: Spanish America in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 2010)

**Informal Institutions and Growth**


**Non-State Property Rights Protection and Contract Enforcement**

- Timothy Frye, *Property rights and property wrongs: How power, institutions, and Norms Shape Economic Conflict in Russia* (Cambridge University Press, 2017)
• Ilia Murtazashvili and Jennifer Murtazashvili, “The origins of private property rights: states or customary organizations?” *Journal of Institutional Economics* 12, 1 (2016)

**Historical Examples of Non-State Property Rights Protection and Contract Enforcement**


**Mafia and Gang Protection of Property Rights and Enforcement of Contracts**


**Relational Contracting**

Week 7: Corruption

Monday, November 8

Key questions:

- What is corruption?
- What are the various types of corruption and how, if at all, are they related?
- How is corruption related to other types of informal institutions and informal practices previously examined in this course?
- How can illicit behavior, such as corruption, be studied?

Readings:

  - Chapters 1 and 2
- Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (Yale University Press, 1968)
  - Read pages 59-72

Readings for Short Essay #3: (Quasi)/Experimental Approaches to the Study of Corruption


Readings for **Short Essay #4**: Innovative Approaches for Measuring Corruption


Further Background Reading:

• Anna Persson, Bo Rothstein, and Jan Teorell “Why anticorruption reforms fail—systemic corruption as a collective action problem,” *Governance* 26, 3 (2013): 449-471
• Robert Klitgaard, *Controlling corruption* (University of California Press, 1988)
• Susan Rose-Ackerman, *Corruption and Government: Causes, Consequences, and Reform* (Cambridge University Press, 1999)
Week 8: State Building  
*Monday, November 15*

**Key Questions**

- Is the concept of strong and weak states useful? How does the study of informal institutions influence our understanding of state strength?
- In what ways do informal institutions support state building? In what ways do they undermine state building?
- How, if at all, does consideration of informal institutions aid in disaggregating the functions of the state? In disaggregating state actors?
- States are often defined in terms of a series of monopolies – on violence, on taxation, on the dispensation of justice. Are there certain spheres in which informal institutions play a greater or lesser role?
- Does the notion of formal vs. formal institutions hold meaning in the absence of a functioning state?

**Readings:**

- Johan Engvall, *The state as investment market: Kyrgyzstan in comparative perspective* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016)  
  - Introduction and Chapter 1
  - Chapters 1-2
- Steffen Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats: Oil and the State in Saudi Arabia* (Cornell University Press, 2011)  
  - Introduction and Chapter 1
  - Chapter 1

**Further background reading:**

• Kathleen Collins, *Clan politics and regime transition in Central Asia* (Cambridge University Press, 2006)
• Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, *Informal order and the state in Afghanistan* (Cambridge University Press, 2016)
Week 9: Authoritarian Institutions / Revisiting the Concept of Informal Institutions

Monday, November 22

Key Questions Part 1: Authoritarian Institutions

- How do institutions in authoritarian regimes differ from institutions in democratic regimes?
- Do informal institutions play a greater role in authoritarian regimes than in democratic regimes?
- Why do authoritarian regimes frequently create nominally democratic institutions (e.g., electoral systems, legislatures, courts)?

Key Questions Part 2: Revisiting the Concept of Informal Institutions

- How would you define informal institutions? Has your definition changed over the course of this term?
- What advantages and disadvantages do scholars face when choosing the rubric of “informal institutions” in place of alternatives such as informal practices, culture, networks, or weak institutions?
- Have you begun referring to any of your research topics of current interest as an informal institution? Why or why not?
- Is the concept of “informal institutions” useful?

Readings

- David Art, “What Do We Know about Authoritarianism After Ten Years?” *Comparative Politics* (2012): 351-373
  - Chapters 1 and 2

Further Background Readings

- Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2010)

*Electoral and Legislative Politics in Authoritarian Regimes*

- Rory Truex, *Making Autocracy Work: Representation and Responsiveness in Modern China* (Cambridge University Press, 2016)
Courts in Authoritarian Regimes


Constitutions in Authoritarian Regimes


Authoritarian Institutions and Economic Development