POL 232G: 
Political Institutions of European Countries

COURSE SYLLABUS 
(Including Reading List) 
Spring Semester 2014

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Teaching Hours: Wednesday 16:30-18:00 
Friday 15:00-16:30

Office Hours: Wednesday or Friday (on appointment)

1. Course Description and Course Objectives 
2. Course Materials 
3. Teaching Method and Course Elements 
4. Assignments and Assessment 
5. Course Schedule
1. Course Description and Objectives

The objective of this course is to explore the different political institutions that exist in Europe, understand why democratic countries vary in the design of their political systems, and assess the political, economic and social consequences of these important variations. Students will be given a powerful insight into how institutions and the political actors that operate within them (e.g. political parties, interest groups, citizens) underpin democratic governance in Europe and elsewhere. Students will gain a thorough knowledge of the individual democracies being examined, through examples cited in the course as well as research for their term papers and class presentations, allowing them to make meaningful comparisons between different political systems. While some features of institutional design tend to persist, political institutions are generally dynamic and undergo some form of change over time. The direction of this change, and what it implies for modern democracy, will be the subject of considerable analysis in the lectures and the readings. Students will be encouraged to compare political systems studied in the course with those of their own countries (and others they know well), and the expectation is that by the end they will have gained a much better understanding of how (at their best) democratic systems are able to provide political accountability, economic development, social welfare and effective policy-making. Through an understanding of political institutions, students will become familiar with many of the key terms used in the study of comparative politics, and will understand many of the principal themes raised in both the academic literature and the broader political debate. They will be able to approach social, economic or political questions in future with a broader understanding of the institutional background, in which these questions inevitably need to be resolved.

It is expected that students will develop a series of analytical skills in this course that will have a profound benefit for their academic and professional development. They should learn to write papers that are coherently structured, logically argued and supported by strong evidence. They should be able to deliver clear, convincing and concise presentations. They will be encouraged to hold positions that they can defend in a constructive and open-ended discussion. Students will be expected not only to advance their own opinions, but also fully engage with the views and perspectives of others. Students should develop the capacity to make meaningful comparisons, based on a precise understanding of how political systems function (in both theory and practice), as well as a broader knowledge of the social context in which these institutions emerge. Students will be expected to develop an informed and nuanced perspective on different areas of political analysis, enhancing their capacity to draft coherent and interesting country studies on a wide range of topics, a vital skill for numerous types of professional activity.

The course is divided into two halves and generally follows the order of chapters in the textbook. The topics to be examined are divided into 10 Sessions, each consisting of two classes of 90 minutes, organised on different days. The first class consists of a lecture by the professor followed by a Question & Answer session (scheduled for Friday afternoon). The second class is dedicated to student presentations and group discussion (scheduled for Wednesday afternoon). After an initial introductory session, the first half of the course examines the core governing institutions in Europe: executives (Presidents or Prime Ministers and their cabinets) in Session 1; legislatures (Parliaments or Congresses and their representations) in Session 2; the judiciary and their role in safeguarding national constitutions in Session 3. The unique political institutions of the European Union and the ways in which these impact on national democratic institutions will be the focus of Session 4. Session 5 will look at the different types of multi-level government that exist in Europe, including federal or unitary states, as well more centralised or decentralised political systems. The last class before the mid-term examinations will be a dedicated revision session.
While the first half of the course focuses on institutions, the second half of the course focuses on the actors that shape decision-making in these institutions. In Sessions 6 and 7 we will undertake a profound analysis of the structure and role of political parties. These remain the key actors within most political institutions in Europe, so significant changes to their functioning have a direct and profound impact on the operation of democratic institutions. Political parties rarely operate in a vacuum and in democracies must always compete in an electoral arena, which reflects the issues and concerns of voters in each national society. Session 8 will therefore look at the role of political cleavages in structuring political divisions and party competition in Europe, and how the decline of traditional cleavages (and the rise of some new ones) affects political institutions and their choices on behalf of citizens. Session 9 will examine the impact of different electoral systems for choosing elected representatives in Europe, as well as the role played by citizens through direct democratic institutions such as referendums or popular initiatives. Session 10 will consider the role of non-party actors like interest groups and social movements in the policy-making process, and what this implies for national and EU level policy-making. The final classes of this course will be dedicated to revision for the final exams and completion of the term papers.

2. Course Materials and Readings

The textbook for this course is *Representative Government in Modern Europe* by Michael Gallagher, Michael Laver and Peter Mair (2011, 5th Edition). It is published by McGraw Hill for the Open University Press, and is widely available for purchase online at a reasonable price. Textbook chapters form the core readings for every session and the starting point for understanding each topic of discussion. Students are strongly urged to buy their own copy of the textbook, in order to make notes and revise adequately for the examinations. Alongside the textbook chapters, student will be expected to read a specific journal article, book chapter or working paper on each topic. These readings will be discussed in the lectures and class discussion. and are particularly helpful for understanding key debates and new directions of research. These readings will be available to students as PDF documents in a shared Dropbox folder (www.dropbox.com), which can be accessed free of charge by downloading the relevant application. How to do this will be discussed in the introductory class.

In addition to the core readings listed above, students will be expected to carry out further readings and some original research in preparation of their presentation topics and term papers. Knowledge gained through additional reading or original research is likely to be extremely useful when answering questions for the mid-term and end-of-term examinations, and could help students get a higher grade in these components of the course. Each textbook chapter contains a list of references with country-specific or more general analyses of the subject matter, and these represent a starting point for further reading. Students interested in a particular topic should also ask the professor about any recommended readings on the subject.
3. Teaching Methods and Course Elements

Teaching sessions of 90 minutes will take place twice a week on Wednesdays and Fridays. Lectures by the professor are scheduled for Fridays (15:00-16:30), while student presentations and class discussion are scheduled for Wednesdays (15:00-16:30). Students should note that the scheduling of lectures and student presentations may be subject to unforeseen changes, which could lead to some lectures taking place on Wednesdays and some student presentations taking place on Fridays. Students are advised to be present for all classes and attendance records will be taken on every occasion. Attendance in class lectures and student presentations/class discussion will contribute equally to the attendance grade, and it is essential that students not only deliver their own presentations, but also participate in class presentations by others. Students unable to attend a class should notify the instructor in advance, via e-mail, and provide a valid reason for their absence.

The course lecture will be delivered by the professor, and will outline key themes raised in the academic literature, as well as providing a broader political analysis. Students will have the opportunity to ask clarifying questions during or after the lecture. It is expected that students will have covered the relevant readings before each lecture, as this will help them gain a fuller understanding of the topics covered. In any case students must cover the relevant readings before the following class dedicated to student presentations and class discussion on the same theme. Other students are expected to raise questions or make comments about these presentations, and the professor will add some more points for consideration. The remainder of the class will consist of an open-ended discussion about themes related to the topic and all students are expected to participate. Participation in class discussion will contribute to the overall grade for the course. There will be also an introductory session at the start of the course, some classes dedicated to exam revision and preparation (mid-terms and finals), and a class dedicated to discussion of the mid-term examinations and term papers.

4. Assignments and Assessments

Students will be assessed on four different aspects of the course. These will combine to determine the final grade for the course as a whole, which is expressed as a letter grade.

The first part of the assessment consists of a combination of student attendance and participation in class discussion (10% of the overall grade), and up to two presentations on specific topics in class (10% of the overall grade). The requirements for a good presentation include clarity in delivering the information, displaying knowledge of the readings and key themes they raise, developing clear and coherent arguments, and showing some evidence of independent research. Presentations should last around 15 minutes (with an absolute maximum of 20 minutes), and are followed by a discussion in which the presenter will be expected to respond to arguments raised by others in an informed and constructive way. While visual aids are not essential to the presentation, it is vital that presentations are delivered in a clear manner, so it may be useful to rehearse them. The specific question or readings to be addressed will be determined by the professor in the class preceding that of the presentation itself. In some cases students will receive their presentation topics a bit earlier but no more than 1 week before the presentation date, in order to ensure a fair assessment of all students in the class. Students will be consulted on their presentation topic and will have some choice in the matter, but it will not always be possible to allocate their first preference.

The second part of the assessment will consist of a term paper (25% of overall grade), on a topic to be proposed by the student and approved by the instructor. Students will be expected to come up with an interesting topic that they will proceed to research as thoroughly as possible in the time
available, and write up a coherent term paper advancing arguments that are appropriately justified and backed with suitable references. **Papers should aim for 3000 words in length and MUST in no circumstances exceed 4000 words including references.** Presentation, grammar and punctuation will be taken into consideration as this contributes to the overall quality of the paper, but this is not the primary consideration and any mitigating factors will be taken into account. Students are expected to prepare a short paper proposal (1 page of A4) to e-mail the instructor by **15 March 2014**. Individual meetings with the professor may be useful to clarify the topic of the term paper. For reasons of fairness it is not possible for the professors to read through preliminary drafts of papers, but students can send revised abstracts at any time. Term papers MUST be submitted via e-mail AND in a printed version by the final deadline of **16:30 on 7 May 2014 (Start of Class)**.

The general penalty for late submission is that essays will not be graded and students will fail this component of the course. Although exceptional circumstances will be considered, it is a strict rule for this course that any students who submit their papers AFTER the final exams will **NOT complete this component on time**. Even if the reasons for late submission are fully justified and accepted by the instructor, a late submission will nevertheless result in a delayed completion of the course and may also delay graduation for final year students. If the reasons for late submission are NOT fully justified or accepted by the instructor, then it will be considered a non-submission and students will get an ‘F’ (0%) for this component of the course. Students are advised to prepare their papers WELL IN ADVANCE of the final deadline, and keep the instructor informed about any delays, for which they may be required to provide written or other evidence.

The course conforms entirely to the College Regulations about **plagiarism**, which are very strict and make clear that the practice will not be tolerated. Term papers will be screened via Turnitin and checked thoroughly by the professor for any signs of plagiarism. Papers with demonstrable and significant signs of plagiarism will be allocated an automatic “F” grade (0%), significantly lowering the overall grade of the student concerned. Students in doubt about the guidelines for plagiarism MUST discuss this with the professor in advance of the deadline for submission, so that measures can be taken to rectify any problem and the above penalty can be avoided.

The third and fourth part of the assessment will consist of performance in the mid-term examinations (25% of overall grade) and the final examinations (30% of overall grade). Since the course covers a lot of ground, the mid-term examinations will cover the first part of the course while the final examinations will cover the second part of the course. Nevertheless, students answering questions in the final exams will be expected to show some knowledge of the core issues covered in the first half of the course (since these are linked), although specific questions will revolve around the content of the second half of the course. Students will be asked to answer 3 essay questions (out of 5 choices) in up to 120 minutes available. Students can leave early provided they do not disrupt the rest of the class, but are advised to take advantage of the full time available.

Component grades of the course will be available to students at different times. Since students will be assessed on their attendance, presentations and class discussion throughout the course, these grades will only be available in early May. Grades for the mid-terms should be available in the week following these exams (or as soon as possible thereafter). Component grades for the term papers and the finals will be available to students only AFTER they receive their final grade for the course as a whole. All grades will be submitted via the Faculty Portal and exam scripts will NOT be handed out in class. In order to view the component grades, students are asked to register on the Vesalius College Student Portal. If they encounter access problems when doing this they should urgently contact Chris Janssens. If students want to view their exam scripts or term papers after assessment they MUST request an individual meeting with the professor.
Letter grades for the course are given as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter Grade</th>
<th>Scale of 20</th>
<th>Scale of 100</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>17.0-20.0</td>
<td>85-100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>16.1-16.9</td>
<td>81-84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>15.3-16.0</td>
<td>77-80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>14.5-15.2</td>
<td>73-76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>13.7-14.4</td>
<td>69-72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>13.1-13.6</td>
<td>66-68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>12.3-13.0</td>
<td>62-65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-</td>
<td>11.5-12.2</td>
<td>58-61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D+</td>
<td>10.7-11.4</td>
<td>54-57</td>
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<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>10.0-10.6</td>
<td>50-53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>0-9.9</td>
<td>0-49</td>
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5. Course Schedule

Introduction (21 January 2014)

This introductory class will cover the broad scope and objectives of the course, and outline the content of each Session. The instructor will have an opportunity to list the requirements and expectations for students on the course, while students will have time to present themselves and express their interest in the subject, as well as address any questions about the course directly to the instructor. We will also discuss the presentations and their assessment, and allocate the presenters for each weekly session before the mid-term examinations. There will follow a brief discussion about administrative aspects of the course, including the creation of a Dropbox folder.

Core Reading: Gallagher et al. (2011), Chapter 1, 22 pages.

Session 1: Presidents and Prime Ministers (Lecture 24 January, Presentations 29 January)

This first teaching Session looks at the political role of executives (Presidents or Prime Ministers and their cabinets). It will outline the key differences between executives in Europe (presidential or parliamentary regimes, as well as hybrid types like semi-presidential regimes), while observing how these variations also have great resonance elsewhere in the world. The session will outline more clearly the important differences between head of state, leader of the executive, executives, ministers and ministries. It will also address important changes affecting all types of elected regimes, as characterised by a growing shift towards personalisation (or presidentialisation) of politics. The factors behind this process and how it impacts on political institutions will be a major topic of analysis in this session and are covered in the readings.

Core Reading:

Gallagher et al. (2011), Chapter 2 (The Executive), 22 pages


Session 2: Parliaments and Congresses (Lecture 31 January, Presentations 5 February)

This Session looks at the role of legislatures in European politics. It will consider the distinction between legislatures and congresses, as well as the role and system of election for second chambers (where these exist). It will scrutinise the all-important relationship between the executive and the
parliament in different countries, and the important factors that shape this relationship. Political accountability in democracies that are parliamentary and presidential in origin will be compared, and we will discuss how these forms of accountability may be changing throughout Europe.

Core Reading:

Gallagher et al. (2011), Chapter 3 (Parliaments), 30 pages


Session 3: Constitutions and Judicial Politics (Lecture 7 February, Presentations 12 February)

This Session looks at the role of written (or unwritten) constitutions in political systems, and the active role the judiciary plays in interpreting constitutions. It will consider what happens when there is disagreement or outright conflict between the judicial branch and the executive or parliamentary branch of the political system, and whether a Constitutional Court is necessary to resolve these issues. We will examine reasons for why the judiciary should operate within a clear constitutional framework, consider the distance the judiciary should maintain from ordinary partisan politics, and at the same reflect on whether judges should be made more democratically accountable for their actions. These complex questions are handled differently in European states, partly because of diversity in their political institutions, and this is a theme to be addressed.

Core Reading:

Gallagher et al. (2011), Chapter 4 (Constitutions, Judges and Politics), 27 pages


Session 4: EU and Representative Government (Lecture 14 February, Presentations 19 February)

This session looks at how the evolving process of European integration affects the organisation of national political systems and the choices of their political elites. It will consider how the European Union (EU) constrains the policy-making options of national elites, while giving them an opportunity to pool sovereignty and engage more effectively in the international arena. Despite the considerable merits of the EU in terms of expanding freedoms for citizens and businesses, frictions with national democratic politics are never far below the surface, so this Session will also consider the role of euro-scepticism and how the sovereign debt crisis in the Eurozone is affecting democratic politics. Finally, we will consider the emerging systems of political representation at EU level, represented through different institutions (Council, Commission, Parliament), and consider the problems this currently poses in terms of democratic legitimacy and political accountability.

Core Reading:

Gallagher et al. (2011), Chapter 5 (The European Union and Representative Government), 42 pages

Session 5: Multi-level Government in Europe (Lecture 21 February, Presentations 26 February)

The session will be dedicated to discussing the multi-level nature of government in Europe, particularly in countries undergoing processes of decentralisation, where state power is being devolved to lower levels of government (Belgium, Italy, Spain, UK). We will also consider the continued importance of federal institutions in European countries that have adopted them (Austria, Germany, Switzerland) and how these differ in policy-making styles from more unitary governments (France, Poland, others). This Session will also examine the social, political and economic factors behind these institutional differences. We will consider what the multi-level governance approach can (and cannot) tell us about modern styles policy-making, and reflect on the important role of political parties in structuring relations between different levels of government.

Core Reading:

Gallagher et al. (2011), Chapter 6 (Central, Regional and Local Governance), 28 pages


Revision Class (28 February 2014)

The objective of this class is to help prepare students for the mid-term examinations (25% of overall grade). We will go over the core issues raised in the previous five Sessions, and discuss in more detail the format and requirements of the examination.

Mid-term Examinations (7 March 2014)

Mid-term Examinations (120 minutes). Please note there will be NO class on 5 March 2014

Discussion of Mid-Term Exams and Research Papers (12 March 2014)

This class will be dedicated to a general discussion of student performance in the mid-term examinations and how this can be improved. Students that want to discuss their own performance in more detail are invited to arrange an individual meeting with the instructor. The rest of the class will be dedicated to a detailed discussion of term paper requirements and expectations, including how to finalise a paper topic and how to research it appropriately.

Session 6: Party Families and their Organisation (Lecture 14 March, Presentations 19 March)

This Session looks at the different party families that exist in Europe and evaluates changes in their level of support and ideological coherence over time. This includes the decline of traditional parties and the rise of populist parties that lack a similar historical grounding. We will analyse whether parties in Europe are more focused than ever before on gaining control of state institutions and winning support from swing voters and the undecided, leading to a relative neglect of the party membership and their core electorate. We will also look at how parties organise themselves internally in European countries, and note important differences with other systems (e.g. USA).

Core Reading:

Gallagher et al. (2011), Chapter 8 (Party Families), 36 pages
Session 7: Party Systems and how they Change (Lecture 21 March, Presentations 26 March)

This session focuses on party systems, which are the patterns of coalition or competition between political parties in every country. Among the variations highlighted are systems where the number of parties represented in government and opposition are relatively few and so tend to alternate in power, and systems where the political scene is more fragmented, many parties are represented in parliament, and governments tend to be formed through complex party coalitions. Party systems can determine whether countries function with a “winner takes all” type of government, or whether governing coalitions become the norm. They also affect whether parties rotate (or remain) in power, and which parties are excluded (or not) from representation in state institutions. More generally, European party systems are changing as they increasingly revolve around two competing “poles” (large parties or coalitions). This may be a response to electoral preferences for personalised government (Session 8) or perhaps changes in European electoral systems (Session 9).

Core Reading:
Gallagher et al. (2011), Chapter 7 (Patterns in Party Politics and Party Systems), 39 pages

Session 8: Rise and Fall of Political Cleavages in Europe (Lecture 28 March, Presentations 2 April)

Political cleavages are important social or economic divisions in society that become reflected in the attitudes of voters and affect the ideology, behaviour and organisation of political parties. Historical cleavages influenced the political conflict that shaped the political institutions of Europe today, and explain much of their diversity. Yet for a series of reasons linked to broader changes in European society, cleavages have mostly declined in significance over the last 30 years, leading to more fluid and unpredictable political systems. Nevertheless, new social divisions are emerging that can take on a strong partisan dimension. It could be argued that the Left-Right cleavage, which sees two competing visions of society organised politically into rival parties or coalitions, may be leading a revival in Europe and elsewhere (e.g. the United States). The causes for this development will be thoroughly debated in the Session.

Core Reading:
Gallagher et al. (2011), Chapter 9 (Cleavage Structures and Electoral Change), 32 pages

Session 9: Electoral Systems and Direct Democracy (Lecture 4 April, Presentations 23 April)

This Session looks at the different ways that citizens elect their political representatives in Europe. While an important distinction remains between majoritarian “winner takes all” electoral systems, and more proportional systems that ensure a closer relationship between votes obtained and seats won, many European countries have sought mixed systems that combine the fairness of proportional systems with the governability of majoritarian systems. The reasons why electoral
systems change is complex. Sometimes electoral systems change in response to the demands of voters, sometimes they reflect the partisan calculation of political elites that can benefit from a different system, while at other times they reflect a political consensus that the existing system needs to be replaced with a more suitable one. The remainder of the Session will look at referendums and other instruments of direct democracy (e.g. citizen initiatives) that allow people to have a direct say in key political decisions. This complements and contrasts with the earlier discussion of electoral systems, which differ in their operation across Europe but share the common feature of being at the very core of the representative model of democracy.

Core Reading:

Gallagher et al. (2011), Chapter 11 (Elections, Electoral Systems and Referendums), 51 pages


Session 10: Interest Groups and Social Movements (Lecture 25 April, Presentations 30 April)

This Session looks at the role of political actors that are not always represented in political institutions, but nevertheless seek to influence and shape the choices of political representatives. These are often powerful in Europe and include business associations, trades unions of different political affiliations, environmental movements, agricultural associations and a wide range of NGOs promoting different causes. Often these groups can coalesce into broader social movements that seek to question the fundamental choices of executives and legislatures. European countries have different ways of structuring the relationship between interest groups and governing institutions, and in this respect the session will explore (and question) the distinction between pluralist and corporatist forms of policy-making in Europe.

Core Reading:


Class Revision (7 and 9 May 2014)

These classes are dedicated to finalising, revising and discussing the various topics covered in the second half of the course, with a view to preparing for the final examinations (30% of overall grade). Students are also asked to submit PRINTED VERSIONS of their term papers (25% of overall grade) by start of class on 7 May 2013.

Core Reading

Gallagher et al. (2011), Chapter 14 (Does representative government make a difference?), 17 pages

Final Exams (Week commencing 12 May 2014)

Final exams (120 minutes).