

POL 1036: Comparative European Politics

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Welcome to Comparative European Politics!

Where we will look at European democracies and their institutions, how they differ, how they have changed and the factors and actors that play a role in this.

To understand what comparative politics is and why it matters, we first have to zoom in on a specific case study. In 2010, **Hungary** was widely considered as a consolidated democracy, boasting robust institutions, a competitive party system, a vibrant civil society, and an independent media. Yet, since **Viktor Orbán's Fidesz** secured a two-thirds super-majority that year, constitutional amendments have progressively eroded checks on executive power. By 2023, Freedom House no longer considered Hungary a "Free" democracy, instead downgrading it to "Partly Free," thereby reflecting signs of **democratic backsliding**. In other words, Hungary's previously *democratic* regime is increasingly showing signs of *autocratic* regimes instead.

More specifically, Hungary can be considered a **competitive authoritarian regime** (CAR). It formally has elections and other democratic institutions, but the deck has been stacked so thoroughly in favor of the incumbent (i.e. Fidesz) that opposition parties will find it incredibly difficult to challenge them for power. Yet, with the upcoming

parliamentary elections in April of 2026, the stage seems set for upheaval. Currently, the Respect and Freedom Party (or Tisza), led by Péter Magyar, is polling as Hungary's most popular political party. This has come following a meteoric rise that culminated in the party securing over 30% of the vote in the 2024 European Parliament Elections, which was the highest for an opposition party since Fidesz came to power. Since then, the opposition has rallied around Tisza, with some parties stepping out of the race for the 2026 parliamentary elections in order to prevent fragmentation of the vote and hopefully secure government change.

Tisza nevertheless faces an uphill battle, particularly because of amendments to Hungary's electoral law that were passed in the aftermath of the Tisza success in 2024. These changes have redrawn some of the electoral districts and have resulted in a situation whereby Fidesz [might lose the popular vote by over five points and still win a parliamentary majority](#). If the polls persist in showing Tisza as the most popular party, Fidesz might even consider passing additional amendments to redraw electoral districts in their favor (also known as **gerrymandering**), as they did in 2021 a mere six months before polling day.

Why this matters + Module aims

This case study displays how a party that had been ousted from office in 2002 reclaims a super-majority in 2010 and dominates domestic politics for the next fifteen years by intentionally shaping different institutions, such as elections and the judiciary, in its favor. In doing so, the opposition is weakened, which reduces the level of political competition, which ultimately results in **democratic backsliding**. This then raises an interesting question: *Is Hungary an outlier or part of a broader trend toward democratic backsliding in Europe? And are the factors that contributed to this phenomenon in Hungary universal, or specific to its domestic context?* This is where **Comparative Politics** and its many tools and frameworks comes in. Comparing differing political outcomes across different polities in order to understand said outcomes allows us to find answers to this and many other questions. How do institutions and party strategies interact across different democratic systems? Why have some party systems remained stable, while others have displayed change? And what safeguards are most effective at preserving genuine democratic competition?

In this module, you will develop the analytical framework and empirical skills needed to answer these questions. You will engage with theory, comparative case studies, data sets, and scholarly debates, as well as receive hands-on experience by contributing to your very **own comparative politics research project**. Whether your future career leads to policy analysis, academia, or public service, the insights gained here will equip you to think critically about the functioning and resilience of democracies worldwide.

In order to best gain these insights, you will have to take responsibility for your learning and actively participate in the **lectures**. These will first introduce the concept and practice of comparative politics. We then touch broadly on the history of Europe and democracy, before examining existing patterns of democracy in Europe. Afterwards, we move over the building blocks of contemporary democracies, i.e. institutions and political actors, before finally discussing democratic backsliding.

Reading, writing and thinking in the module

This course will involve a fair share of reading and writing, which are essential to really get the best out of your learning experience. Of course, in today's world, that means that we need to have a conversation about generative artificial intelligence (AI) in the sense of Large Language Models (LLMs), such as ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Perplexity and so on. LLMs give us outputs based on training data found on the internet; unfortunately, a lot of what is found on the internet is biased and inaccurate, meaning that LLM outputs are not to be trusted outright. These models also often 'hallucinate' facts, so far as to say that they are often producing "[bullshit](#)". Furthermore, the technology relies on stolen property, exploited laborers, and significant environmental costs, while it seemingly has a negative impact on our brain functioning as well.

Most importantly, using LLMs makes your work bland, lacking any personality or voice. Yet, in today's day and age, and in the future, people who can articulate thoughts in their own words and with their own voice will stand out from the crowd. If you hone your skills as a writer, but also as a reader and thinker, it will undoubtedly set you up for professional success, and will grant you the ability to take full credit and feel a sense of fulfillment for your work. But this requires hard work: you will have to practice

and power through shitty first drafts, errors, and revision. You will have to reread texts, take notes, underline, and actively engage with the words on the page.

The use of AI is therefore discouraged as a whole, and in line with DCU AI policies, you are not allowed to use it in a plagiarizing manner – i.e. present work written by AI as your own. Your work in this course should be made by you – not someone you pay and not a bot. Similarly, all lectures, feedback, and grades will be made by me without AI, nor will any of your intellectual property be fed to tools that train AI. If you use AI in your work, you must use the TOPIC model of referencing. This is available from the POL1036 Loop page.

Assessment

Please read this section very carefully.

Your final grade will be determined via continuous assessment (50%) and a written exam (50 %). The continuous assessment takes on the form of a group project, as well as an oral examination component in the form of a friendly chat about the project. You must attend for the oral exam, if you want to receive credit for your work on the group project.

Group Projects (Including Oral Exams)

You have been randomly assigned to a group with two other students. Please see the Loop page for POL1036.

Pick one of the following research questions and create **either** a 2000 word research paper (excluding notes, references, and notes), a 5-7 min explainer video, **or** a 10-12 min video podcast. An explainer video should look more like [this](#) (but of course you will only be judged on the contents of the video, not your video editing skills), while a video podcast can just be you and your group members discussing your research. **Pick two European countries** and explain the strengths and weaknesses of the **case selection** for answering the question. Your work needs to include **at least one relevant graph using recent data** and you must use **at least six academic sources** (including at least two from the reading list). Feel free to use many more.

Dedicate at least **a paragraph or section in your video** to each of at least six sources and the extent to which they were useful to your assignment.

- Question 1: Why have some countries experienced democratic backsliding and others have not?
- Question 2: Why have some European party systems changed more than others?
- Question 3: Is the consensus-majoritarian contrast useful in understanding contemporary politics? (For this, you can compare one issue or problem across the two countries, if you wish)

Initial One-Pager & Peer Review

Deadline one-pager: 30 January 7AM

The idea of the **one-pager** is to help get you started with your group project early, and get some valuable feedback from me and your peers on your initial ideas. This is done early enough in the semester to allow for course correction if necessary.

A form will be made available on the POL1036 Loop page which you are required to fill in and upload to Loop. Only one group member needs to submit it. Late submission might result in limited feedback.

After submission, each student will be assigned another group's one-pager to review, meaning that each group should have three reviewers. The group projects and reviews will be discussed in peer review sessions organised from 5-12 February (subject to changes) during lecture hours. More information on this will be discussed in class and made available on Loop.

Your one-pager and participation in the peer review session will be graded and make up 5% each of your final mark for the group project. Failure to submit a complete one-pager (meaning all questions are adequately filled in) and/or to participate in the peer review sessions will result in a zero.

Submission of group project:

DEADLINE: March 21, 7 AM

Submission of the project should ideally be done via Loop, but if the video's file size is too large, you can host it on YouTube or send me an email and we will sort out a different way. I should nonetheless have access to the video by the deadline.

The project should signal your group number and the names of each group member on the first page. Only one group member needs to submit it.

If you submit late, I will not have time to read your project in preparation for the oral exam and you will not receive a mark.

Oral exam:

The oral exam will be a friendly chat based on the submitted group project. The three group members will be examined together. All members must be prepared to individually answer questions on all parts of the project. This means that, although group members may lead certain sections of the project, the whole text should be a joint effort and each student should be familiar with all the texts referenced in the project. 'I didn't write that part' or 'I didn't read that source' will not be acceptable responses to a question.

The oral exam should ensure that students are not tempted to submit work done by AI rather than by themselves and it should ensure that all group members contribute to the project. The exam will be recorded as part of the normal examination quality control process. The oral exam will serve as a multiplier of the draft mark for the project, as in the following example.

Group project draft grade=60

Weak performance at oral exam: $60 \times 0.66 = 40$

Strong performance at oral exam: $60 \times 1.33 = 80$

Absent for oral exam: $60 \times 0 = 0$

The **oral exams will be held in weeks 12 and 13** of this semester.

Failure to contribute to group work:

It is your responsibility to respond to other group members. If you do not reply to their messages and do not make a timely and proportionate contribution to the writing of the group project, you will not receive a mark for the project; will not be allowed attempt the oral exam; and will, consequently, fail the module.

Absence from exams:

If you are sick or otherwise unable to attend for a longer period and miss the oral exam, you will need to defer the module and alternative assessment will be organized for you in the summer. Since I need to read group projects prior to oral exams, it will not be possible to grant extensions for group projects.

Written Exam

The written exam will be closed book, and will consist of several questions testing your knowledge of the materials covered in class, as well as your ability to engage with the material and think critically. Examples of potential exam questions will be provided during class.