

Politics of Autocracy

PSCI-4661

Spring 2026

Mondays and Wednesdays 12:00PM - 1:20PM, Wooten Hall 212

Dr. Roman Hlatky; roman.hlatky@unt.edu

Office Location: Wooten Hall 138

Office Hours: Mondays: 8:50AM-11:50AM; by appointment

Course Overview

This is an advanced-level course in political science focusing on the politics of autocracy – a system of governance defined by the rule of one or the few at the expense of the many. Throughout the course, we will situate autocracy in the broader framework of political regimes – i.e., systems of governance – differentiate between authoritarianism and totalitarianism, evaluate why and how autocracies arise, survive, and collapse, examine the internal dynamics of such regimes, and analyze a variety of different autocratic regimes, both current and historical.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, you will be able to:

1. Define and discuss the variety of autocratic regimes – as well as related concepts – both conceptually and operationally.
2. Explain how transitions to and from autocracy occur using theory as well as empirical examples.
3. Explain the different dilemmas dictators face, and the tools they use to stay in power.
4. Apply the comparative and social scientific method to the study of authoritarian regimes and transitions.
5. Produce written and oral work that presents an argument, supports it with evidence, and discusses substantive implications and conclusions.

Course Structure, Requirements, and Strategies for Success

This class meets twice a week on Mondays and Wednesdays from 12:00PM to 1:20PM. Generally, courses will begin with a lecture about the topic at hand. After the lecture, we will move on to discussion where we will debate the questions and implications raised by the material that we cover. You are expected to have done all the readings for a given class, and to have done them carefully.

All readings are available on Canvas.

I highly recommend taking reading notes by jotting down important arguments, the evidence used to substantiate them, and their implications, as well as your critiques and any questions that the readings raise. Finally, I suggest that you do your best to keep up with the news. Much of what we learn is reflected in the current events of the world around you. Thus, keeping up with the news will not only help make you a better thinker and citizen, it will also help you in this class. I recommend the *BBC*, *Al Jazeera*, or the *Economist*.

This class has five requirements with the following grade breakdowns:

1. **Class Participation - 20%** – See below.
2. **Reaction Paragraphs - 20%** – We have twenty-two class sessions together over the course of the semester (excluding the first class day, MLK Day, Spring Break, group workshop days, and group presentation days). For eleven of these class days, you will be responsible for turning in, **by email**, a reaction paragraph that responds to the week’s readings, lectures, or current events. The reaction paragraph must, in one way or another, relate to the class material, especially if they are about current events. **Paragraphs are due at 11:59PM the day before class, so either Sunday or Tuesday.** As long as you put thought and effort into your paragraphs, they will be graded on completion according to the following rubric:

# of Reaction Paragraphs Submitted	% out of 20
11	20%
10-9	18%
8-7	15%
6	10%
5 or less	0%

3. **Country Presentation (Group Project) - 20%** – In groups, you will work together on a presentation about an authoritarian or semi-authoritarian country of your choice. The presentation should cover key elements of why the country is an (semi) authoritarian regime, identify what type of regime it is, its institutional features, and a future prognosis – is the country likely to remain at the same level of authoritarianism, slide deeper into dictatorship, or is democracy coming? You will present during class time. Further information and guidelines will be provided later on.
4. **Dataset Identification Assignment - 15%** – You will be responsible for identifying either an existing source of data about authoritarianism or describing, in detail, how you would create such data. After identifying the data, you will write a two-page report describing the data itself (i.e., what type of data it is, what does it “look like”, how is stored and accessed, etc.) and what types of questions these data allow you to answer about authoritarianism, and how. You do not need to actually use the data to answer these questions, but you do need to be specific about how one would use it to do so. We will go over an example in class.

5% of this assignment is dataset identification – meaning finding data and submitting a short paragraph describing your choice to make sure it is appropriate for the assignment; and 10% is the actual two-page write-up (both typed, double-spaced, turned in on Canvas).

5. **Final Exam (Essay) - 25%** – there will be an open-book, open-notes, open-internet, take-home final. The final will consist of one essay question.

***** Key Dates to Remember *****

- **February 11th:** Dataset Identification Assignment Choice due by 11:59PM on Canvas
- **February 25th:** Groups assigned for Presentation
- **March 30th** Dataset Identification Assignment due by 11:59PM on Canvas
- **April 20th and 22nd:** Group Presentations in class (all groups must be ready on the 20th)

- **May 6th:** Final Exam due by 11:59PM on Canvas.

Grading Scale:

Grade	%
A	89.50 - 100
B	79.50 - 89.49
C	69.50 - 79.49
D	60.00 - 69.49
F	59.99 and below

Policies and Resources

Participation: Most, if not all, of our classes will have a set time for discussion. During these discussions, I expect you to contribute to the conversation by raising questions, critiques, or by discussing points that you found convincing. To promote conversation, for each session, I have listed several questions that we can discuss. These can be found in the course outline below. Do not worry about making the “right” comment; as long as your contribution is thoughtful it adds value to our learning. Finally, I realize that, for various reasons, verbal participation may not be easy for many of you. If this applies to you, please come see me in office hours during the first or second week of class. Together, we can work out alternate strategies for participating or techniques that help you verbally participate in class.

Importantly, we will be discussing a variety of controversial issues that may hold special significance to students. It is important to discuss ideas in a supportive and respectful manner, acknowledging that others may have different opinions. I encourage you to see things from a different point of view and use feedback from each other to augment your ideas. And while I encourage debate and disagreement as a productive aspect of classroom discussion, you will be expected to act in a respectful manner at all times.

Attendance Policy: Attending class is mandatory. That being said, unforeseen circumstances arise, and I understand that you may have other things going on in your life that cause you to miss class. Thus, each student is allowed two unexcused absences, no warning necessary. All other absences require documentation (e.g., a doctor’s note). **Each unexcused absence exceeding the two absence limit will result in a lowering of your final grade by five percent.** In other words, let’s talk if you have to miss class, so we don’t have to pointlessly lower your grade. Finally, please do your best to arrive to class on time.

Religious Observances: By university policy, you must notify me of your pending absence at least fourteen days prior to the date of observance of a religious holy day. If you must miss an assignment in order to observe a religious holy day, you will be given an opportunity to complete the missed work within a reasonable time after the absence.

Office Hours: I have scheduled office hours on Mondays between 8:50AM and 11:50AM. I am also available by appointment. In addition, I am usually working in my office and have an open-door policy. If you come by and my office door is open, feel free to knock and come on in. Also, we do not have to meet in my office, if you feel more comfortable meeting elsewhere, let me know. Two more

things. First, you do not have to come to office hours alone. If your peers have similar questions, or if you feel a group discussion would be more useful for you, by all means come to office hours with your classmates. Second, I encourage you to come by office hours during the first couple weeks of class and introduce yourself. Learning about your interests and goals helps me tailor the class and make it more useful for you.

Late Assignments: Assignment deadlines are not just for you. Deadlines give me sufficient time to provide you with thoughtful and thorough feedback on each of your assignments, and to return graded assignments to you in a timely manner. For this reason, late assignments will be marked down by 5% for every 24 hours until the assignment is submitted. Please, if you anticipate being unable to meet an assignment deadline, let me know in advance so we can work together!

Appeals: If you believe a grade does not reflect your performance, you are welcome to dispute the grade. I ask that all grade appeals be made in writing. In the memo, explain why you should receive a higher grade on the assignment. This should be done within a week after the grade is announced and submitted after class or in office hours. After I read your memo, we will schedule a meeting to discuss why the grade does or does not warrant a change.

Academic Integrity Standards and Consequences: According to UNT Policy 06.003, Student Academic Integrity, academic dishonesty occurs when students engage in behaviors including, but not limited to cheating, fabrication, facilitating academic dishonesty, forgery, plagiarism, and sabotage. A finding of academic dishonesty may result in a range of academic penalties or sanctions ranging from admonition to expulsion from the University.

Emergency Notification & Procedures: UNT uses a system called Eagle Alert to quickly notify students with critical information in the event of an emergency (i.e., severe weather, campus closing, and health and public safety emergencies like chemical spills, fires, or violence). In the event of a university closure, please refer to the UNT Learning Management System (LMS) for contingency plans for covering course materials.

Statement on Learning Success: Your success in this class is important to me. We will all need accommodations because we all learn differently. If there are aspects of this course that prevent you from learning or exclude you, please let me know as soon as possible. Together we will develop strategies to meet both your needs and the requirements of the course. I also encourage you to reach out to the student resources available through UNT. Many are listed on this syllabus, but I am happy to connect you with a person or Center if you would like.

Names and Pronouns: At UNT, we aim to facilitate advocacy, dialogue, and learning around issues related to gender equity. The ways in which we choose to address one another, through the use of preferred names and pronouns, can be a strategy that fosters an inclusive learning environment. Each of us will honor and respect an individual's request to be addressed according to their preferred name, with correct pronunciation and pronoun.

Triggering and Challenging Material: In this course, we may discuss material that can be triggering or emotionally challenging. Each of us brings to class our unique personal experiences, making it difficult to predict how the material will affect you. If you anticipate that certain material might be triggering, please come meet with me so that we can discuss possible strategies to put in place that will allow you to engage in the course to your fullest potential.

Services for Students with Disabilities: This class respects and welcomes students of all backgrounds, identities, and abilities. If there are circumstances that make our learning environment and activities difficult, if you have medical information that you need to share with me, or if you need specific arrangements in case the building needs to be evacuated, please let me know. I am committed to creating an effective learning environment for all students, but I can only do so if you discuss your needs with me as early as possible. I promise to maintain the confidentiality of these discussions.

The University of North Texas makes reasonable academic accommodation for students with disabilities. Students seeking reasonable accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Access (ODA) to verify their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the ODA will provide you with a reasonable accommodation letter to be delivered to faculty to begin a private discussion regarding your specific needs in a course. You may request reasonable accommodations at any time, however, ODA notices of reasonable accommodation should be provided as early as possible in the semester to avoid any delay in implementation. Note that students must obtain a new letter of reasonable accommodation for every semester and must meet with each faculty member prior to implementation in each class. Students are strongly encouraged to deliver letters of reasonable accommodation during faculty office hours or by appointment. Faculty members have the authority to ask students to discuss such letters during their designated office hours to protect the privacy of the student. For additional information, refer to the Office of Disability Access website at <https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/office-disability-access>. You may also contact ODA by phone at (940) 565-4323.

Counseling and Mental Health Center: Do your best to maintain a healthy lifestyle this semester by eating well, exercising, avoiding drugs and alcohol, getting enough sleep, and taking some time to relax. This will help you achieve your goals and cope with stress. All of us benefit from support during times of struggle. You are not alone. Asking for support sooner rather than later is often helpful. If you or anyone you know experiences any academic stress, difficult life events, or feelings like anxiety or depression, we strongly encourage you to seek support: <https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services>.

The UNT Learning Center: Did you know that more than one third of UNT undergraduate students use the Learning Center each year to improve their academic performance? All students are welcome to take advantage of Learning Center's classes and workshops, private learning specialist appointments, peer academic coaching, and tutoring. For more information, visit <https://learningcenter.unt.edu/> or email LearningCenter@unt.edu.

The UNT Care Team: The UNT Care Team is a collaborative interdisciplinary committee of university officials that meets regularly to provide a response to students, staff, and faculty whose behavior could be harmful to themselves or others. To learn more about the Care Team go to: <https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/care-team1>. If you have concerns about the safety or behavior of fellow students, TAs or Professors, let the Care Team know. Your call can be anonymous. If something doesn't feel right it probably isn't. Trust your instincts and share your concerns.

Additional Resources:

- Undergraduate Writing Center: <https://writingcenter.unt.edu/>
- Libraries: <https://library.unt.edu/>

- ITS: <https://aits.unt.edu/support>
- Student Emergency Services: <https://www.unt.edu/safety-emergency>
- Career Center: <https://careercenter.unt.edu/>
- Intramural Sports: <https://recsports.unt.edu/programs/intramurals>
- Study Abroad: <https://studyabroad.unt.edu/>

Title IX Reporting

Title IX is a federal law that protects against sex and gender based discrimination, sexual harassment, sexual assault, sexual misconduct, dating/domestic violence and stalking at federally funded educational institutions. UNT is committed to fostering a learning and working environment free from discrimination in all its forms. When sexual misconduct occurs in our community, the university can: (1) Intervene to prevent harmful behavior from continuing or escalating; (2) Provide support and remedies to students and employees who have experienced harm or have become involved in a Title IX investigation; (3) Investigate and discipline violations of the university's relevant policies (<https://policy.unt.edu/policy/16-005>).

Beginning January 1, 2020, Texas Senate Bill 212 requires all employees of Texas universities, including faculty, to report any information to the Title IX Office regarding sexual harassment, sexual assault, dating violence and stalking that is disclosed to them. Texas law requires that all employees who witness or receive any information of this type (including, but not limited to, writing assignments, class discussions, or one on one conversations) must be reported.

I am a Responsible Employee and must report any Title IX related incidents that are disclosed in writing, discussion, or one on one. Before talking with me, or with any faculty or staff member about a Title IX related incident, be sure to ask whether they are a responsible employee.

If you would like to speak with someone who can provide support or remedies without making an official report to the university, see here for a list of resources marked confidential <https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/survivor-advocate/get-help>.

Key Dates

Date	Event / Assignment	Submission Method
Jan 12	First Day of Class	
Jan 19	MLK Day (No Class)	–
Feb 11	Dataset ID Choice Due	Canvas (11:59 PM)
Feb 25	Presentation Groups Assigned	In-Class
Mar 9–13	Spring Break (No Class)	–
Mar 30	Dataset ID Due	Canvas (11:59 PM)
Apr 20 & 22	Group Presentations	In-Class / Submit Slides on Canvas by Apr 20
Apr 27	Final Exam Prompt Distributed	In-Class / Canvas
May 6	Final Exam Essay Due	Canvas (11:59 PM)