

The Global Authoritarian Trend: Strategies and Opposition

Course Overview

Over the last decade, there has been a steady rise of authoritarian politics and governance around the globe— from Xi’ China, Putin’s Russia, Erdogan’s Turkey, Orban’s Hungary, and increasingly in places varied as India, Brazil and the West. While there are important differences between these political models, there are also similarities that explain why this trend has been so pronounced and has spread into the world of advanced democracies. At the same time, opponents of authoritarian politics and governance are searching for new tools and strategies to reverse this trend. The outcome of this competition will impact just about every major other issue in the world today, as nations decide how to organize themselves to meet national and international challenges.

This course will examine the rise of authoritarianism, the different forms that it has taken in different countries, and the tools and approaches that different movements are using to combat it. In particular, we will look at the stories that authoritarian leaders tell to justify their rule, and the playbook that they utilize to hold on to power – from the structure of governance, to the role of propaganda, to the manipulation of technology and social media. We will review a range of different authoritarian models – from the more mixed Western model, to the completely closed one party state of China. We will examine the similarities and differences between these different authoritarian models, and work to understand why the global environment has been so hospitable to nationalist and authoritarian leaders in recent years, looking at the impact of the global financial crisis, the Arab Spring, and growing migration flows.

In addition to the nature of the political trend, we will also look at a variety of strategies pursued by political opponents of authoritarian leaders: the growth of mass mobilization in different parts of the world – from Hong Kong to climate strikes; efforts to rebuild opposition movements by focusing on local outcomes and exposing corruption; strategies to reclaim technology and social media as tools of empowerment; and the overarching search for a story that can counter the potency of the nationalist, authoritarian narrative that is predominant in most of the world.

While the United States will not be specifically scrutinized as a country of focus, U.S. politics and foreign policy is implicated by all of these different countries and subjects. What similarities and differences do our politics and institutions have from the countries we will be examining? How is the global competition between nationalist and progressive politics manifest here in the United States? And what role should the United States play as a leader within the international community in pushing back against this authoritarian trend?

While much of the course will deal with relatively current events, we will also aim to reconstruct how we reached this moment – particularly in the countries that will be in focus. By the end of the class, students should expect to have a deeper understanding of the trend that is shaping world politics, and the nature of the debate about how to move forward.

Course Summary:

Week 1: The Authoritarian Playbook

What broad trends explain the rise of authoritarianism? The intro to the class

Ece Temelkuran, “How to Lose a Country: The 7 Steps from Democracy to Dictatorship”

Week 2: Putin’s Russia

<https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/02/01/putin-from-oligarch-to-kleptocrat/>

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/08/11/watching-eclipse>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/05/world/europe/putin-tells-the-russians-we-shall-be-stronger.html>

Week 3: Erdogan’s Turkey

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/07/how-erdogan-made-turkey-authoritarian-again/492374/>

Week 4: Orban’s Hungary

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/viktor-orban-hungary/557246/>

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/01/14/viktor-orbans-far-right-vision-for-europe>

Week 5: Xi’s China

<https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/08/16/data-leviathan-chinas-burgeoning-surveillance-state/>

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/26/china-big-data-fuels-crackdown-minority-region>

<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>

Week 6: Mass Mobilization

Reading TK

Week 7: Going Local

Reading TK

Week 8: Tech

Reading TK

Week 9: A Better Story

Reading TK

Week 10: International Support

Reading TK

Course Requirements:

This course will be rooted in classroom discussion, with two written assignments (including a longer, final research paper). Discussion is central to the class, and participation is encouraged. The written assignments, particularly the final paper, will involve doing research into different models of authoritarianism.

Grading will be based on the following:

- Participation – 30 percent

Note: Attendance is mandatory. Everyone gets one free unexcused absence. Beyond that, you will need to demonstrate why you couldn't attend.

- Mid-course writing assignment due May 6 – 25 percent

A short paper that will analyze the playbook of one authoritarian leader.

- Final research paper due last day of class – 45 percent

A longer research paper will analyze both the nature of a particular authoritarian system, and the tools and tactics that are being pursued by the opposition, and what other strategies could make the system vulnerable.

Additional Notes:

In addition to the core readings listed below, there may be supplemental readings as we work through the course. Updates will be provided in class and on the course website. Throughout the course, we will have occasional guest speakers. Their comments to the class should be treated as private / off the record.

I, obviously, was a recent participant in American political life, and continue to express my opinions publicly. However, I want to stress that all political views are welcomed / encouraged.