

AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA
FRIDAYS 2–4:30 PM
GIBSON HALL 141
SPRING 2026

PROFESSOR ANNE MENG
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OFFICE HOURS: AFTER CLASS

COURSE DESCRIPTION

What is an authoritarian regime, and how do dictators stay in power? Authoritarian rule is the oldest and most common form of government, and nearly half of the world's population continues to live under autocratic regimes today. This course examines why some authoritarian regimes endure for decades—such as those in China—while others collapse or give way to democracy, as in Mexico. Drawing on theoretical and empirical research in comparative politics, we analyze the strategic choices autocratic leaders make in relation to political elites and society at large. We study why dictators create parties, elections, and legislatures (as in Russia or Egypt); when they rely on repression, censorship, and coercion (as in Myanmar); how citizens organize to challenge authoritarian rule (as in Iran); and how leaders manage succession and control information (as in Cuba or Vietnam). Through historical and contemporary case studies from around the world, the course highlights how institutions, founding events, international pressure, and conflict shape authoritarian survival, breakdown, and democratic backsliding.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1. Attendance and Participation – 25%

Attendance and participation are especially important in seminars, and we will take advantage of the small class size to have many student-led discussions of the material. Students are expected to have completed all the assigned readings before class and be prepared to engage in critical discussions of the works.

- *If you are sick, please don't come to class. Stay home and take care of yourself. I'm happy to help you catch up on material if you need anything.*

2. Discussion Questions and Memos – 25%

Discussion Questions (15%): Each student should post 2 discussion questions under the Discussions tab in Canvas every week by 11:59 PM on Thursday before each class.

Discussion Memos (10%): Each student is required to write two discussion memos over the course of the semester. Memos must be posted to the Discussions tab on Canvas by 11:59 PM on the Thursday before class. Students may choose any two weeks between January 23 and April 17.

Each memo should be approximately 2 pages in length and focus on one assigned reading from that week.

Page 1: Summary

Provide a concise and accurate summary of the article's core contributions:

- What is the main puzzle or question the author seeks to explain?
- What is the author's central argument or thesis?
- What types of evidence does the author use to support the argument?

Page 2: Critical Engagement

Engage critically with the reading by addressing the following:

- What did you find most interesting or surprising about the article?
- Are there important issues, cases, or perspectives the author did not address?
- What are some common themes this article shared with the other readings?

Memos should demonstrate careful reading and thoughtful engagement with the material rather than simply summarizing the article.

3. Case Study – 50%

Draft Exchange (5%) – due April 10

Peer Review (5%) – due April 17

Final Paper (40%) – due May 1

Each student will write a case study analyzing an authoritarian regime (or a regime that became authoritarian) in a specific country. The instructor will provide a list of countries to choose from, and each student will select one case. The goal of the assignment is to apply theories of authoritarian politics to a real-world case, using historical evidence to explain how authoritarian regimes emerge, survive, adapt, and sometimes collapse. Each case study should be 20 pages and address the following questions:

Regime background

- What was the political system prior to the emergence of authoritarian rule?
- When and how did the authoritarian regime come to power (e.g. coup, election, revolution, gradual consolidation)?

Authoritarian strategies

- What strategies has the regime used to maintain power?
- How does the regime manage elites (e.g. parties, legislatures, patronage, purges)?
- What role do elections, courts, or other formal institutions play, if any?

Regime outcomes

- Has the regime remained stable, adapted over time, or experienced crisis?
- If the regime has collapsed or liberalized, what explains its breakdown?
- If it has endured, what factors help explain its resilience?

Comparative insight

- Which theories or concepts from the course best explain this case?
- What does this case illustrate about authoritarian politics more generally?

We will write the case study in stages: Students will exchange early drafts (around 5 pages) of their case study with another student on **April 10**. Each student should provide 1-2 pages of feedback for their partner and email them this feedback by **April 17**. The final case studies are due to the instructor on **May 1**.

COURSE POLICIES

Late assignments

I do not accept late assignments, so please plan ahead and complete all assignments on time. If you really are facing an extenuating circumstance, please come talk to me.

Re-grade policy

If a grade dispute arises, please provide a one-page memo explaining why you believe the grade you received is incorrect. A copy of the graded assignment should be included along with the memo. Re-grade requests must be submitted within a week from the time the grade was first received.

Academic Honor Code

All students are expected to submit work that reflects their own ideas and to properly cite published sources when referencing the ideas of others. AI tools may be used as a research aid. However, all work submitted in this course must clearly reflect your own thinking, analysis, and writing. Copying or closely paraphrasing AI-generated text is not permitted. Prohibited use of AI in this class constitutes a violation of the university honor code and will be subject to sanctions. If you have any questions about proper research and writing practices, please come talk to me.

SCHEDULE

All readings will be posted as PDF files under the Files tab on Canvas.

Week 1 (1/16): Introduction

Week 2 (1/23): What is an authoritarian regime? How should regimes be coded?

Pamela Paxton. 2000. "Women's suffrage in the measurement of democracy: Problems of operationalization." *Studies in Comparative International Development* 35(3): 92-111.

Geddes, Barbara, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz. 2014. "Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions: A New Data Set." *Perspectives on Politics* 12(2):313-331.

Milan Svobik. 2012. *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, Chapters 1-2.

Week 3 (1/30): Varieties of authoritarianism

Gandhi, Jennifer. 2008. *Political Institutions Under Dictatorship*. Cambridge University Press. Intro (Ch 0) and Ch 1.

Smith, Benjamin. 2005. "Life of the Party: The Origins of Regime Breakdown and Persistence under Single-Party Rule." *World Politics* 57(3):421–451.

Clarke, Killian, Anne Meng, and Jack Paine. 2025. "Born This Way: Authoritarian Origins and Regime Survival." Working Paper.

Week 4 (2/6): Choosing a successor

Andrej Kokkonen and Anders Sundell. 2014. "Delivering Stability—Primogeniture and Autocratic Survival in European Monarchies 1000–1800." *American Political Science Review* 108(2).

Anne Meng. 2021. "Winning the Game of Thrones: Leadership Succession in Modern Autocracies." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 65(5).

Edward Goldring and Peter Ward. 2024. "Elite Management Before Autocratic Leader Succession: Evidence from North Korea." *World Politics*.

Week 5 (2/13): Mobilization, protest, and opposition

Hassan, Mai. 2024. "Coordinated dis-coordination." *American Political Science Review* 118.1: 163-177.

Esberg, Jane, and Alexandra A. Siegel. 2023. "How exile shapes online opposition: Evidence from Venezuela." *American Political Science Review* 117.4: 1361-1378.

Dan Mattingly. 2020. *The Art of Political Control in China*. Cambridge University Press. Chapters 1 and 2.

Week 6 (2/20): Rebellion and revolutions

Jean Lachapelle, Steven Levitsky, Lucan Way, and Adam Casey. 2020. "Social Revolution and Authoritarian Durability." *World Politics* 72(4)

Meng, A. and Paine, J. 2022. "Power Sharing and Authoritarian Stability: How Rebel Regimes Solve the Guardianship Dilemma." *American Political Science Review*

Grewal, Sharan. 2023. *Soldiers of Democracy? Military Legacies and the Arab Spring*. Oxford University Press, Chapters 1 and 2

Week 7 (2/27): Coups and Coercive Power

Naunihal Singh. 2014. *Seizing Power*. Hopkins University Press. Chapters 1-2

Woldense, Josef. 2022. "What Happens When Coups Fail? The Problem of Identifying and Weakening the Enemy Within." *Comparative Political Studies* 55(7):1236–1265.

Lisa Blaydes. 2018. *State of Repression: Iraq Under Saddam Hussein*. Chapters 1 and 2.

Week 8 (3/6): Enjoy Spring Break!

Week 9 (3/13): Cooptation and Control

Paglayan, Agustina. 2024. *Raised to obey: The rise and spread of mass education*. Princeton University Press. Chapters 1 and 2.

Rosenfeld, B. 2021. *The Autocratic Middle Class: How State Dependency Reduces the Demand for Democracy*. Princeton University Press. Chapter 1.

Scharpf, Adam, Christian Gläbel, and Pearce Edwards. 2023. "International sports events and repression in autocracies: Evidence from the 1978 FIFA World Cup." *American Political Science Review* 117.3: 909-926.

Week 10 (3/20): Propaganda and information

Treisman, Daniel, and Sergei Guriev. 2023. *Spin dictators: The changing face of tyranny in the 21st century*. Princeton University Press. Chapters 1, 3, and 4.

Carter, Erin Baggott and Brett L. Carter. 2023. *Propaganda in Autocracies: Institutions, Information, and the Politics of Belief*. Cambridge University Press. Chapter 1.

Lisa Wedeen. 1998. "Acting "as if": symbolic politics and social control in Syria." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 40(3).

Week 11 (3/27): Instructor at conference, no class!**Week 12 (4/3): Foreign intervention**

Gunitskiy, Seva. 2017. *Aftershocks: great powers and domestic reforms in the twentieth century*. Princeton University Press. Chapter 1

Downes, Alexander B. 2021. *Catastrophic Success: Why Foreign-Imposed Regime Change Goes Wrong*. Cornell University Press. Chapter 1

Donno, Daniela, Sara Fox, and Joshua Kaasik. 2022. "International incentives for women's rights in dictatorships." *Comparative Political Studies* 55.3: 451-492.

Week 13 (4/10): Democratization**[Early Draft due]**

Albertus, Michael and Menaldo, Victor. 2018. *Authoritarianism and the Elite Origins of Democracy*. Cambridge University Press. Chapter 1.

Riedl, Rachel Beatty, Dan Slater, Joseph Wong, and Daniel Ziblatt. 2020. "Authoritarian-led Democratization." *Annual Review of Political Science* 23:315–332.

Mickey, Robert. 2015. *Paths Out of Dixie: The Democratization of Authoritarian Enclaves in America's Deep South*. Princeton University Press. Chapters 1 and 9

Week 14 (4/17): Democratic Backsliding

[Peer Review Feedback due]

Bermeo, Nancy. 2016. "On Democratic Backsliding." *Journal of Democracy* 27(1):5–19.

Killian Clark, Anne Meng, and Jack Paine. 2026. "Incumbent consolidation and democratic failure." Working Paper.

Grumbach, Jacob M. "Laboratories of democratic backsliding." *American Political Science Review* 117.3 (2023): 967-984.

Week 15 (4/24): Extra office hours, no class!

May 1: Final Research Papers Due