

POL 300: Politics and Contemporary Issues in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Office Hours: W 9-11am

Office: Kerr Hall 568

Class Hours: MW 8-9:20am

Classroom: Wellman Hall 109

Course Summary

This course offers a survey of Sub-Saharan African politics from the pre-colonial period to the contemporary era. Rather than focusing on the internal politics of any particular country, our focus will be on the academic study of contemporary African politics. Students are encouraged to share perspectives and criticisms from other relevant disciplines (e.g., anthropology, history). We will examine the common themes and trends that shape politics and development across the continent. Some core questions that motivate this course are: Why did authoritarianism emerge in many African countries after independence? Why have authoritarian governments been able to persist in some countries but not others? Why do civil wars occur? How has the international context, particularly Western intervention in the form of missionaries, colonialism, and development assistance, affected African politics? What are the current prospects for democracy and social order in Africa?

We will seek to understand the drivers of both the huge variation across the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, and of the divergences between Africa and other regions. Lectures and readings will mix case studies of events in specific countries with the analysis of data that allows us to test arguments about cause and effect relationships. You will become a specialist in either a particular country of your choosing or a particular topic (economic policy, vote buying, climate change etc.). The assignments that you do over the quarter will introduce you to some of the data that researchers use to study Africa. They will build into a final paper comparing events in your case to the overarching trends that we will learn in the course.

1 Learning Objectives

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

1. Describe theoretical explanations of African political outcomes and apply them to specific cases
2. Apply the logic and tools of comparative political analysis
3. Convey coherent analytical arguments about comparative politics and sub-Saharan Africa in writing and in speech
4. Speak knowledgeably about the domestic politics of a selected African country and the broad political trajectories of African countries after independence

2 Course Format

This class is intended to be both lecture and discussion based. Each week after class I will post the lecture slides on Canvas. These slides will not contain audio, so it is imperative you come to class. Participation and contributions to class discussion are required. Students are expected to complete all readings assigned for a particular week before attending class.

Textbooks/Materials

- There are no textbooks required for purchase for this course. You will notice that some classes require a book chapter. You will find copies of these posted on the Canvas page.

Policy on Late/Missing Assignments

- All late assignments without a legitimate excuse will be graded down 10% of the total points for every day late, including Saturday and Sunday. If an assignment is due on Tuesday and you turn it in on Wednesday, the highest possible grade you can achieve is a 90%. If you turn in the assignment on Thursday, the highest possible grade you can achieve is an 80%, etcetera. If you need to miss an exam or turn in an assignment late due to illness, personal emergency, or other serious circumstances, please contact me as soon as possible.

3 Expectations

- This course is designed to be an upper-level seminar on contemporary issues in African politics. This comes with a significant workload as well as an intensive writing requirement. To ensure that this class is broadly applicable to career paths generally chosen by political science majors, I offer 2 different tracks of assignments. One is a policy track that will require students to write multiple policy memos as if one were a State Department employee. The other is a research track that culminates in one longer research paper due at the end of the term. This assignment is designed to give students interested in pursuing graduate school a high-quality writing sample. You may not switch tracks after Class 14.

- *Policy track*. This set of assignments will focus on: (1) your ability to apply peer-reviewed literature to real-world policy dilemmas; (2) writing a series of shorter pieces that will build your skills with critical analysis and argumentation.
- *Research track*. This set of assignments will focus on: (1) your comprehension and ability to critically engage with debates in the peer-reviewed academic literature; and (2) researching and writing an original research paper of 12-15 pages for your final quarter project.

4 Course Requirements

- Regardless of which track students choose, **ALL** students must complete the following:
 1. Participation (15%)
 2. Map Quiz (10%)
 3. Country Presentation (10%)
 4. Midterm (15%)
- Students on the policy track must also complete the following:
 1. "Good Authority" Article (15%)
 2. Two short Case Study Memos (3-5 Pages each) (15% and 20%)
- Students on the research track must also complete the following:
 1. Paper Proposal and Annotated Bibliography (15%)
 2. Final Research Paper (12-15 Pages) (35%)

4.1 Participation (15%)

- You are expected to participate in class discussions (in a respectful manner).
- I recognize that speaking up in class may make some students nervous. I encourage you to participate as best as you can. Because some students may be less comfortable speaking every class, each class will have a Qualtrics link with a question. You *must* respond to this question before class ends to receive attendance credit
- You may skip 2 classes without any penalty.
- Please email me if you are sick or cannot attend class due to some unforeseen circumstance. You will not be penalized for missing any class due to an excused absence
- After the two permitted absences, each additional unexcused absence will reduce your participation grade by 5 percentage points

4.2 Map Quiz (10%)

- Students will be given a map of Sub-Saharan Africa and be required to identify 15 countries and their capital cities.

4.3 Country Presentation (10%)

- This short presentation will focus on some specific aspect of politics in the country of your choosing. You must engage with at least three scholarly sources on this aspect of your country's politics and mention the sources in your presentation. If you are unsure what sources count as scholarly, please come see me. Presentations that get an "A" will both succinctly provide information about the topic and reflect on what this case tells us about general theories.
- Your presentation should be short (5-7 minutes). Please record your presentation and submit it on Canvas. We will discuss presentations in class.

4.4 Midterm (15%)

- This midterm will test your ability to use the course materials to argue one side of a particular debate about a topic we have discussed in class.
- Please note that this is not a summary of the articles we have read in class. You should describe arguments, address the conflict between the authors' findings, and then use the literature to make your own argument. At its core, this is an argumentative essay.
- Do not worry about remembering the exact author name or year a paper was written. You will not lose points for misidentifying an author or year, but you **will** lose points for mis-characterizing an idea. You may, of course, include items we have discussed in class.
- This midterm will be held in class

4.5 Policy Track

- Those choosing the policy track must also complete the following:
 1. "Good Authority" style blog post (15%)
 2. Two case study memos (3-5 pages each) (15% and 20%)

4.5.1 Policy Track-"Good Authority" article (15%)

- You must turn in this assignment by Class 13.
- You must write a blog post that makes political science research more digestible for a broader audience. You may do this in a few different ways:
 1. Take 1 article that we have read and use it to write a blog post.
 2. Focus on a general topic of the course like climate change, historical legacies, or why some countries are democratic. Then talk about what political science says about that topic.
- You are already doing a presentation on a particular country so you may not repeat the country-topic you did in your country presentation.

- It will likely be helpful for you to look at news stories for this project. Your blog post does not need to be a current event.
- Please see [Good Authority](#) to see an example of what this article should look like.
- This assignment should be roughly 1,000 words +/- 250.

4.5.2 Policy Track-Case Study Memos (35%) (15% and 20%)

- Each of these two memos is to be a 3-5 page analysis of a country event or an important aspect of African politics. The memo must make a case for why this case study or political dynamic is important for a policy audience to understand. You must draw on scholarly literature in order to shed light on the argument you're making, though you can also use policy papers or other sources of data. Each case study memo must have at least 8 sources, of which at least 4 must be scholarly / peer-reviewed research. Though this assignment is more applied than the final paper being done by students on the research track, you should consult the guidance in the guidelines for research at the end of the syllabus.
- One of the memos must include some form of data analysis such as regressions.
- The second memo will be weighted more heavily than the first, so learning over the course of the quarter will be taken into account. A strong second case study memo can make up for a weaker grade on the first memo.
- The last case memo is due on the day of our scheduled final exam. You may turn in both case memos at the same time, however they will then be graded with equal weight.

4.6 Research Track

4.6.1 Research Track-Paper Proposal and Annotated Bibliography (15%)

- This should be a short document that lays out your research question, what you view as the major scholarly answer(s) to this question, and your empirical strategy for examining this research question. My thinking is that this project could build upon the question or topic you identified for your country presentation, but it would broaden out the topic either in terms of scope or case material (e.g., make the question larger, include another case study, etc). Please reach out in advance if you're not sure you have an appropriate proposal topic.
- A big part of your early research and reading should be focused on defining your research question in a sharp or "crisp" manner and then identifying the scholarly literature that addresses that question. Essentially, you want to have your research question short enough to be explained in an elevator.
- Your research question should address your particular case as well as broader theories.
- This final paper will require data analysis, so you should identify what statistical technique you would like to use and why. Please include your dependent, independent, and control variables. Come see me if you have any questions about this.

- In addition to the proposal, you should include a short annotated bibliography of 6-8 academic articles that you will use in the paper. For each article you should identify its research question, their argument, their conclusion, and how you will use the article in your paper.

4.6.2 Research Track-Final Research Paper (35%)

- This final paper will be an original research paper on a topic of your choosing related to African politics. You may pick whichever topic you like, but make sure it is well focused. For example, investigating whether more education causes more people to believe in climate change in South Africa is well focused. Conversely, investigating how education influences economics is too broad.
- Your paper will be evaluated by the clarity of your argument, how well you engage with the literature on this topic, and the quality of your data analysis.
- The paper must be 12-15 pages long and contain at least 10 academic citations.
- More information (with a detailed rubric) will be given later in the course.
- Your final paper is due on the day of our scheduled final exam.

Grading Scale

- 93–100 = A
- 90–92.99 = A-
- 87–89.99 = B+
- 83–86.99 = B
- 80–82.99 = B-
- 77–79.99 = C+
- 73–76.99 = C
- 70–72.99 = C-
- 67–69.99 = D+
- 63–66.99 = D
- 60–62.99 = D-
- Below 60 = F

Office Hours

Office hours are when I set aside two hours each week to answer any questions you may have. Office hours are also:

- An opportunity to discuss with your instructor any special needs or challenges you face. If possible, talk to your instructor before the quarter starts or at the beginning of the quarter.
- They are for clarifying information and answering questions from class.
- An opportunity to discuss or get feedback about assignments and tests.
- To share any information about extenuating personal circumstances that may affect your learning and class performance.
- They are an opportunity to discuss academic and/or career goals.
- They are a time to discuss potential research or internship opportunities.
- No appointment is necessary.

Course Policies

Contacting Me

I will do my best to answer any email you send within 24 hours. I will respond Monday-Friday 8am-6pm PST. If you don't hear from me after 24 hours, please email me again! If you email me on the weekend I may not be able to respond until Monday.

Academic Integrity and Honesty

Students are required to comply with UC Davis Code of Academic Conduct. You can find this here: <https://ossja.ucdavis.edu/code-academic-conduct>. The use of ChatGPT/AI-assisted writing is also prohibited according to UCD policy. Papers found to have been written using AI-assisted writing tools will be given a zero. If you are worried about your writing please utilize the writing resource center. You may also use only tools such as Grammarly.

There are some acceptable uses for AI tools. For example, AI tools may be used to find academic journals, but not to find academic articles. You may ask ChatGPT "Which political science journals should I use to learn more about economic policies in Mozambique?" but you may not ask ChatGPT "What are some articles that examine how Portuguese colonialism influences modern Mozambique economic policies?" We will cover how to brainstorm research ideas and find academic sources in class 10. If you want to find academic papers before then, use Google Scholar or review articles to find specific articles. If you have any questions about how to do this, please do not hesitate to ask me.

Accommodations

If you require additional accommodations, please let me know within the first two weeks of the quarter, as well as providing me with the appropriate documentation from the University and the Student Disability Center (SDC).

Schedule

4.7 What is African Politics?

Class 1 Course Introduction

What do you think when you think of Africa? How should we discuss a complex continent with numerous countries in Sub-Saharan Africa?

- Wainaina, Binyavanga. 2005. "How to Write About Africa," *Granta*, 92.
- Seay, Laura. 2012. "How Not to Write About Africa." *Foreign Policy*.

Class 2 Modern Democracy in Africa

What do governments in modern Sub-Saharan Africa look like? What does it mean to be a democracy in Africa?

- Opalo, Kennedy Ochieng'. 2012. "African Elections: Two Divergent Trends." *Journal of Democracy* 23(3): 80-93.
- Riedl, Rachel (2022). Africa's Democratic Outliers; Success amid Challenges in Benin and South Africa, in: *Democracy in Hard Places* edited by Mainwaring and Masoud, p.94-127.

4.8 Colonialism and its Ghosts

Class 3 The Scramble for Africa and the Slave Trade

What did colonialism look like in Africa? How did colonialism impact modern-day political institutions in Africa?

- Nunn, Nathan. 2008. "Shackled to the Past: The Causes and Consequences of Africa's Slave Trade." In Jared Diamond and James A. Robinson, eds. *Natural Experiments of History*.

Class 4 From Pre-Colonial to Colonial State

How did the colonial state differ from the pre-colonial state?

DEADLINE TO SELECT COUNTRY FOR PRESENTATION

- Herbst, Jeffrey. 2000. "Chapter 2: Power and space in precolonial Africa." In *States and Power in Africa*, pp 35-57
- Young, Crawford. 1994. *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective*. "Chapter 4: Constructing Bula Matari", 77-95. (Stop at "Constructing the Colonial State: Basic Premises".)

Class 5 A Brief History of Decolonization

What were the drivers of independence across Africa? When we think of post-independence leaders in African states, who do we think of?

- Christensen & Laitin. 2019. "Chapter 1: The Charismatic Founders and Their Dreams", 13-30.
- French, Howard. 2021. "Introduction", 1-13.

Class 6 Missionaries

How have missionaries influenced modern African Politics?

- French, Howard. 2021. Born in Blackness. Chapter “28. Seized by the Spirit,” 275-292.
- Cagé, Julia, and Valeria Rueda. 2016. “The Long-Term Effects of the Printing Press in Sub-Saharan Africa.” American Economic Journal: Applied Economics 8 (3): 69–99.

Class 7 Ethnicity

How does ethnicity shape modern politics and public good provision? How did ethnic cleavages start?

- Ichino, Nahomi and Noah Nathan. 2013. “Crossing the Line: Local Ethnic Geography and Voting in Ghana.” American Political Science Review 107(2): 344-361.
- Baldwin, Kate, and John D. Huber. 2010. “Economic versus Cultural Differences: Forms of Ethnic Diversity and Public Goods Provision.” American Political Science Review 104(4): 644–62.
- Posner, Daniel N. 2004. “The Political Salience of Cultural Difference: Why Chewas and Tumbukas Are Allies in Zambia and Adversaries in Malawi.” American Political Science Review 98(4): 529–45. **optional reading**

Class 8 Post-Colonial Governance Troubles

After independence, new states must govern. What has prevented many African states from governing effectively and providing for their citizens?

Map Quiz at the beginning of Class

- Nyong’o, Peter Anyang’. 1992. “Africa: The Failure of One-Party Rule.” Journal of Democracy 3(1): 90-96.
- Bratton, Michael and Nicholas van de Walle. 1997. “Neopatrimonial Rule in Africa,” Chapter 2, in Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, pp. 61-82.
- Robinson, James A. 2023. “Tax Aversion and the Social Contract in Africa.” Journal of African Economies 32(Supplement_1): i33–56. **optional reading**

4.9 Democratic? Governance in Africa**Class 9 Democracy or Autocracy?**

Political scientists generally view states along the democracy and autocracy continuum. Why have some states become more democratic while others have become autocratic?

- Lechler, Marie and Lachlan McNamee. 2018. “Indirect Colonial Rule Undermines Support for Democracy: Evidence from a Natural Experiment in Namibia.” Comparative Political Studies 51(14): 1858-1898. **skim methodology section**
- Bates, Robert H., John H. Coatsworth, and Jeffrey G. Williamson. 2007. “Lost Decades: Postindependence Performance in Latin America and Africa.” The Journal of Economic History 67(4): 917–43.

Class 10 IN CLASS MIDTERM**Class 11 The Afrobarometer, Armed Conflict Location Dataset, and Research Design**

This class is an introduction to major datasets used in African politics research as well as how best to design a research study

- **About the Afrobarometer**

- Raleigh, Clionadh, Andrew Linke, Håvard Hegre, and Joakim Karlsen. 2010. "Introducing ACLED: An Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset." *Journal of Peace Research* 47(5): 651–60. **skim.**

Class 12 Elections and Vote Buying

What is vote buying? How does it function? Why does vote buying occur in countries with a secret ballot?

Country Presentation due at Midnight

- Wantchekon, Leonard. 2003. "Clientelism and Voting Behavior: Evidence from a Field Experiment in Benin." *World Politics* 55(3): 399–422
- Jensen, Peter Sandholt, and Mogens K. Justesen. 2014. "Poverty and Vote Buying: Survey-Based Evidence from Africa." *Electoral Studies* 33: 220–32.

Class 13 Accountability

How do citizens hold politicians accountable? Are politicians accountable to individuals? Does vote buying diminish accountability?

- Lindberg, Staffan I. 2010. "What Accountability Pressures Do MPs in Africa Face and How Do They Respond? Evidence from Ghana." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 48(1): 117–42.
- Raffler, Pia J., Daniel N. Posner, and Doug Parkerson. 2025. "Can Citizen Pressure Be Induced to Improve Public Service Provision?" *The Journal of Politics*: 000–000. doi:10.1086/736577.

Class 14 Protest and Dissent

What happens when elections do not hold politicians accountable? When do citizens choose to protest?

Good Authority Article due for Policy Track

- Lebas, Adrienne, and Lauren E. Young. 2023. "Repression and Dissent in Moments of Uncertainty: Panel Data Evidence from Zimbabwe." *American Political Science Review*: 1–18.
- Tuki, Daniel, and Hussaini Kwari. 2025. "Let the Poor Breathe! Poverty and Anti-Government Protests in Nigeria." *Afrobarometer*.
- Robiro, Nicole, and Sophia Seelos. 2026. "Predictable Patterns of Protest: The Impact of Agricultural Cycles on Social Unrest in Kenya." *Food Policy* 142: 103136. **optional reading**

Class 15 Conflict

What explains the causes of civil wars across the continent? How can we stop war?

- Bates, Robert H, 2008. *When Things Fell Apart: State Failure in Late-Century Africa*. Cambridge University Press. **(Chapter 2)**
- Roessler, Philip. 2011. "The enemy within: Personal rule, coups, and civil war in Africa." *World Politics* 63(2): 300-346.
- Annan, Jeannie and Christopher Blattman, 2016. Can employment reduce lawlessness and rebellion? A field experiment with high-risk men in a fragile state. *American Political Science Review*, 110(1), pp. 1–17. **optional reading**

Class 16 Economics

What do the economies of African states look like? Why are many African states lagging in economic development?

- Bates, Robert H. 1981. *Markets and States in Tropical Africa*. 1st ed. University of California Press. **(Chapter 1)**
- Belinda Archibong, Brahim Coulibaly and Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala. 2021. "Washington Consensus Reforms and Lessons for Economic Performance in Sub-Saharan Africa." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 35(3): 133-156.

4.10 Contemporary Issues

Class 17 Climate Change

Research Proposal Due-Research Track; First Case Study Memo Due-Policy Track

Climate change is profoundly impacting African states. They face some of the greatest consequences of a warming climate, yet contributed little to its warming. How is climate change affecting African nations? What do individuals in Sub-Saharan Africa think about climate change?

- Burke, Marshall B., Edward Miguel, Shanker Satyanath, John A. Dykema, and David B. Lobell. 2009. "Warming Increases the Risk of Civil War in Africa." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 106(49): 20670–74.
- Ntodwa, Edson, Rorisang Lekalake, and Matthias Krönke. 2025. "Adapting to a Changing Climate: The Importance of Climate-Change Literacy." *Afrobarometer Policy Paper No. 97*. Afrobarometer.
- Okafor, Chukwuebuka C., Charles C. Ajaero, Christian N. Madu, Chinelo A. Nzekwe, Festus A. Otunomo, and Nduji N. Nixon. 2024. "Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation in Nigeria: A Review." *Sustainability* 16(16): 7048. **optional reading**

Class 18 Foreign Aid

Is foreign aid improving conditions in Africa? What is the effect of aid?

- Briggs, Ryan C. 2018. "Poor Targeting: A Gridded Spatial Analysis of the Degree to Which Aid Reaches the Poor in Africa." *World Development* 103: 133-148.
- Andrew Mwenda. 2007. "Aid for Africa? No Thanks." TED Talk.

- Blair, Robert A., Robert Marty, and Philip Roessler. 2022. "Foreign Aid and Soft Power: Great Power Competition in Africa in the Early Twenty-First Century." *British Journal of Political Science* 52(3): 1355–76. **optional reading**

Class 19 Chinese Influence: Colonialism 2.0?

How is China exerting its influence on the continent? What are the consequences of Chinese aid? Are countries better off than before?

- Blair, Robert A., and Philip Roessler. "The Effects of Chinese Aid on State Legitimacy in Africa: Cross-National and Sub-National Evidence from Surveys, Survey Experiments, and Behavioral Games," *World Politics*, 73, no. 2 (2021).
- Brook Larmer. 2017. "Is China the World's New Colonial Power?" *New York Times Magazine*, May 2.

Class 20 Looking forward

What does the future hold for African states?

- Ken Ochieng' Opalo. 2024. "The Truth About Africa's Coups." *Journal of Democracy* 53(3): 93-107.
- "Piles of Cash and a Town of Solutions in Kenya and Nigeria" NPR Planet Money