

AFRICAN POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS (SIS 519-003)

Dr. Carl LeVan, levan@american.edu
School of International Service, CRS



“African Political Institutions” is a new course in Comparative and Regional Studies (CRS) that introduces graduate students and advanced undergraduates to the major themes and the basic techniques of comparative institutional analysis. It critically and empirically examines whether the crafting of political institutions can be linked to outcomes such as better representation, improved macroeconomic performance, or less clientelism. The readings typically juxtapose contemporary African research with classic studies from other regions of the world, particularly Europe and Latin America.

Objectives:

The main goal of the course will be to develop a systematic understanding of the basic features of electoral systems, executive selection processes, federalism, and party systems. (Future versions of the class may incorporate judicial controls, veto player theory, or studies of legislatures.) Sessions will include seminal readings on topics such as presidential versus parliamentary government and the impact of social cleavages on party formation, as well as new research on trends such as mixed-member legislatures and electoral authoritarianism. The course concludes with readings on the consequences of institutions, focusing on distributional effects, political stability, and democratic “quality.” The course strives to develop a holistic view of institutions, situating them within an interrelated architecture of government and appreciating the tradeoffs of different arrangements.

Structure and Format:

The class will be conducted as a seminar, with small teams of students leading discussions for most class meetings. The class also utilizes non-conventional scheduling and an aggressive online learning environment to allow students more time to engage in research and project development. Students will participate in two small group presentations, prepare a literature review, and submit an applied research paper.

Who should this class appeal to?

Advanced undergraduate students interested in Africa who have taken at least one survey course such as “Contemporary Africa” in (SIS 265) or “Contemporary African Politics” (GOVT 532).

Graduate students from CRS, International Development, or the School of Public Affairs who want to learn about institutional analysis in comparative politics.

Law students interested in political aspects of constitutional design.