

**POLS8464**

**HISTORICAL POLITICAL ECONOMY**

**Novel Methods to Quantify History**

Fall 2025

**Instructor:** Caterina Chiopris – [cc5398@columbia.edu](mailto:cc5398@columbia.edu)

**Time:** Tuesday, 4:10 pm – 6 pm

**Location:** 711 International Affairs Building

**OFFICE HOURS:** You can sign up for office hours [\[here\]](#). Office hours will be held in 734, IAB.

**Description**

The course surveys recent developments in the political economy approach to the study of history, and is designed for graduate students developing research agendas especially in data-poor contexts. Mixing classic works with frontier research, it provides an overview of the key milestones in the development of the state from antiquity to modernity, and examines how historians and political economists differ in their study of the history of political institutions. Throughout the course, we will discuss biases in historical research and, to the extent possible, cover case studies from Western, Asian, Latin American, and African history.

We will explore novel data collection and data processing techniques, that are meant to be broadly applicable to data-scarce contexts, and the opportunities and perils of new technologies. We will examine how recent methodological advances, especially the deep learning revolution, have expanded the definition of what data sources can be, incorporating texts, images, and networks. We will then cover major themes in political science and the broader social sciences – such as the origins of parliaments and democracy, the role of culture, religion, and science – and show how novel types of data and methods have expanded (or limited) the types of research questions scholars have been addressing. The broad themes of the course will include: what prompted leaders to introduce parliaments? What are the existing

theories for how democracy emerged, and how can we distinguish between them? How do culture and religion diffuse, and what was their role for state development and growth? How are science, religion, and political institutions connected?

As a graduate-level course, its dual purpose is to expose students to broad processes of social change that unfold over centuries; and prepare them pragmatically to conduct their own research, thinking creatively about their data, setting, and empirical design.

A useful guide throughout the course will be:

Jenkins, Jeffery A., and Jared Rubin, eds. 2024. *The Oxford Handbook of Historical Political Economy*. Oxford University Press.

### **Evaluation:**

The class is evaluated based on participation, a replication and final research paper or proposal.

- **Participation**, 20% of the final grade.
  - Students are expected to attend every class, having read the required readings in advance, and actively participate in the discussion.
  - You should submit a brief response to the papers by **10 am** before the class during Weeks 2, and 7 - 12.
  - You should run a small test of one of the methods discussed (Weeks 3-5) and report your findings, questions or challenges during class.
- **Replication** exercise, 40% of the grade. Report due date: **October 5**. In class presentation: **October 7-14**.
  - Replicate a paper published within the last ten years in a major political science journal or adjacent field.
  - Empirical replications consist in rewriting the code from scratch to reproduce main figures and tables of the paper. Theoretical replications consist in replicating the proof of the main results in detail.
  - Additionally, you should include one or two extensions, i.e., with the data provided, you present new results, or robustness checks not included in the paper. For theory replications, you should provide an additional result to expand the model.

- This activity could be done in groups or individually. If done in a group, it should be specified who was responsible for what.
  - The write up of the replication should be 10 pages approximately; the presentation should be 10-15 minutes.
- **Research Development and Proposal**, 40% of the final grade. Due date of presentation: **December 2**. Due date of research proposal: **December 12**.
    - Develop an original research paper or proposal. This could come in two formats: (1) an original theory with a draft of a model, (2) a proposed empirical analysis, outlining both data and empirical strategy.
    - Write an original 20-page proposal outlining the motivation, research question, contribution to the literature. For empirical papers: data, empirical strategy, and possible timeline; for theoretical papers: model set up and sketch of results.
    - Everyone will present their ongoing research development on the last week of class.

### **Enrollment and Prerequisites**

The course is intended for PhD students in political science and interested students in adjacent disciplines. A strong grounding in graduate-level econometrics/statistics will be assumed. Enrollment requires instructor approval for non-PhD students, and the class will be capped at 20 students. Auditors are not permitted, but the class may be taken pass/fail with instructor approval for completing one main assignment.

### **Academic Integrity**

Columbia University does not tolerate cheating or plagiarism in any form. Students violating the code of academic and professional conduct will be subject to disciplinary procedures. Guidelines on academic integrity are available at <https://gsas.columbia.edu/studentguide/research/academic-integrity-and-responsible-conduct-research>, and all students are expected to be familiar with and abide by them.

## **Overview of Weekly Readings**

### **1. Introduction (Sep 2)**

#### *Non-required Readings:*

Goody, Jack. 2012. *The Theft of History*. Cambridge University Press.

Kuhn, Thomas, 1962. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. University of Chicago Press.

Dilling, Matthias and Félix Krawatzek. 2024. “The Populist Radical Right as Memory Entrepreneur? The Prominence, Sentiment, and Interpretations of History in the German Parliament.” *British Journal of Political Science* 54.4 (2024): 1296-1317.

Ramos-Toro, Diego and Elsa Voytas. 2025. “Historical Narratives and Political Behavior in the US.” Working paper.

Conley, Timothy G., and Morgan Kelly. 2025. “The standard errors of persistence.” *Journal of International Economics* 153: 104027.

### **2. A Brief History of the State (Sep 9)**

Olson, Mancur. 1993. “Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development.” *American Political Science Review* 87 (03): 567-576.

Tilly, Charles. 1985. “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime” in Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, *Bringing the State Back In*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 169-191.

Besley, Tim and Torsten Persson. 2009. “The origins of state capacity: Property rights, taxation, and politics.” *American economic review*, 99(4), 1218-44.

Scott, James C. 2017. *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*. Yale University Press. Chapter 1 and 4.

#### *Additional readings*

Spence, Jonathan D. 1990. *The Search for Modern China*. WW Norton & Company.

Merriman, John. 2009. *A History of Modern Europe: from the Renaissance to the Present*. WW Norton & Company.

Acemoglu, D., De Feo, G., & De Luca, G. D. 2020. Weak states: Causes and consequences of the Sicilian Mafia. *The Review of Economic Studies*, 87(2), 537-581.

## ----- Part 2: Data and Methods

### 3. Text (Sep 16)

Ash, Elliott, and Stephen Hansen. 2023. "Text algorithms in economics." *Annual Review of Economics* 15.1: 659-688.

Dell, Melissa. 2025. "Deep learning for economists." *Journal of Economic Literature* 63.1: 5-58.

Ash, Elliot, Stephen Hansen, and Yabra Muvdi. 2024. "Large Language Models in Economics." CEPR Discussion Paper 19479.

### 4. Images (Sep 23)

Dosovitskiy, Alexey, et al. 2020. "An image is worth 16x16 words: Transformers for image recognition at scale." arXiv:2010.11929.

Heblich, Stephan, Clément Gorin and Yanos Zylberberg. 2025. "State of the Art: Economic Development Through the Lens of Paintings". Working paper.

Voth, Hans-Joachim; Yanagizawa-Drott, David. 2024. "Image(s)." CEPR Discussion Papers 19219.

### 5. Networks (Sep 30)

De Paula, Áureo. 2020. "Econometric models of network formation." *Annual Review of Economics* 12.1: 775-799.

Wang, Yuhua. 2022. "Blood is thicker than water: Elite kinship networks and state building in imperial China." *American Political Science Review* 116.3: 896-910.

Padgett, John F., and Christopher K. Ansell. 1993. "Robust Action and the Rise of the Medici, 1400-1434." *American journal of sociology* 98.6: 1259-1319.

## *Additional Readings*

Ferguson, Niall. 2018. *The Square and Tower*. Penguin Books, pages 30-117.

## 6. Data in data-poor settings (Oct 7)

*Only meant to be skimmed:*

Brian Beach, and Walker Hanlon, 2023. “Historical newspaper data: A researcher’s guide.”

Eggers and Spirling. “Electoral Security as a Determinant of Legislator Activity, 1832–1918: New Data and Methods for Analyzing British Political Development.”

Carlson, Jacob, Tom Bryan, and Melissa Dell. 2024. “Efficient OCR for Building a Diverse Digital History.” *ACL*.

Abhishek Arora, Emily Silcock, Leander Heldring, Melissa Dell. 2025. “Contrastive Entity Coreference and Disambiguation for Historical Texts.” *Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing*.

(for context) Michalopoulos, Stelios, and Elias Papaioannou. "Pre-colonial ethnic institutions and contemporary African development." *Econometrica* 81.1 (2013): 113-152.

Huber, John and Laura Mayoral. 2024. “Economic Development in Pixels: The Limitations of Nightlights and New Spatially Disaggregated Measures of Consumption and Poverty.” Working paper.

Paine, Jack, Xiaoyan Qiu, and Joan Ricart-Huguet. 2025. “Endogenous colonial borders: Precolonial states and geography in the partition of Africa.” *American Political Science Review* 119: 1-20.

## ----- Part 3: Institutions and Culture

## 7. Parliaments (Oct 14)

North, Douglass C., and Barry R. Weingast. 1989. “Constitutions and Commitment: The Evolution of Institutions Governing Public Choice in Seventeenth-Century England.” *Journal of Economic History* 49(4): 803-832.

Van Zanden, Jan Luiten, Eltjo Buringh, and Maarten Bosker. 2012. “The rise and decline of European parliaments, 1188–1789.” *The Economic History Review* 65(3): 835-861.

Gentzkow, Matthew, Jesse M. Shapiro, and Matt Taddy. 2019. “Measuring group differences in high-dimensional choices: method and application to congressional speech.” *Econometrica* 87.4: 1307-1340.

Spirling, Arthur. 2016. "Democratization And Linguistic Complexity: The Effect Of Franchise Extension On Parliamentary Discourse, 1832—1915." *Journal of Politics*, 78(1): 120--136.

## **8. Democracy (Oct 21)**

Acemoglu, Daron, and James A. Robinson. 2006. *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [chapters 2-3]

Boix, Carles. 2003. A Theory of Political Transitions. In *Democracy and Redistribution*. Cambridge University Press.

Ansell, B., & Samuels, D. 2010. "Inequality and democratization: A contractarian approach." *Comparative Political Studies*, 43(12), 1543-1574.

Aidt, Toke S., and Raphaël Franck. 2019. "What motivates an oligarchic elite to democratize? Evidence from the roll call vote on the great reform act of 1832." *The Journal of Economic History* 79.3: 773-825.

## **9. Religion (Oct 28)**

Chaney, Eric. 2013. "Revolt on the Nile: Economic shocks, religion, and political power." *Econometrica* 81.5: 2033-2053.

Valencia, Felipe. 2019. "The Mission: Economic Persistence, Human Capital Transmission and Culture in South America." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 134(1):507-556.

Becker, Sascha O., and Ludger Woessmann. 2009. "Was Weber wrong? A human capital theory of Protestant economic history." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 124(2): 531-596.

Becker, Sascha O., Yuan Hsiao, Steven Pfaff, and Jared Rubin. 2020. "Multiplex Network Ties and the Spatial Diffusion of Radical Innovations: Martin Luther's Leadership in the Early Reformation." *American Sociological Review* 85(5): 857-894.

## **10. Culture (Nov 11)**

Nunn, N. and Wantchekon, V. 2011, "The Slave Trade and the Origins of Mistrust in Africa", *American Economic Review*, 101 (7): 3221-3252.

Spolaore, E and Wacziarg, R. 2009. “The Diffusion of Development,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 124.2: 469–529.

Michalopoulos, Stelios, and Melanie Meng Xue. 2021. “Folklore.” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 136.4: 1993-2046.

Ash, Elliott and Melanie Meng Xue. 2025. “British Industrialization and Cultural Change: Evidence from the Use of Proverbs”. Working paper.

## **11. Nationalism; Civil and Ethnic Conflict (Nov 18)**

Boix, Carles. 2024. “The Historical Political Economy of Nationalism”, in Jeffery A. Jenkins, and Jared Rubin (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Historical Political Economy*.

Jha, Saumitra. 2013. “Trade, Institutions, and Ethnic Tolerance: Evidence from South Asia”. *American Political Science Review*. 107(4):806-832.

Jha, Saumitra and Steven Wilkinson. 2012. “Does Combat Experience Foster Organizational Skill? Evidence from Ethnic Cleansing during the Partition of South Asia”. *American Political Science Review*. 106(4):883-907.

## **12. Science (Nov 25)**

Romer, Paul M. 1990. “Endogenous Technological Change.” *Journal of Political Economy* 98(5): S71-S102.

Cheng, Cheng, David Stasavage, and Yuhua Wang. 2025. “The Written Word and the Development of the State in China and Europe.” Working paper.

Cantoni, Davide, and Noam Yuchtman. 2014. “Medieval universities, legal institutions, and the commercial revolution.” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 129.2: 823-887.

Hallmann, Carl, W. Walker Hanlon, and Lukas Rosenberger. 2022. “Why Britain? The Right Place (in the Technology Space) at the Right Time.” Working paper.

Chaney, Eric. 2016. “Religion and the rise and fall of Islamic science.” Working paper.

Juhász, Reka, Mara Squicciarini and N. Voigtländer. 2024. “Technology Adoption and Productivity Growth: Evidence from Industrialisation in France” *Journal of Political Economy*, 132(10): 3215-3259.

### **13. Student Presentations (Dec 2)**