

PLST 315: AUTHORITARIAN CONSTITUTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC DICTATORSHIPS (Prof. Caldwell)

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THE PROBLEM:

Contemporary authoritarian regimes cloak their power in constitutions promising democracy and the rule of law, while seeking the ability to exercise arbitrary power and marginalize their internal enemies (while not necessarily eliminating them). How do potential autocrats emerge and remain in “liberal” political systems? Are authoritarianism and democracy at odd with each other? And what relevance do these questions have for contemporary US democracy?

THE PROCESS

1. First, we developed the basic concepts necessary for the analysis on the basis of leading theorists’ work: populism, constitutionalism and rule of law, democracy, presidentialism and authoritarianism, and the so-called “frankenstate” that tweaks individual rules themselves consistent with constitutional democracy to enable arbitrary rule
2. Second, we divided into groups to research specific cases. The groups opted for four very different kinds of authoritarian systems claiming a foundation in the rule of law: China’s state-socialism under Xi, Egypt’s military rule under al-Sisi, Russia’s “managed democracy” under Putin, and the attempt made to alter US democracy in an authoritarian direction under Trump.
3. Third, each group member produced a research paper on a specific aspect of the particular case.
4. Fourth, each group brought their research together in the form of a research poster.

THE FINDINGS

1. By stitching individually democratic constitutional components together, modern day authoritarian regimes create “frankenstates,” which are “democratic dictatorships” that allow autocrats to consolidate power.
2. Authoritarianism and democracy are not mutually exclusive, and a shift towards “democracy” can be used to justify a concurrent shift towards authoritarianism based on the rejection of supposedly less democratic, “liberal” forms of government that prioritize pluralism and parliamentarianism.
3. In framing the opposition as archaic and conservative, modern authoritarian brazenly institute and justify anti-democratic reforms under the façade of modernization (secularism, market economies, greater efficiency). They claim that only their ideology can deliver the people to this future, thereby justifying repression and legal/constitutional change.
4. The modern US has seen devolution towards a “frankenstate” fueled by abuse of electoral institutions. Politically, this trend is driven by populism, which has elements of economic, racial and historical nostalgia.

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