

Course concept „Economic Aspects of Political Institutions: The Narrow Corridor to Liberty“ Winter 2020/21

This version: September 2020

The course is built on and around the book “The Narrow Corridor to Liberty—States, Societies and the Fate of Liberty” by Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson. The key idea is to read, write about and discuss the ideas in the book and to—hopefully—learn something interesting and relevant, and—maybe—even enjoy our collaboration in doing so.

Please join the ILIAS [via this link](#). All the course activity is coordinated on ILIAS.

Learning goals: The goal is to enable you to...

- Elaborate on possible determinants of transition paths for political institutions
- Explain why liberty requires an ongoing struggle for power
- Provide suitable examples for constellations of power distribution between state and society
- Summarize the essential aspects of an argument effectively
- Analyze the applicability of an argument to a different context
- Express your thoughts effectively to your peers
- Assess a text of your peer (and your own) according to transparent criteria
- Provide useful feedback to your peers

Workload & cooperation:

- The course demands a *high degree of self-studying*:
 - o Reading Acemoglu & Robinson’s book (ca. 45 hours),
 - o reflecting on it, writing four essays on selected chapters (ca. 12 hours per essay),
 - o giving feedback to peers (ca. 4 hours per essay),
 - o revising one of the essays (ca. 8 hours)
- You have a certain degree of freedom to distribute your workload: choose four out of eight essay exercises (deadlines are [scheduled](#) below). I propose an exemplary [workload distribution](#).
- Interaction with other students: Peer-review process, weekly online sessions & forum.
- Interaction with lecturer: Weekly online sessions (Thu, 8-10 am CET), office hours & forum.
- Complete four essay exercises (see below) and prepare a revised version of one of your essays.
- Online meetings: When we meet for online discussions, *all of us will have read* the book up to the point currently scheduled, and some of the participants will have written an essay about the material to be discussed in the meeting. Literally “being on the same page” will provide a solid basis for fruitful discussions. Some deeper thoughts will enter the discussion via the essay exercises.

Essay exercises: Each essay exercise is composed of the following tasks:

- Essay: On 2-3 pages, (i) write a summary of the chapter under consideration, (ii) address a [specific question](#) with respect to that chapter, and (iii) bring up a thought of your own. Include a self-assessment of your essay (see the [criteria](#) below). The deadline for submission is two days before the online meeting in which we discuss the chapter.
- Review & assessment: At the deadline, ILIAS randomly assigns two essays for your peer review & assessment (along the [criteria](#) below). You have two weeks to complete them. The online meeting between the essay-writing and the review provides guidance for the reviewing task.

Study requirements:

- Select four from eight essay exercises (deadlines are [scheduled](#) below). You can complete more than four essay exercises and earn bonus points.
- Completing the four essay exercises is a *mandatory study requirement*. An essay exercise counts towards the study requirement only if it is complete (i.e., it contains essay, reviews & assessments).

Examination method & grading:

- You can earn up to 120 points (144 points including possible bonus points) in this course.
- You earn your points as follows:
 1. I will evaluate one of your essays (including your self-assessment) with 0-30 points.
 2. I will evaluate one of your peer reviews (including your assessment) with 0-30 points.
 3. I will award bonus points for completing more than four essay exercises (as for the mandatory essay exercises, only completed tasks count). Each additionally completed essay exercise earns 6 bonus points (which corresponds to 1 grade point, see below).
 4. I will evaluate the revised version of your chosen essay with 0-60 points.
- You can freely choose which of your essays you want to revise. I will pick one of your other essays for evaluation. Your earned points are summed up to a point score (0-144 points).

From point scores to **grades**:

Point score	< 54	< 60	< 66	< 72	< 78	< 84	< 90	< 96	< 102	< 108	< 114	114 +
grade	fail	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15

Registration for the examination: You have to register for both, the study requirement (“work sheets”) and the exam (“term paper”) before the deadline announced by the examination office. Register in the first examination period. There will be no re-sit.

Schedule:

Week	Content in online meeting/ in essay exercise	Essay due (TUE)	Review & assessment (TUE)	Online meeting (THU)
1	Introduction			05.11.
2	Concepts			12.11.
3	Ch 1	17.11.		19.11.
4	Ch 2 &/or 3	24.11.		26.11.
5	Ch 4 &/or 5	01.12.	1.12.	03.12.
6	Ch 6 &/or 7	08.12.	08.12.	10.12.
7	Ch 8 &/or 9	15.12.	15.12.	17.12.
X-mas break				
8	“2 nd chance” Ch 1- Ch 9	12.01.	12.01.	14.01.
9	Ch 10 &/or 11	19.01.	19.01.	21.01.
10	Ch 12 &/or 13	26.01.	26.01.	28.01.
11	Ch 14 &/or 15	02.02.	02.02.	04.02.
12	Conclusion		09.02.	11.02.
13			16.02.	
14	Revised version of one essay (your choice)	28.02.		

Note: Each of your essays is supposed to focus on one chapter. For each essay exercise, you can submit only one essay, which rules out certain combinations, e.g. writing essays on Chapters 6 and 7. You are expected to be prepared to comment on your peers’ essays on any of the chapters for a chosen essay exercise. All deadlines are scheduled for 3 pm CET.

Tip for your workload distribution:

Start reading the book as soon as your time constraints allow you. While reading, bear in mind the specific questions to be addressed in your essays. Plan ahead which tasks you want to complete at which point in time (and reserve explicit slots for your work in your calendar!); try to stay 4-6 days ahead of the deadlines. It is highly recommended to include one of the early tasks. The earlier you start working, the better you can cope with possible shocks to your time budget. Your early participation will also help identify any unclarities about the task.

Exemplary workload distribution: Let's assume that you choose the essay exercises on Chapters 1, 2, 7 and 8, and that you decide to revise your work on Chapter 7.

WEEK														
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	
CHAPTER	1	Time to read & write		Essay due on 17.11.		Time to review; Reviews due on 1.12.								
	2	Time to read & write			Essay due on 24.11.		Time to review; Reviews due on 8.12.							
	3	Time to read												
	4	Time to read												
	5	Time to read												
	6	Time to read												
	7	Time to read & write					Essay due on 8.12.		Time to review; Reviews due on 12.01.		Time to revise your essay			
	8	Time to read & write						Essay due on 15.12.		Time to review; Reviews due on 19.01.				
	9	Time to read												
	10	Time to read												
	11	Time to read												
	12	Time to read												
	13	Time to read												
	14	Time to read												
	15	Time to read												

Possible grading in this example:

55 points for your revised essay on Chapter 7

+ 25 points for your original essay on, say, Chapter 8

+ 25 points for a review and assessment of a peers' work

+ 0 points (bonus)

105 points Total point score

13 points Your grade

Note: Upon request, I can start your evaluation as soon as you submitted your revised essay (e.g., if you are an exchange student who needs the grade before a specific deadline).

Technical organization of the tasks:

- You submit all your essays in the "Essay exercises"-Tool on ILIAS before the respective deadline (see [schedule](#)). You can revise your submission any time before the deadline.
- At the deadline, ILIAS allocates your essay to two peers for review and assessment, and assigns two essays to you for review and assessment. You access the task via the same ILIAS-Tool. You

have to submit your review and assessment before the deadline. Please use the text fields for your comments and assessments. Additionally, you can upload a file (optional).

- There is one date reserved for a "2nd chance". You have a second chance to submit an essay which you could not complete before its deadline, or a second chance to complete an essay exercise for which you did not provide your reviews in time (to complete the exercise, you have to submit your essay again). Apart from this 2nd chance, submissions of essays or reviews after the deadlines are not possible. Plan ahead, and include a time buffer in case you face technical difficulties at the time of the submission.
- All files must be submitted as .pdf, as this format causes the least trouble, and everybody should be able to process them. Please do not open any files uploaded in a different format, and bring the presence of such files to my attention.

Criteria for the evaluation of the essays (likewise, guide for writing the essays):

	Needs continued development (0-1 point)	Good (2 points)	Exemplary (3 points)
Descriptive topic introduction	No introduction provided.	Introductory sentence.	Concise sentence that introduces the topic.
Guiding questions/ structure	The planned thread of the essay needs to be more visible for the reader.	The planned structure of the essay is visible to the reader; the main topic has been stated.	Topic has been broken down to a thread of sub-topics; these are clearly articulated, aligned to the methods used and well structured. The reader is guided through the essay.
Number of relevant facts/information	No relevant aspects are mentioned.	Some relevant aspects are mentioned.	All the relevant aspects are mentioned.
Content of relevant facts/information	Relevant facts need to be better displayed.	Most facts are correctly displayed.	All facts are correctly displayed and well presented.
Relevance (ink-to-info-ratio)	Redundancies and irrelevant aspects.	All aspects are (at least remotely) relevant, few redundancies.	Clear focus on the relevant aspects, no redundancies.
Link between facts; line of argumentation; persuasiveness	Connection between the mentioned aspects needs to be made more explicit and/or explained more clearly. The line of argumentation needs more structure; a clear goal of the essay is missing.	All the aspects are adequately linked. The line of argumentation is adequately presented.	Facts, methods and the steps of the argument are appropriately linked. How this connection provides to answering the question is clearly articulated. The line of argument is convincing and results are presented in a clear and persuasive way.
Findings	Findings are stated but lack depth / critical insight and do not adequately address others' points of view.	Findings are derived from the arguments and take into account complexities of issue. Limitations are acknowledged.	Findings are developed from methods, imaginative, taking into account complexities of issue. The limitations of findings are acknowledged and recommendations are made regarding further investigation. Different points of view are synthesized within findings.

Referencing	Own ideas are not separated from adopted ideas. Referencing is incomplete.	Own ideas are indicated as such. Sources are most of the time identifiable.	Own ideas as well as originators of adopted ideas are always clearly identifiable. It is easy to verify the stated facts from the source.
Concluding sentence	No sentence.	There is a summarizing sentence.	There is a concise sentence that sums up the thread.
Spelling and grammar	There are many spelling or grammar mistakes.	There are few spelling and grammar mistakes.	Spelling and grammar are correct; sentences end in the same time and number as they start.

Remarks on the criteria:

- I will use the criteria in the table above for the evaluation of your essays, with roughly equal weight on each of them. The highlighted profile indicates the minimum requirement to consider the essay worthy a “pass” grade.
- Please provide specific feedback to your peers for each of the criteria, helping your fellows to improve their essays. E.g. regarding “Concluding sentence”: “Your conclusion only repeats the argument from the last paragraph. I suggest to point out the tension between...”

Assessment:

- Please assess your peers’ essays along the criteria on a 0-3 scale and enter the sum of points across the criteria in the appropriate text field offered for the review process, i.e. a number between 0 and 30.
- Please also assess your own essay along each of the criteria on a 0-3 scale (included in template).

Specific aspects to be addressed in your essay:

Your essay on a chapter is supposed to summarize the key aspects of the chapter, to address the specific question(s) below, and to bring up a thought of your own (e.g., reflect on the relevance of the arguments for current events, relate the concepts to those found in other academics’ work, or bring up whatever you find interesting and think that other students of institutional economics will find interesting as well). The purpose of performing these tasks is to train your competence to prioritize essential information, and to effectively organize your arguments. In your review work, you train your competence to critically read a text, and to provide helpful suggestions for improving the text.

You find a template with the desirable formatting of the text on ILIAS.

Specific questions:

- *Chapter 1:* How do Acemoglu & Robinson conceptualize “liberty”? In how far does the concept coincide with your own notion of liberty?
- *Chapter 2:* Do you think that the sketched argument regarding the struggle of power between state and society (“Red Queen effect”) can be applied to the interaction between other groups as well, such as capitalists versus laborers? Elaborate.
- *Chapter 3:* How do you assess the interplay between norms and state power in the society in which you are currently living (or have been living in the recent past)?
- *Chapter 4:* In your view, is it possible for an outside observer to distinguish voluntary cooperation (e.g. out of altruistic motives) from “forced” cooperation (because of fear of punishment)?
- *Chapter 5:* What is “pristine state formation”? According to Acemoglu & Robinson, which conditions crucially determine which kind of Leviathan evolves?
- *Chapter 6:* Which role do Acemoglu & Robinson attribute to the bureaucracy for the emergence of a Shackled Leviathan? In your view, which role does it play in the established version of the Shackled Leviathan?
- *Chapter 7:* How do Acemoglu & Robinson describe the selection of public officials in China? Discuss possible advantages and disadvantages of the mechanisms.

- *Chapter 8:* According to Acemoglu & Robinson, what distinguishes India's cage of norms from that of the Tiv?
- *Chapter 9:* Which argumentation strategy do Acemoglu & Robinson use to illustrate the relevance of the distribution of power between state and society for the impact of structural factors on the emergence of liberty? Discuss.
- *Chapter 10:* What are the factors, according to Acemoglu & Robinson, that limit the possibilities to expand state capacity in America? Elaborate on the role of public-private partnerships.
- *Chapter 11:* Which roles do Acemoglu & Robinson's attribute to the relations to external players for the emergence of a Paper Leviathan? Elaborate.
- *Chapter 12:* Which role does religion play for the state's and the society's capacity? Contrast your view with that of Acemoglu & Robinson.
- *Chapter 13:* What is "Vereinsmeierei"? In your view, does it rather promote or hinder a country from reaching the corridor (or staying inside it)?
- *Chapter 14:* Which role do Acemoglu & Robinson attribute to trade unions?
- *Chapter 15:* Elaborate on one of Acemoglu & Robinson's policy proposals. Contrast their view with Hayek's (supposed) view on the proposal, and put your own view into perspective.

Guiding principles for the course concept:

- TIME FLEXIBILITY
 - o You are free to choose your individual task portfolio according to your time preferences and time constraints (and of course, your interest).
 - o You can smooth your workload considerably by starting to read the book—and even by starting to write your essays—right away.
 - o The time frame (two weeks between assignments and delivery deadline) for the feedback & assessment tasks is meant to balance between getting a timely feedback and granting the reviewers an appropriate time frame to schedule the writing of high-quality reviews. Please let me know if this choice does not strike the balance right.
 - o Tip: It is allowed to complete a task before the deadline. You can revise your work any time before the deadline. Try to stay ahead of deadlines to avoid stress and disappointment.
 - o Be aware of the two deadlines of your chosen essay exercise, the submission of the essay and providing feedback.
 - o In order to avoid overlap with other courses, we have to hold our online meetings in the time slot specified for our course, i.e. THU, 8-10am CET.
- CONSTRUCTIVE ALIGNMENT
 - o The general idea of constructive alignment is to bring the desired learning outcomes, the method of studying and the examination method into alignment.
 - o I would like your effort to be targeted at activities that are likely to be conducive to your learning and to our cooperation. This is why the study requirement and the examination method are closely linked. All your major efforts are (potentially) relevant for your grade.
 - o The peer-review process relies on everybody contributing to it. This is why a task will not count at all if it is not completed
 - o The online meetings are conceptualized in such a way that they are most conducive to our cooperation. We will be suitably prepared to engage in fruitful discussions, which will help us to perform the review and assessment tasks.
 - o Your diligence and/or your interest is rewarded: If you complete more than the four mandatory essay exercises, you receive bonus points.
- TRANSPARENCY
 - o The rules are supposed to be clear from the beginning, so that you can plan ahead. Hence, this comprehensive document...
 - o It is important to me that the same rules apply to everybody. We can debate the rules, but not individual exceptions.
 - o If something is wrong with the rules (e.g., the timing of a deadline), then please bring this to my attention asap.

Disclaimer: This document is meant to provide a basis for forming accurate expectations on part of the course participants. Though commitment to the rules is one of my priorities, adaptations to unforeseen contingencies may become necessary. If this happens, changes will be kept to a minimum, highlighted in the new version of the document, and the course participants will be informed via e-mail.

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