**GVPT429J**

**DIGITAL DICTATORSHIP**

Fall 2023

**Location:** [**Tawes Fine Arts Bldg.**](http://maps.umd.edu/map/index.html?Welcome=False&MapView=Detailed&LocationType=Building&LocationName=141) **(**TWS) 0234

**Time:** MW 2:00pm - 3:15pm

**Instructor:** Professor Fiona Shen-Bayh

**E-mail:** [shenbayh@umd.edu](mailto:shenbayh@umd.edu)

**Office:** Chincoteague Hall, 2117F

**Office Hours:** Mondays 3:30-4:30 pm (drop-in) and by appointment (please email me to schedule a meeting)

**Course description**

Dictatorship is one of the oldest forms of government in the world. In recent years, dictators have adapted to shifting political terrain, developing new ways of overcoming threats and maintaining control. This is particularly the case in the digital sphere where new technologies have profoundly altered how politics operate and peoples interact in both democracies and autocracies alike. Studying these changes is crucial for understanding how modern dictatorships work, but one of the main challenges to studying dictatorship is a lack of data on how autocratic regimes truly operate.

Recent advances in data science methods present new opportunities to study autocratic politics from a variety of digital platforms. Learning how to leverage these tools can provide insight into longstanding theories of autocratic power. This course considers *digital dictatorship* along two dimensions—as a strategy of autocratic survival (digital tools of control) and as a method of empirical inquiry (“big data” on autocratic politics).

Our learning goals are threefold:

1. to develop theoretical understanding of dictatorship from a political science perspective;
2. to leverage new methods of analyzing “big data” from autocratic contexts;
3. to write a research prospectus that synthesizes social science theory with data science methods.

**Course Texts**

* *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century,* by Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman
* *Text as Data: A New Framework for Machine Learning and the Social Sciences*, by Justin Grimmer, Margaret E. Roberts, and Brandon M. Stewart

**Assignments**

1. **Semester-long project:** The core assignment of this course is a semester-long project of your choosing. You have two possible tracks:
   1. **Question-driven research:** a prospectus that poses an original research question that relates to the main themes of *digital dictatorship,* as defined above; OR
   2. **Data-driven research:** a quantitative, computational text analysis of a dataset that I have chosen for you.

For either a) or b), your semester-long project will be composed of several smaller assignments that will ultimately culminate in a **final written submission** and **an oral/visual presentation** during the final week of classes. The purpose of these smaller assignments is to guide you through the research process and make the final output less daunting. More details about the project will be explained in the research project guide (available on Canvas).

**Important due dates for the semester-long project:**

* **Part 1:** October 2
* **Part 2:** October 18
* **Part 3:** November 20
* **Part 4:** December 13

1. **Readings:** You are expected to complete readings by the date on which they are assigned. Note that with the exception of book chapters, you will need to find the assigned articles yourself online. This task is purposeful: one of the main goals of this course is to learn how to do a literature review; looking up the readings on Google Scholar or the UMD library catalog will thus provide you with valuable research skills that will inform the development of your prospectus. Note that unless you look up an article from the UMD library site directly, you will need to activate your off-campus proxy server to download articles behind a subscription paywall (for instructions, see https://www.lib.umd.edu/find/online/off-campus).
2. **Participation:** You are expected to be ready to discuss the assigned readings, ask questions, and engage with your peers. However, given that we are still in the midst of a pandemic, there might be situations wherein you are unable to attend class. **Participation is not the same as attendance.** Thereare manyways to stay engaged, both in and out of the physical classroom. If you are unable to attend class for whatever reason, I am more than willing to work with you to find a strategy that helps you stay engaged, even if remotely.
3. **Discussion leaders**: Every week, we will have a discussion leader who sets the agenda for our meeting by presenting a brief summary of the readings as well as 3-5 questions to open the debate. **Send a written outline of your questions to me via email by the morning of the relevant discussion day**. You must serve as discussion leader **at least** **once**. You may sign up for additional slots to garner extra credit, or you may submit questions to me even if you did not sign up (credit will go towards your participation grade). Discussion leader signups will be determined on the first day of class. We will start off with no more than 2 discussion leaders per week, but we can adjust this as the semester goes on, particularly if you want to lead extra discussions. Please sign up [here](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1ipX0zofCCP5KDHX85L5HS5q2YVnqQUxARh1hQnzUbOw/edit?usp=sharing).

**Data Science Applications**

I will be conducting several class-wide tutorials on text-as-data methods using Python. The goal here is to show you how to use such methods to analyze autocratic politics and leverage new sources of “big data” from these contexts.

Note: coding experience in R or Python is a pre-requisite of this course *if you opt to do the data-driven research project*. I will not be teaching how to do basic programming in R or Python so if you are doing original analysis for your semester-long project, prior coding experience is assumed. If you need a refresher, I recommend checking out [**https://sicss.io/overview**](https://sicss.io/overview)**.**

However, even if you opt to do the question-driven research project and are not planning on doing original analysis, you may still design a project that explains how you might use these text-as-data methods to address your research question empirically.

**Attendance**

Except for reasonable cause, you are expected to be present at all regularly scheduled class meetings. It is your responsibility to notify me in advance of your absence, to the extent possible.

**Grade Assessment**

1. **Semester-long Project**

Intro and research question 10%

Literature review 20%

Theory and hypotheses 20%

Research design 20%

Final Presentation 10%

1. **Participation**

In-class engagement 10%

Discussion leader (2x) 10%

**Grade Scale**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| A | 94-100 |
| A - | 90-93 |
| B + | 87-89 |
| B | 84-86 |
| B - | 80-83 |
| C + | 77-79 |
| C | 74-76 |
| C - | 70-73 |
| D + | 67-69 |
| D | 64-66 |
| D - | 61-63 |
| F | <61 |

**Office Hours**

Drop-in office hours will be on Mondays 3:30-4:30 p.m. in my office. If you cannot meet during this time due to scheduling conflicts, I am happy to make alternative arrangements – please confirm over email to make sure this appointment is written down. When I schedule appointments, I prioritize students who cannot attend my regular office hours due to **immovable conflicts**: i.e. class or extracurricular activities. Unless you fall into this category, I request that you respect this policy by trying to make use of my regularly scheduled office hours before asking for an alternative meeting time.

**UMD Policies and Resources**

It is our shared responsibility to know and abide by the University of Maryland’s policies that relate to all courses, which include topics like:

* Academic integrity
* Student and instructor conduct
* Accessibility and accommodations
* Attendance and excused absences
* Grades and appeals
* Copyright and intellectual property

Please visit [www.ugst.umd.edu/courserelatedpolicies.html](http://www.ugst.umd.edu/courserelatedpolicies.html) for the Office of Undergraduate Studies’ full list of campus-wide policies and follow up with me if you have questions.

**Academic Integrity**

For this course, some of your assignments will be collected via Turnitin on our course ELMS page. I have chosen to use this tool because it can help you improve your scholarly writing and help me verify the integrity of student work.  For information about Turnitin, how it works, and the feedback reports you may have access to, visit [Turnitin Originality Checker for Students](https://umd.service-now.com/itsc?id=kb_article&sys_id=c0116d8f0f7ef2007f232ca8b1050e63).

The University's Code of Academic Integrity is designed to ensure that the principles of academic honesty and integrity are upheld. In accordance with this code, the University of Maryland does not tolerate academic dishonesty. Please ensure that you fully understand this code and its implications because all acts of academic dishonesty will be dealt with in accordance with the provisions of this code. All students are expected to adhere to this Code. It is your responsibility to read it and know what it says, so you can start your professional life on the right path. As future professionals, your commitment to high ethical standards and honesty begins with your time at the University of Maryland.

It is important to note that course assistance websites, such as CourseHero, or AI generated content are not permitted sources. Material taken or copied from these sites can be deemed unauthorized material and a violation of academic integrity. These sites offer information that might be inaccurate or biased and most importantly, relying on restricted sources will hamper your learning process, particularly the critical thinking steps necessary for college-level assignments.

Finally, on each assignment you must write out and sign the following pledge:  *"I pledge on my honor that I have not given or received any unauthorized assistance on this exam/assignment."*

**UMD Accessibility and Disability Services**

The University of Maryland is committed to creating and maintaining a welcoming and inclusive educational, working, and living environment for people of all abilities. The University of Maryland is also committed to the principle that no qualified individual with a disability shall, on the basis of disability, be excluded from participation in or be denied the benefits of the services, programs, or activities of the University, or be subjected to discrimination. The [**Accessibility & Disability Service (ADS)**](https://www.counseling.umd.edu/ads/) provides reasonable accommodations to qualified individuals to provide equal access to services, programs and activities. ADS cannot assist retroactively, so it is generally best to request accommodations several weeks before the semester begins or as soon as a disability becomes known. Any student who needs accommodations should contact me as soon as possible so that I have sufficient time to make arrangements.

For assistance in obtaining an accommodation, contact Accessibility and Disability Service at 301-314-7682, or email them at [**adsfrontdesk@umd.edu**](mailto:adsfrontdesk@umd.edu). Information about [**sharing your accommodations with instructors**, **note taking assistance**](https://www.counseling.umd.edu/ads/currentads/) and more is available from the [**Counseling Center**](http://counseling.umd.edu/ads/).

**Student Resources and Services**

Taking personal responsibility for your own learning means acknowledging when your performance does not match your goals and doing something about it. I hope you will come talk to me so that I can help you find the right approach to success in this course, and I encourage you to visit [**UMD’s Student Academic Support Services website**](http://tutoring.umd.edu) to learn more about the wide range of campus resources available to you.

In particular, everyone can use some help sharpening their communication skills (and improving their grade) by visiting [**UMD’s Writing Center**](http://www.english.umd.edu/academics/writingcenter/schedule) and schedule an appointment with the campus Writing Center.

There are a wide range of resources to support you with whatever you might need ([**UMD’s Student Resources and Services website**](https://sph.umd.edu/content/student-resources-and-services) may help). If you feel it would be helpful to have someone to talk to, visit [**UMD’s Counseling Center**](https://www.counseling.umd.edu/) or [**one of the many other mental health resources on campus**](https://tltc.umd.edu/instructors/teaching-topics/supporting-whole-student).

**Week 1: Introduction**

**8/28: Introductions and overview**

**8/30: No class**

**Week 2: Defining Dictatorship**

**9/4: Labor day**

**9/6: What is digital dictatorship?**

1. Kendall-Taylor, A., Frantz, E., & Wright, J. (2020). The digital dictators: How technology strengthens autocracy. *Foreign Affairs*, 99(2), 103-115.
2. *Spin Dictators*, Chapter 1: “Fear and Spin”
3. Przeworski, Adam, Models of Authoritarian Regimes: A Critique (February 13, 2022). Available at: [http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4033720](https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4033720)

*Questions to keep in mind: based on these readings, what is the most generic definition of autocracy you can come up with? Does “digital” dictatorship seem to refer to something that is fundamentally different to dictatorships of eras past? Or are there more commonalities than differences? What kinds of data do these authors refer to? Does this data help us answer new + old questions?*

**Week 3: Defining Repression**

**9/11: Physical Violence**

1. *Spin Dictators*, Chapter 2: “Discipline, but Don’t Punish”
2. [Recording repression: Identifying physical integrity rights allegations in annual country human rights reports](http://cfariss.com/documents/CordellClayFarissWoodWright2022ISQ.pdf), Rebecca Cordell, K. Chad Clay, Christopher J. Fariss, Reed M. Wood, and Thorin Wright, *International Studies Quarterly* (June 2022)

**9/13: Digital Violence**

1. Gunitsky, S. (2015). Corrupting the Cyber-Commons: Social Media as a Tool of Autocratic Stability. *Perspectives on Politics*, 13(1), 42-54. doi:10.1017/S1537592714003120
2. Pan, J., & Siegel, A. (2020). How Saudi Crackdowns Fail to Silence Online Dissent. *American Political Science Review,* *114*(1), 109-125. doi:10.1017/S0003055419000650

*Questions to keep in mind: What value do social media data provide for the study of dictatorship? What are the potential biases of these data– how much (or little) information do you think we can glean about dictatorship from these sources?*

**Week 4: Analyzing the Dictator’s Texts, Part 1**

**9/18: Autocratic Texts**

1. Lisa Blaydes, Justin Grimmer, and Alison McQueen. (2018). Mirrors for Princes and Sultans: Advice on the Art of Governance in the Medieval Christian and Islamic Worlds. *The Journal of Politics,* 80(4), 1150-1167.
2. *Text as Data* 
   1. Chapter 1: “Introduction”
   2. Chapter 2: “Social Science Research and Text Analysis”

*Questions to keep in mind: What value do written texts provide for the study of dictatorship? What are the drawbacks of written sources? What kinds of challenges do you think scholars face in collecting, processing, and analyzing such data?*

**9/20: Text-as-Data Workshop**

1. *Text as Data*
   1. Chapter 3: “Principles of Selection and Representation”
   2. Chapter 4: “Selecting Documents”
   3. Chapter 5: “Bag of Words”
2. Bring your laptop to class for text-as-data lab workshop

**Week 5: Analyzing the Dictator’s Texts, Part 2**

**9/25: Autocratic constitutions**

1. Ginsburg, T. and Alberto Simpser. *Constitutions in authoritarian regimes.* Chapter 1. <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1912&context=public_law_and_legal_theory>
2. *Text as Data*, Chapter 7: “The Vector Space Model and Similarity Metrics”
3. Bring your laptop to class for text-as-data lab workshop

**9/27: Text-as-Data Workshop**

1. “Is Everybody Doing … OK? Let’s Ask Social Media”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/12/style/self-care/social-media-.html>

Read about the Hedonometer: <https://hedonometer.org/about.html>

1. *Text as Data*
   1. Chapter 15: “Principles of Measurement”
   2. Chapter 16: “Word Counting”
2. Bring your laptop to class for text-as-data lab workshop

**Week 6: Controlling Information**

**10/2: Propaganda**

1. *Spin Dictators*, Chapter 3: “Postmodern Propaganda”
2. Rozenas, Arturas and Stukal, Denis, How Autocrats Manipulate Economic News: Evidence from Russia's State-Controlled Television (May 7, 2018). *Journal of Politics*.

Due: Project, Part 1 (submit to Canvas)

* Prospectus track: Intro and research question
* Investigation track: Intro and descriptive statistics

**10/4: Censorship**

1. *Spin Dictators*, Chapter 4: “Sensible Censorship”
2. Esberg, J. (2020). Censorship as Reward: Evidence from Pop Culture Censorship in Chile. *American Political Science Review,* *114*(3), 821-836. doi:10.1017/S000305542000026X

**Week 7: Supervised Methods**

**10/9: Text-as-Data Workshop**

1. *Text as Data*
   1. Chapter 17: “An Overview of Supervised Classification”
   2. Chapter 18: “Coding a Training Set”
2. Bring your laptop to class for text-as-data lab workshop

**10/11: Supervised methods in practice**

1. STUKAL, D., SANOVICH, S., BONNEAU, R., & TUCKER, J. (2022). Why Botter: How Pro-Government Bots Fight Opposition in Russia. *American Political Science Review,* *116*(3), 843-857. doi:10.1017/S0003055421001507
2. Arturas Rozenas and Denis Stukal, [How Autocrats Manipulate Economic News: Evidence from Russia’s State-Controlled Television](https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/703208), *The Journal of Politics* 2019 81:3, 982-996.

**Week 8: Sourcing Data from Dictatorships**

**10/16: Open-Source Data**

1. “Anatomy of a Russian 'Troll Factory' News Site” <https://www.bellingcat.com/resources/case-studies/2018/06/08/anatomy-russian-troll-factory-news-site/>
2. “FSB Team of Chemical Weapon Experts Implicated in Alexey Navalny Novichok Poisoning” <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2020/12/14/fsb-team-of-chemical-weapon-experts-implicated-in-alexey-navalny-novichok-poisoning/>
3. Read methodology behind the report: <https://www.bellingcat.com/resources/2020/12/14/navalny-fsb-methodology>

*Questions to consider: Bellingcat is an investigative news organization – what lessons can be drawn from this work for scholars, policymakers, and everyday citizens? What opportunities are afforded to journalists that might not be afforded to other kinds of researchers? And what opportunities or allowances are afforded to academics that might not be afforded to journalists?*

**10/18: NO CLASS**

Due: Project, Part 2 (submit to Canvas)

* Prospectus track: Literature Review
* Investigation track: Modeling Text

**Week 9: Dictators in Disguise**

**10/23: Dictators or Democrats?**

1. *Spin Dictators*, Chapter 5: “Democracy for Dictators”
2. Scheppele, K. L. (2018). Autocratic Legalism. *The University of Chicago Law Review*, *85*(2), 545–584. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26455917
3. “Philippines Election,” John Oliver,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtdVglihDok&ab_channel=LastWeekTonight>

*Questions to keep in mind: Why do autocrats attempt to mask themselves as democrats or appeal to the rule of law? For whom do you think these performances are intended? Do you think these tactics are effective at cultivating popular support? What does popular support for autocracy actually mean?*

**10/25: Dictators Beyond Borders**

1. *Spin Dictators*, Chapter 6: “Global Pillage”
2. Esberg, J., & Siegel, A. A. (2021, February 23). How Exile Shapes Online Opposition: Evidence from Venezuela. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/fau4z>

**Week 10: The New World Order?**

**10/30: Liberal Dictatorship**

1. *Spin Dictators*, Chapter 8: “The Future of Spin”
2. Graeme Wood, April 2022, “Absolute Power” https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/04/mohammed-bin-salman-saudi-arabia-palace-interview/622822/

**11/1: Living in the Age of Artificial Intelligence**

1. Martin Beraja, Andrew Kao, David Y. Yang & Noam Yuchtman. “AI-tocracy” <https://www.nber.org/papers/w29466>
2. “Don’t blame China for the rise of digital authoritarianism in Africa” <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2021/09/09/dont-blame-china-for-rise-of-digital-authoritarianism-africa-surveillance-capitalism/>

**Week 11: Detention in a Digital Age**

**11/6: Detention in a Digital Age**

1. *The New York Times*, “‘Absolutely No Mercy’: Leaked Files Expose How China Organized Mass Detentions of Muslims”

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/16/world/asia/china-xinjiang-documents.html>

1. We will watch the *Vice* documentary, “China’s Vanishing Muslims: Undercover In The Most Dystopian Place In The World”

**11/8: No class**

**Week 12: Ethics of Autocracy Research**

**11/13: Data**

1. *Bursztyn, Leonardo, Davide Cantoni, David Y. Yang, Noam Yuchtman, and Y. Jane Zhang. 2021. "Persistent Political Engagement: Social Interactions and the Dynamics of Protest Movements." American Economic Review: Insights, 3 (2): 233-50.* [*https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/aeri.20200261*](https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/aeri.20200261)
2. *New York Times,* “Hong Kong Police Arrest Students Over ‘Advocating Terrorism’”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/18/world/asia/hong-kong-university-arrests.html>

1. Check out the arrests data published by the Hong Kong government (download the csv file here): https://www.censtatd.gov.hk/en/EIndexbySubject.html?scode=400&pcode=D5600600#section1

*Questions: What are the ethical implications of doing research in autocratic contexts using big data versus experimental research methods? What are the trade-offs of either approach? How should we collect meaningful data in these contexts without endangering human subjects?*

**11/15: Flex Day**

**Week 13: Thanksgiving Break**

**11/20: NO CLASS**

Due: Project, Part 3 (submit to Canvas)

* Prospectus track: Theory and hypotheses
* Investigation track: Refining your model

**11/22: NO CLASS (THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY)**

**Week 14: Presentation Skills**

**11/27: How to give a presentation**

1. Edward Tufte, “The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint”
2. Ian Power, *The New Yorker*, “Absolute Powerpoint: Can a software package edit our thoughts?” <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2001/05/28/absolute-powerpoint>

**11/29: Prospectus Workshop**

1. Be ready to share a draft of **Parts I-III** of your prospectus with the rest of the class.

**Week 15: Final Presentations**

**12/4: No class**

**12/6, 12/11: In-class Presentations**

**Finals Week**

**12/13:** Due: Final Project, Part 4

* Prospectus track:
  + Revised Question + Literature Review
  + Revised Theory + Hypotheses
  + Research Design
* Investigation track:
  + Revised Descriptive Stats
  + Revised Models
  + Analysis and interpretation