

## Evaluation: STV1300 Spring 2022

Course-code: STV1300

Course title: STV1300 - Introduction to Comparative Politics

Language: English

### **Course convener's evaluation of the course:**

This course was thoroughly evaluated in 2021, after a major revision, based on a survey among students in addition to input from course contacts and all lecturers. The submitted evaluation report led to some changes the spring of 2022. We excluded a couple of non-compulsory topics (in light of course description) from the lecture series and the reading list to secure more time to core questions, and we made some changes to the reading list to replace a few chapters students and lecturers were less happy with. These changes worked out as planned.

Moreover, we further improved the learning tools we offered students in addition to lectures (13 lectures on campus and streaming in Zoom due to the pandemic). In sum, we also offered:

- Recording of all lectures (uploaded to the timetable with links in Canvas)
- Online student resources associated with the textbook
- Help to find partners for study groups ("colloquiums"): the digital assistant sent out a survey and created groups for those who needed help based on their language preferences etc. and created group rooms in Canvas for all groups (pre-existing and new ones).
- A list of study questions for each lecture topic, and an answer key for all questions towards the end of the teaching period
- Written advice on how to make a study group work efficiently
- Assistance by a study group buddy ("kollokviefadder") throughout the semester (a "Covid measure")
- Guidance on how to read and to write reading memos (in Canvas)
- Test questions (multiple choice) for assessment of progress (in Canvas, per lecture topic)
- Online class dictionary (English-Norwegian, Google doc, student-led)
- General advice on how to successfully complete a written exam (in Canvas)
- Facebook-group for students' informal contact created by course contacts.

To be back in the auditorium was amazing and gave new energy to the lectures. The number of students showing up in the lecture hall was lower than before Covid, and thus a disappointment, but most likely this was caused by "Covid habits" and the combined streaming and recording. Hopefully, the number will increase again next year without streaming and normal circumstances from the beginning.

Taken together we offered students more tools for learning than ever before in this class (i.e., since seminars were abolished many years ago). The combination of "study group buddies" and study questions made colloquium groups resemble seminars. Reports suggest that they worked well (see below).

All in all, the class seemed to work well. It is a challenge to secure high-quality teaching with 400-500 students, but we have improved the last few years and continue to think about how we can make such classes work as well as possible.

Having an assistant was very valuable and gives students easier access to the team of teachers. Moreover, this year also confirmed that providing detailed information about all aspects of the course and the exam in Canvas early on is appreciated and reduces the number of (identical) emails/Canvas questions during the semester.

### **Summary of feedback from student contact-point**

Five students volunteered to be course contacts. We appointed them all as we then got contacts from Political Science, BA, Political Science, Annual Unit, International Studies, Erasmus exchange, and the Philosophy, Politics and Economics, BA. They created a Facebook group for STV1300 as an informal platform for contact between students during the term.

We had a mid-term meeting where a majority showed up after having asked their fellow students for input. The feedback – on course content, lectures, readings, and study groups – was generally very positive.

Only one study group buddy was reported to not have done their job as expected at this point and there was some disagreement among students as to whether it is OK to ask questions during lectures instead of during breaks or after. The hybrid version made this more challenging than usual. Finally, the use of English as course language was, as the year before, a contested issue among Norwegian-speaking students. Some of them think a mandatory pol sci class should always be in Norwegian, whereas others appreciate the opportunity to learn and practice academic English and to include exchange students.

After the exam, the main take away was that the written home exam format (due to Covid) is not ideal as the added analytical component to short-answer questions easily lead to less (too little) time for the long-answer part even if the number of questions is reduced compared to a school exam. Moreover, some students were surprised that a significant part of the exam were based on the articles/chapters not the textbook. However, in these cases we were talking about key topics the textbook didn't cover, not original articles supplementing textbook chapters.

### **Suggestions for improvements:**

There is no need to make major changes, but a few things to consider are the following:

Interestingly only 194 out of the 441 registered in Canvas wanted to take part in study groups, according to our survey via Nettskjema. 166 responded they wanted help to establish a group, 28 responded they already had a study group (the result was 36 Canvas groups in sum). This figure (194) is close to the number usually attending lectures (pre-pandemic). Hence, many students seem to take this class without taking active part. There might be several reasons for this. A certain number simply try to improve their grade from last year (more than 60 students Spring 2021 were only registered for the exam), but lack of mandatory assignments, the use of lecture

recordings and the use of a traditional school exam as evaluation form are also possible explanations. Perhaps some sign up for the introductory classes on the top of other things (multiple other classes and paid work) to see how it goes. At least, the grade distribution suggests that some try to take the exam based on minimal preparation.

What can we learn from this? One possible conclusion is that we should consider to continuing offering support to study groups after Covid and include 1-2 mandatory assignment(s) for all:

1. Ideally, we should offer seminars as well as lectures, but the question is how well that will work given the number of (less committed) students. Moreover, it is also very labour intensive to offer seminars to such a high N.
2. Yet, one may (continue to) offer something similar, to those about 200 who are interested in more active participation on a voluntary basis: study questions, group activities and study group buddies (who come to some group sessions but not all). Probably, students on our own programs are overrepresented in this core and we may offer them higher quality.
3. Also, we should consider to including some compulsory activities during the teaching period to strengthen gradual, deeper learning for all (4-500). For example, one could use multiple choice questions (existing ones and new) for a qualification exercise securing that all students learn core concepts above a certain level before taking the exam.
4. To help the course convener prepare and make this work, the class would need a teaching assistant.

As for the establishment of study groups, our survey shows that it is not obvious that all students find study partners themselves in such a huge class at the BA-level. According to the digital assistant, it was time consuming to help, but she emphasized that we'll save a lot of time if we don't offer to create both physical and digital groups (just groups based on language preference), but above all if we refuse to do anything after the groups are established. Follow-up requests from individual students were what took most of the time. Many students simply forgot to sign up even though we reminded them many times. Others didn't like their group, some complained about being the only one active in the group, etc. A simple rule can be that we establish groups (in Canvas) for those interested according to Nettskjema and after that they must sort things out themselves. In this way, a teaching assistant can do something very helpful for the students in a few hours.

If one has a MC-qualification including questions from the entire curriculum to secure learning across the board with an emphasis on knowledge and comprehension, one could let the exam only consist of an essay where we emphasize deeper understanding and analytical skills, not mainly knowledge and comprehension of concepts. In this way, we will better cover all the learning outcomes than we do in the evaluation today.

A discussion point for next year is also how to best/better balance traditional lecture (monologue) and student involvement in the lecture hall based on Mentimeter, Kahoot, discussion in pairs etc. So far, lectures have differed, not very systematically, in this respect. To secure even more of the latter, one needs to do less of the former, and rely more on the main textbook (trust they can get less help from us to understand the concepts, theories etc.). Students seem to enjoy the lectures and they use slides and

recordings as basis for their work, but we also know that it is hard to concentrate when a person talks for 90 minutes. One of the course contacts missed the opportunity to discuss during the sessions, which is difficult when there several 100s students in a class, but something one could allow if we lecture less and do more in pairs, Mentimeter etc. If one opts for less monologue and more interaction across the board, one should communicate very clearly what this means to the students.