POLSCI 620S: American Politics

Spring 2026

Class: Thursdays 1:25-3:55, Gross Hall 111
Instructors and office hours:

- Jon Green (jon.green@duke.edu)
    - Gross Hall 294H
    - M/W 4-5, F 2-3, or by appointment
- John Aldrich (aldrich24@gmail.com)
    - Gross Hall 294G
    - By appointment

Course Description

Why does the United States have the set of governing institutions that it does, how do they work, and how do its citizens contribute to collective decisions? This course offers an "introduction" to questions concerning foundations, institutions, and behavior in US politics at the level of a graduate seminar. It is organized around intensive reading, unstructured discussion, and written engagement with foundational and cutting edge scholarship in American Political Institutions and American Political Behavior.

This is a graduate seminar developed primarily for PhD students in political science or related fields, though it is open to advanced undergraduates as well. Successful students will not only deepen their substantive understanding of US politics, they will develop their professional skills in the social sciences more broadly. This includes the ability to critically engage with scholarship, pose and refine research questions, identify data and methodological approaches that answer those questions, and communicate those answers both in writing and in person.

Evaluation

- Attendance and Preparation (10%)
    - Participation (5%)
        - Students are required to come to class prepared to discuss the material.
        - Everyone has different learning styles, and participation in discussion includes listening as well as speaking. You do not have to talk a lot for talking's sake in order to show that you are prepared for class. That said, we reserve the right to administer periodic reading quizzes and/or cold-call during discussions if the class as a whole is not prepared.
    - Discussion question (5%)
        - Every student is required to circulate one discussion question on Canvas by 10am on the day of class (to give everyone time to read each others' discussion questions before we meet).

        - Good discussion questions cannot be answered with a “yes” or “no.” Yes or no questions are almost always a “how,” “what,” or “why” away from being good discussion questions.
- “In conversation” leadership (10%)
    - The reading lists for some weeks have an extra set of articles listed as “in conversation.” These articles offer different answers to similar or in some cases identical research questions, putting them (sometimes directly) “in conversation” with one another. For these weeks, a subset of students will be assigned to read these articles and come to class prepared to explain this scholarly conversation to the rest of class (for whom these readings are optional). What are the stakes of this conversation? What are the different conclusions the authors come to, and how do they arrive at them? Is one side right and the other wrong, or are they both right about different things?
- Referee reports (30%)
    - Over the course of the semester, you will review three pieces of scholarship that you have been assigned to read as if you were involved in the peer review process. Each of these referee reports will be worth 10% of your final grade.
        - You may only write referee reports for empirical scholarship that either was or will be peer reviewed in practice. Refereeing book chapters is discouraged unless you’ve read the whole book.
    - You can choose the weeks in which you would like to submit referee reports, but you can only submit one in any given week.
    - Referee reports are due *before* the relevant class period.
- Final conference paper (50%)
    - Over the course of the semester, you will write a paper on a topic of your choosing (in consultation with us) that could be suitable for an academic conference. At the end of the semester, you will present this paper as you would at a conference.
        - For graduate students, our expectation is that you will write an **empirical paper**, though executing the empirical component is optional. You may instead write a **registered report**, which is an everything-but-the-results version of the paper. This includes descriptions of data, methods, and any hypotheses for analyses you would conduct – in sufficient detail that a reviewer would be able to evaluate the intellectual merits of your theory; the practical merits of your design (including its feasibility and whether it would credibly test your theory); and the overall contribution that a fully-executed version of your paper would make.
            - Graduate students are encouraged to use this assignment as an opportunity to make progress on their day-job research agendas, provided there is sufficient overlap with the course.
        - For undergraduates, our expectation is that you will write a **research synthesis** that builds on established scholarship to make an original argument regarding how we should understand some aspect of U.S. politics.

- This assignment carries multiple components:
    - Paper proposal (5%): Early in the semester, you will submit a short (200 words max) abstract and brief plan for what you intend to produce by the end of the semester.
    - Detailed outline (10%): Later in the semester, you will submit an outline that sketches your argument, hypotheses, and results in bullet point format. This will allow us to provide feedback at an intermediate stage and will hopefully make writing the actual paper easier.
    - Final paper (15%): The final paper must be between 6,000 and 10,000 words, and is due on the last day of class.
    - Conference presentation (20%): We will use the last day of class and our final exam period (if necessary) to hold a mini-conference. You will have twelve minutes to present, followed by three minutes of Q&A.

Course Schedule and Reading List

With the exception of Skowronek (1997), *The Politics Presidents Make*, which we ask that you rent, borrow, or purchase, all other course materials are posted on Canvas.

Foundations

- Week 1 (January 8): Introduction
    - Assorted advice for new/early stage PhD students

- Week 2 (January 15): Collective Action Problems and Democratic Norms
    - North and Weingast (1989): Constitutions and Commitment
    - Azari and Smith (2012): Unwritten Rules: Informal Institutions in Established Democracies
    - Helmke and Rath (2025): Defining and Measuring Democratic Norms

    Recommended:
        Benson (2024): Democracy and the Epistemic Problems of Political Polarization
    - Schickler (2025): What Donald Trump Has Taught Us About American Political Institutions

- Week 3 (January 22): Revolution/The Founding
    - Dougherty and Heckelman (2006): A Pivotal voter from a pivotal state: Roger Sherman at the Constitutional Convention
    - Napolio and Peterson (2021): Institutional Foundations of the American Revolution: Legislative Politics in Colonial North Carolina
    - Aldrich, Jillison, and Wilson (2022): Why Congress

    Recommended:

    - Ferling, John. *Adams vs. Jefferson: The tumultuous election of 1800*. Oxford University Press, 2004.
    - Adams, Jefferson, and the Turbulent Election of 1800: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UtMyVY0sLv8
    - Aldrich (2005): The Election of 1800

- Week 4 (January 29): Federalism
    - Riker (1964): *Federalism: Origins, Operation, and Significance* (Chapters 1-4,6)
    - Bailey (2005): Welfare and the Multifaceted Decision to Move
    - Rendleman and Rogowski (2024): Americans' Attitudes Toward Federalism

    Recommended:
    - Miller, Gary J. *Cities by contract: The politics of municipal incorporation*. MIT Press (1981).
    - Kogan, Lavertu, and Peskowitz (2018): Election Timing, Electorate Composition, and Policy Outcomes: Evidence from School Districts
    - Colvin and Jansa (2024): Athletic competition between the states: The rapid spread of Name, Image, Likeness laws and why it matters for understanding policy diffusion

- Week 5 (February 5): Civil Liberties/Civil Rights **(Paper abstracts due)**
    - Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley (1997): Media Framing of a Civil Liberties Conflict and Its Effect on Tolerance
    - Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen (2016): The Political Legacy of American Slavery
    - Eubank and Fresh (2022): Enfranchisement and Incarceration after the 1965 Voting Rights Act
    - Morris and Miller (Forthcoming): Did *Shelby County v. Holder* Increase the Racial Turnout Gap?

    Recommended:
    - Becoming Thurgood: https://www.pbs.org/video/becoming-thurgood-americas-social-architect-mssj3y/
    - Shepherd, Michael E., Adriane Fresh, Nick Eubank, and Joshua D. Clinton. "The politics of locating polling places: race and partisanship in North Carolina election administration, 2008–2016." *Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy* 20, no. 2 (2021): 155-177.
    - Clinton, Joshua D., Nick Eubank, Adriane Fresh, and Michael E. Shepherd. "Polling place changes and political participation: Evidence from North Carolina presidential elections, 2008–2016." *Political Science Research and Methods* 9, no. 4 (2021): 800-817.

    In conversation: Do voter ID laws suppress minority votes?

- Hajnal, Lajevardi, and Neilson (2017): Voter Identification Laws and the Suppression of Minority Votes
- Grimmer, et al (2018): Obstacles to Estimating Voter ID Laws' Effect on Turnout
- Hajnal, Kuk, and Lajevardi (2018): We All Agree: Strict Voter ID Laws Disproportionately Burden Minorities
- Grimmer and Yoder (2022): The durable differential deterrent effects of strict photo identification laws

Institutions

- Week 6 (February 12): Congress
  - Carmines and Stimson (1986): On the Structure and Sequence of Issue Evolution
  - Roberts and Smith (2003): Procedural Contexts, Party Strategy, and Conditional Party Voting in the U.S. House of Representatives
  - Binder (2015): The Dysfunctional Congress
  - Jacobson (2015): It's Nothing Personal: The Decline of the Incumbency Advantage in Congress
    - Related/optional: The moderation debate fiddles with 2% while democracy's dimensionality collapses: https://leedrutman.substack.com/p/the-moderation-debate-fiddles-with

    Recommended (US Congress):
    - Krehbiel (1991): *Pivotal Politics*
    - Lee (2016): *Insecure Majorities*
    - Galston (2025): What history tells us about the 2026 elections https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-history-tells-us-about-the-2026-midterm-elections/
    - Carson, et al reader:
      - Compromise and Consequence: The Impact of Institutions on American Representation (Davis and Finnochiaro)
      - Is the Legislature Broken? (Williamson and Windham)

    Recommended (Comparative Legislative Politics):
    - Martin and Vanberg (2020): Coalition government, legislative institutions, and public policy in parliamentary democracies
    - Golder (2006): Pre-electoral coalition formation in parliamentary democracies
    - Abramson, et al (2010): Comparing strategic voting under FPTP and PR

- Week 7 (February 19): Presidency
  - Skowronek (1997): The Politics Presidents Make (Chapters 1-3, 6,7)
  - Moe and Howell (1999): Unilateral Action and Presidential Power: A Theory
  - Drechsel (2024): Estimating the effects of political pressure on the Fed

Recommended (Political Economy):

- Olson, Mancur. "Dictatorship, democracy, and development." *American political science review* 87, no. 3 (1993): 567-576.
- Olson, Mancur, and Richard Zeckhauser. "An economic theory of alliances." *The review of economics and statistics* (1966): 266-279.
- What power does the president have over the federal bureaucracy?: https://hls.harvard.edu/today/what-power-does-the-president-have-over-the-federal-bureaucracy/ (for the next week, as well)

Recommended (Comparative Executive Politics):

- Linz, Juan. 1990. "The Perils of Presidentialism." *Journal of Democracy* 1(1): 51-69.
- Helms, Ludger. "Presidents and Prime Ministers: Then and Now." In *The Problem of Governing: Essays for Richard Rose*, pp. 97-116. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2023.
- Jones, George W. "The study of prime ministers: A framework for analysis." *West European Politics* 14, no. 2 (1991): 1-8.

- Week 8 (February 26): Bureaucracy
  - McCubbins and Schwartz (1984): Congressional Oversight Overlooked: Police Patrols vs. Fire Alarms
  - McCubbins, Noll, and Weingast (1987): Administrative Procedures as Instruments of Political Control
  - Acs and Coglianese (2023): Influence by Intimidation: Business Lobbying in the Regulatory Process
  - Napolio (2025): Executive Policymaking Coalitions, Veto Activation, and Collective Action Problems

- Week 9 (March 5): Courts **(Paper outlines due)**
  - Caldeira and Wright (1988): Organized Interests and Agenda Setting in the U.S. Supreme Court
  - Knight and Epstein (1996): On the Struggle for Judicial Supremacy
  - Lauderdale and Clark (2012): The Supreme Court's Many Median Justices
  - Hirsch, Kastellec, and Taboni (2025): Reviewing fast or slow: A theory of summary reversal in the judicial hierarchy

  In conversation: models of legal decisionmaking
  - Segal and Spaeth (1996): The Influence of *Stare Decisis* on the Votes of United States Supreme Court Justices
  - Bailey and Maltzman (2008): Does Legal Doctrine Matter? Unpacking Law and Policy Preferences on the US Supreme Court
  - Hollis-Brusky (2015): *Ideas with Consequences: The Federalist Society and the Conservative Counterrevolution*, Chapter 1

- Optional: The Federalist Society claims it's just a debating club https://www.programmablemutter.com/p/the-federalist-society-claims-its

Recommended:
- https://www.scotusblog.com/

- Spring break: March 6-15

Public
- Week 10 (March 19): Long Coalitions
  - Bawn (1999): Constructing 'Us': Ideology, Coalition Politics, and False Consciousness
    - Wan and Green: Political Pundits and the Maintenance of Ideological Coalitions (manuscript and response memo)
  - Blum and Cowburn (2024): How Local Factions Pressure Parties
  - Finkel, et al (2020): Political Sectarianism in America

  In conversation: what are political parties?
  - Aldrich (2010): *Why Parties? A Second Look* (Chapters 1-3,6)
  - Bawn, et al (2012): A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands, and Nominations in American Politics
  - McCarty and Schickler (2018): On the Theory of Parties

- Week 11 (March 26): Public Opinion
  - Converse (1964): The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics
  - Carmines and Stimson (1986): On the Structure and Sequence of Issue Evolution (Yes, this is repeated from the Congress week)
  - Zaller and Feldman (1992): A Simple Theory of the Survey Response: Answering Questions versus Revealing Preferences
  - Hetherington (1998): The Political Relevance of Political Trust
  - Groenendyk, et al (2023): How Norms Shape the Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics

  Recommended:
  Sartori (1969): Politics, Ideology, and Belief Systems

  In conversation: What is it like to be a moderate?
  - Fowler, et al (2023): Moderates
  - Broockman and Lauderdale (2025): "Moderates"
  - Fowler, et al. Assessing Moderation and Multidimensionality with Mixture Models: A Reply to Broockman and Lauderdale (i.e. ""Moderates"")
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- Week 12 (April 2): Elections

- Schattschneider (1960): *The Semisovereign People* Ch 1,4
- Green, et al (2022): Online Engagement with 2020 Election Misinformation and Turnout in the 2021 Georgia Runoff Election
- Hewitt, et al (2024): How Experiments Help Campaigns Persuade Voters
- Grimmer, Marble, and Tanigawa-Lau (2025): Measuring the Contribution of Voting Blocs to Election Outcomes

In conversation: the median voter theorem and its discontents

- Downs (1957), *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, Chapter 8
- Grofman (2004): Downs and Two Party Convergence
- Izzo (2023): Ideology for the Future
- "Conditional Party Government: Its Relationship to the Party in the Electorate and in Governance" (Aldrich and Rohde), Chris Karpowitz and Jeremy Pope, eds., *Reconsidering Parties and Partisanship* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press), forthcoming.

- Week 13 (April 9): The Modern Information Environment
  - Allen, Watts, and Rand (2024): Quantifying the impact of misinformation and vaccine-skeptical content on Facebook
  - Munger, Kevin. 2024. *The YouTube Apparatus*. Cambridge University Press, Elements Series in Politics and Communication.
    - Related/optional: In the belly of the MrBeast https://kevinmunger.substack.com/p/in-the-belly-of-the-mrbeast

  Recommended:
    - Hindman (2018): *The Internet Trap*
    - Forestal (2024): Social Media, Social Control, and the Politics of Public Shaming
    - Farrell, et al. 2025. "Large AI models are social and cultural technologies." *Science* 387(6739): 1153-1156

  In conversation: cyber-balkanization or lack thereof
    - Guess (2021): (Almost) Everything in Moderation: New Evidence on Americans' Online Media Diets
    - Green, et al (2025): Curation Bubbles

- Week 14 (April 16): Conference presentations (no assigned reading, **final papers due**)
- Final exam period (if necessary for conference presentations): May 2, 2-5pm

Course Policies

Attendance: You are expected to attend class and be prepared to engage with the course material (see the Evaluation section).

Deadlines: You are expected to turn assignments in on time. Requests to change deadlines must be submitted in writing with reasonable advance notice.

Deadlines for referee reports are flexible, but this flexibility can be a double-edged sword, as it is your responsibility to manage your time and you are not allowed to submit multiple referee reports in a single week. **Falling behind on referee reports without arranging an alternative schedule with us in advance will result in the loss of partial or full credit for each missing report, depending on how severely behind you are.**

Incompletes: Duke policies stipulate that incompletes should be limited to cases where a serious personal, family, or medical issue would prevent you from completing your coursework during the semester. Requests for incompletes will only be granted in these exceptional circumstances.

Class Discussions: When you enroll in this class, you become colleagues with everyone else who is enrolled in it. Colleagues frequently disagree, but they do so without being disagreeable. You are expected to engage with each others' views and perspectives respectfully both inside and outside of the classroom. Even (especially) when you disagree, it is essential to approach this disagreement amicably, with an assumption of good faith, because you are colleagues and not opponents.

Grading: If you feel that a grade you receive on an assignment does not reflect the quality of the work you submitted, you may email to request clarification on two conditions:

- The email includes substantive engagement with the feedback you received.
- The email is sent between one and seven days after the grade was issued
    - As in, we will not reconsider grades either less than a day or more than a week after they are issued.

Writing: Written work should be proofread for spelling and grammar, arguments should be supported by scholarly evidence, and all references *must* be appropriately cited. We do not have strong preferences regarding which citation format you use, as long as you pick one and use it consistently. Graduate students are strongly encouraged to write in Latex/Overleaf and manage citations with a .bib file. If writing in Word/Google Docs, you are strongly encouraged to use a citation manager such as Zotero (which is free and easily integrates with these programs).

Academic Honesty: Academic dishonesty is when you present someone else's ideas as your own. All ideas and claims included in written work that are not either common knowledge or your own should be appropriately cited.

You may use large language models such as ChatGPT in this class for tasks in which we would otherwise expect a human to behave like a machine. This may include copyediting, rephrasing, or beginning a search for external sources (provided that you follow external links to those sources and actually read them). You may not use large language models in an attempt to get a

machine to behave like a human. Presenting model-generated text as your own intellectual labor is, in the scholarly and philosophical sense of the term, bullshit, and will be considered academic dishonesty.

Any student who appears to violate Duke's Academic Dishonesty Policy may be referred to the Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards. Academic dishonesty in any aspect of course work will result in failure of the course.