

# American Political Institutions

POLI 251

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## Course Description

This course will introduce you to central themes in American political institutions. It is designed to train you to read and critically evaluate scholarship in political science—and in the social sciences more broadly. My goal is not that we “cover” everything (an impossible task), but that you develop the habits of a careful, thoughtful consumer of academic literature.

The course is deliberately structured around a smaller set of readings than is typical. Each week we’ll pair a “classic” book or article—works you will see and cite constantly if you publish in American institutions—with a modern take on that classic published in a top journal, almost all since 2020. The classics provide the foundation; the new works show the kind of scholarship you should aim to produce.

The limited reading load is intentional: I am striving for depth, not breadth. Throughout your career, you will have plenty of opportunities to dive into subfields that interest you, and I will point you to additional syllabi if you would like starting places (see e.g., [Pamela Ban](#) and [David Miller](#)). Here, the expectation is that you wrestle with these specific works at a level of depth that prepares you not just for exams, but for research and publishing.

## Required Materials

Journal articles are all freely available for download as long as you are connected to a UCSD network or if you use the VPN off campus. Every book I have assigned is available through the UCSD library. If you are having trouble getting a hold of a book, reach out to me and I will loan you my copy. Save your graduate stipend and buy books when you have a job.

# Assignments

Your grade in this course will be based on three components: participation and discussion (30%), weekly reading outlines (30%), and detailed journal reviews (40%). Each is designed to reinforce the others. The notes and reviews are scaffolding to prepare you for deeper seminar discussions and to build habits you will carry into your academic career.

## Participation and discussion (30%)

The success of this class depends on active, engaged conversation. You are expected to do the readings carefully, come prepared to discuss, and contribute to seminar in a thoughtful and constructive way. I will assess your contributions holistically at the end of the quarter. Regular preparation, attendance, and participation in class will earn you full points.

More than one absence (barring anything major or serious) will reduce your participation grade; if you must miss class, please let me know in advance.

## Weekly reading notes (30%)

For each assigned reading, you must submit a completed [reading notes worksheet](#) before class (via Canvas). This exercise is meant to help you clarify a book or article's argument, methods, and contribution in your own words. It also gives us a common foundation for discussion and ensures we spend class time on the most interesting questions rather than summarizing.

If you are submitting a journal review on a given week (see below), you do not need to submit reading notes for the "modern take" article—but you do need to submit reading notes for the classic.

## Detailed journal reviews (2 per student, 20% each)

Each student will complete two detailed journal reviews of a "modern take" article (articles to be chosen/assigned on the first day of class), due on Weeks 3-10.

Reviews should be written in the style of a referee memo: begin with a concise summary of the paper's central claim and its contribution, then provide a summary of the positive elements of the work, share at least two major pieces of feedback (e.g., on theory, methods, or contribution) and two minor points (e.g., on clarity, presentation, or robustness checks). We will go over this format during week 2.

Reviews must be posted to the Canvas discussion page 24 hours before class. Everyone should read these submissions before class.

# Course Policies

## Academic Integrity

I take academic honesty and integrity seriously. Please see the [UCSD policy on academic integrity](#) for more information or talk to me if you are ever uncertain about whether some action would violate academic integrity.

## AI Policy

Large Language Models like ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini are powerful and transformative technologies that will play a significant role in your professional lives after graduation. In fact, I use these tools every day when researching, learning new things, and preparing for this class. Given their value in learning and problem-solving, I encourage you to use them in this class as a complement to your own learning—not as a substitute for it.

There are no restrictions on how you use these tools, and I hope you do take advantage of them. However, you are here to learn how to read and write academic papers. Fully outsourcing this work to LLMs will not serve you in the long run and it will negatively affect your grade if the work you turn in falls short of my expectations.

## Accommodations

Students requesting accommodations for this course due to a disability should provide a current Authorization for Accommodation (AFA) letter issued by the Office for Students with Disabilities (<https://osd.ucsd.edu/>) and should speak with me at the beginning of the course.

## Course Schedule and Readings

All readings should be completed by class on the date listed.

### Week 1 (10/01/2025): Introduction

- Read my blog post "[Don't Take Shortcuts When It Comes to Course Readings](#)." Take particular note of the part where I talk about the questions you should be asking and answering when you read a paper.

### Week 2 (10/08/2025): How To Read an Academic Paper

Note: This class will be held virtually ([link](#)) and will begin at 4:30 pm (it will end at 5:50 PM, as usual).

*Also note: This is an unusual class. I will have you read the first submission of one of my papers (the final version can be found [here](#), but you do not need to read it). Then, you will read the reviewer's comments. Please do not share my original draft or the reviewer comments.*

- Read my blog post, "[How to Be a Better Reviewer \(JAWS Event Recap\)](#)."
- Then, read [the original submission](#) of Noble, Benjamin S. 2024. "Presidential Cues and the Nationalization of Congressional Rhetoric, 1973–2016." *American Journal of Political Science* 68(4): 1386–1402. [Submit the reading notes worksheet for this article before you do the next step](#).
- Finally, read the [reviewer's comments](#) on my paper. Pay attention to their questions and concerns, and whether they matched your own.

## Week 3 (10/15/2025): The Electoral Connection

- The classic: Mayhew, David. 1974. *Congress: The Electoral Connection*. New Haven: Yale University Press. [[Introduction and Chapter 1](#)].
- A modern take: Grimmer, Justin. 2013. "Appropriators Not Position Takers: The Distorting Effects of Electoral Incentives on Congressional Representation." *American Journal of Political Science* 57(3): 624–42.

## Week 4 (10/22/2025): Homestyle

- The classic: Fenno, Richard. 1977. "U.S. House Members and Their Constituencies." *American Political Science Review* 71(3): 883–917.
- A modern take: Crosson, Jesse, and Jaclyn Kaslovsky. 2025. "Do Local Roots Impact Washington Behaviors? District Connections and Representation in the U.S. Congress." *American Political Science Review* 119(2): 887–904.

## Week 5 (10/29/2025): Cartel Theory

- The classic: Cox, Gary W., and Mathew D. McCubbins. 2005. *Setting the Agenda: Responsible Party Government in the U.S. House of Representatives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [[Chapters 1-2, 5](#)]
- A modern take: Ballard, Andrew O., and James M. Curry. 2021. "Minority Party Capacity in Congress." *American Political Science Review* 115(4): 1388–1405.

## Week 6 (11/05/2025): Party Strategies

- The (new) classic: Lee, Frances E. 2016. *Insecure Majorities: Congress and the Perpetual Campaign*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. [[Chapters 1-3, 5](#)]

- A modern take: Gaynor, SoRelle Wyckoff. 2025. "Following the Leaders: Asymmetric Party Messaging in the U.S. Congress." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 50(1): 85–106.

## Week 7 (11/12/2025): Presidential Power?

- The classic: Neustadt, Richard E. 1990 [1960]. *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan*. Free Press. [Prefaces, Chapters 1, 2 (Pt I only), 3, 5]
- A modern take: Lownade, Kenneth. 2024. *False Front: The Failed Promise of Presidential Power in a Polarized Age*. University of Chicago Press. [Chapters 1-4]

Reviewers: Ben Noble (I guess...?)

## Week 8 (11/19/2025): Bureaucracy and Politicization

- The classic: Lewis, David E. 2008. *The Politics of Presidential Appointments: Political Control and Bureaucratic Performance*. Princeton University Press. Princeton, NJ. [Chapters 1-2, 5].
- A modern take: Potter, Rachel Augustine. 2025. "Buying Evidence? Policy Research as a Presidential Commodity." *The Journal of Politics* 87(2): 724–38.

## Week 9 (11/26/2025): No Class, Thanksgiving

## Week 10 (12/03/2025): Courts

- The classic: Richards, Mark J., and Herbert M. Kritzer. 2002. "Jurisprudential Regimes in Supreme Court Decision Making." *American Political Science Review* 96(2): 305–320.
  - The modern take: Stobb, Maureen, and Joshua B. Kennedy. 2024. "Judicial Specialization and Deference in Asylum Cases on the U.S. Courts of Appeals." *American Political Science Review* 118(4): 1733–47.
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## Acknowledgements

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