

Introduction to US Constitutional Law - 84-120

Professor Jonathan Cervas

Assistant Teaching Professor

Carnegie Mellon University

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Course Information

This course provides an introduction to the United States Constitution and the principles of constitutional law. The course material provides a comprehensive examination of the powers of the federal government and the allocation of decision-making authority among government institutions. It delves into the nuances of judicial review, scrutinizing the scope and limits of judicial power in resolving constitutional issues. Students will engage with the intricate relationship among branches within the federal government, analyzing the balance of powers, including the extent of presidential power vis-à-vis congressional authority to legislate. Through a combination of lectures, case studies, and *mostly* discussions, students will gain a deep understanding of the U.S. Constitution's role in shaping American legal and political landscapes.

This course introduces students to constitutional law as a way of understanding how the U.S. Constitution shapes political conflict, government power, and individual rights. The emphasis is on **ideas, institutions, and landmark cases**, not technical mastery of legal doctrine.

1. *Materials:* See below under *course plan*. We will use several books, and supplement these with Supreme Court opinions and other readings.
2. *Meetings:* We will meet on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 3:30pm to 4:50pm. **Baker Hall (BH) A53**
3. *Electronics:* You may *not* use laptops, iPads, etc., in class except to the extent that it furthers your learning for our class. Please put away your phones before class begins.
4. *Evaluation:* Final Grades will be assigned based on the following weights:

Case Briefs = 30% of Final Grade.

Exams (4) = 70% of Final Grade.

- Exam 1 (15%)
- Exam 2 (cumulative, 20%)
- Exam 3 (15%)
- Exam 4 (cumulative, 20%)
 - Penalties for unpreparedness in class discussions

Grade cut points shall be:

A: 90%+

B: 80%+

C: 70%+

D: 60%+

R: 59%-

5. *Communication:* My office hours are Thursdays from 12:00–2:00 PM in my office, 374 Posner Hall. If you would like to meet outside of these hours, please email me at cervas@cmu.edu and we can arrange a time to meet, either in my office or on Zoom. In addition to course-related questions, I am happy to talk about broader issues related to your college experience, including whether law school or graduate school might be a good fit for you.

The Teaching Assistant for this class is Elijah Dourado. Elijah's email is elijahd@andrew.cmu.edu.

Course Objectives

- By the end of the course students should be able to:
 - Demonstrate constitutional literacy about the structure of government; concepts such as the separation of powers and federalism; the nature and debates over judicial power; and the content and meaning of constitutional rights and liberties afforded to individuals
 - Explain core aspects of the U.S. Supreme Court, including judicial selection, basic processes of case docketing, and features of opinion writing
 - Read, understand, and brief judicial opinions authored by the U.S. Supreme Court
 - Assess the persuasiveness of an argument relative to the historical era and court composition.
 - Identify and apply methods of constitutional interpretation, such as historical analysis, evolving constitutionalism, etc.
 - Communicate major themes and doctrine arising in several areas of Constitutional Law
 - Be informed consumers of news, legal developments, and future opinions.

Course Components and Grading

Course Expectations and Class Format

To succeed in this course, students are expected to attend every class and arrive prepared, having completed all assigned readings and homework, including case briefs.

Class sessions will combine lecture and discussion, with regular use of the Socratic Method—a traditional law school pedagogy designed to probe students' understanding of cases and the relationships among legal doctrines. The purpose of this method is to develop analytical reasoning, verbal clarity, and confidence in engaging legal arguments, not to intimidate or embarrass students. Under this method, the instructor may call on students at random, without prior notice, to engage in a sustained dialogue about a case, concept, or reading.

Students who have not completed the assigned reading will not be successful in these exchanges. Lack of preparation will be noted, and unprepared students will incur a penalty of **-5%** on the exam for the corresponding unit.

Missing and Late Assignments

This course proceeds according to a strict progression from topic to topic, which ensures fairness, consistency, and a shared baseline of preparation for all students. Failing to complete the readings and assigned case briefs will derail your progress and undermine our ability to build on prior material. For that reason, **late work is not accepted**, and any materials not submitted by the assigned deadline will be marked **incomplete**.

I am taking this opportunity to make my expectations for CMU students explicit. Course assignments are designed to reflect these expectations, and students will be graded accordingly. If you feel you need to strengthen any of the skills described below, please visit during office hours or schedule an appointment outside of the posted times.

Student Preparedness

- Students are expected to come prepared to engage in class and to be active learners. This means arriving having **read, reflected on, and worked with** any readings or homework scheduled for discussion in the syllabus and course schedule.
 - This course is **moderately reading-intensive**. You will be asked to read complex material, including legal opinions, scholarly perspectives on constitutional law, and original historical documents. Developing comprehension and fluency requires time and sustained attention. Students should plan to dedicate **an average of six hours per week outside of class** to studying course content.
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Assignments

- (i) Mark Tushnet (ed.), Mark A. Graber (ed.), Sanford Levinson (ed.).
The Oxford Handbook of the U.S. Constitution. Oxford University Press, 2015.;
- (ii) Richard H. Fallon Jr., *The Changing Constitution* (“Fallon”); or
- (iii) Additional readings available either at the websites noted below or on Canvas.

Please be aware that completing several of the assignments will take more than a single class meeting. The schedule is set up as Units instead of specific dates. At the conclusion of each class session, I will outline what you should prepare for the following class. Keep in mind that the schedule and assignments may be adjusted based on how quickly we progress.

Optional reading:

- (iv) Jill Lepore, *We the People: A History of the U.S. Constitution*

About the Instructor

Jonathan Cervas is an Assistant Teaching Professor in political science at Carnegie Mellon University, where he teaches courses on American politics, constitutional law, elections, and quantitative methods. His research focuses on political institutions, elections, redistricting, and voting rights, and has been published in leading journals across political science, law, economics, and geography. He has served as a court-appointed special master and expert in major redistricting and voting rights cases across multiple states, and is a Research Associate with the Electoral Innovation Lab and the Princeton Gerrymandering Project. Dr. Cervas earned his PhD from the University of California, Irvine.

Course Outline

Can be found online at: <https://github.com/jcervas/teaching/blob/main/2025-2026/class-cmu-2026-84-120/course-outline.md>

AI Use Policy for Student Work

As artificial intelligence (AI) tools become increasingly accessible, it is important to clarify expectations for their use in this course. You are welcome to use AI technologies (such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, or similar tools) to support your independent work—such as brainstorming ideas, checking grammar, or improving the clarity of your writing. However, you **may not use AI to generate substantive content that you submit as your own original work**. All assignments, essays, and projects must reflect your own analysis, critical thinking, and voice.

Permitted Uses of AI:

- Outlining or organizing your thoughts
- Checking grammar, spelling, or clarity
- Generating ideas or prompts to help you get started
- Reviewing your own drafts for readability

Prohibited Uses of AI:

- Submitting AI-generated essays, paragraphs, or answers as your own work
- Using AI to complete assignments, discussion posts, or projects in place of your own effort
- Copying and pasting AI-generated content without substantial revision and personal input

If you use AI tools in your process, you must **disclose** how you used them in a brief note at the end of your assignment (e.g., “I used ChatGPT to help brainstorm ideas for my outline.”).

Violations:

Submitting AI-generated content as your own is considered academic dishonesty and will be treated as a violation of the university’s academic integrity policy.

If you have questions about what is or is not allowed, please ask before submitting your work.

Representation Statement

I am committed to including a broad range of perspectives in the readings and materials for this course. If you believe a critical voice is missing, please let me know so I can improve the syllabus now and in future offerings.

We must treat every individual with respect. We come from many different backgrounds, and this variety of viewpoints is fundamental to building and maintaining an equitable and inclusive campus community. “Representation” can refer to the ways we identify ourselves—race, color, national origin, language, sex, disability, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, creed, ancestry, belief, veteran status, or genetic information, among others. Each of these identities shapes the perspectives our students, faculty, and staff bring to campus. Promoting these varied viewpoints not only fuels excellence and innovation but also advances the pursuit of justice. We acknowledge our imperfections while fully committing to the work—inside and outside our classrooms—of building and sustaining a campus community that embraces these core values.

Each of us is responsible for creating a safer, more inclusive environment.

Unfortunately, incidents of bias or discrimination do occur, whether intentional or unintentional. They contribute to an unwelcoming atmosphere for individuals and groups at the university. Therefore, the university encourages anyone who experiences or observes unfair or hostile treatment on the basis of identity to speak out for justice and seek support—either in the moment or afterward. You can share your experiences using the following resources:

- **Ethics Reporting Hotline**

Submit an anonymous report by calling 844-587-0793 or visiting cmu.ethicspoint.com.

All reports are documented and reviewed to determine whether further action is needed. Regardless of the incident type, the university will use your feedback to transform our campus climate into one that is more equitable and just.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

If you have a documented disability and an accommodations letter from the Office of Disability Resources, please discuss your needs with me as early in the semester as possible. I will work with you to ensure that accommodations are provided as appropriate. If you suspect you may have a disability and are not yet registered with the Office of Disability Resources, you can contact them at access@andrew.cmu.edu.

Student Well-Being

The past few years have been challenging. We are all under significant stress and uncertainty. I encourage you to find ways to move regularly, eat well, and reach out to your support system—or to me at cervas@cmu.edu—if you need help. We can all benefit from support during stressful times, and this semester is no exception.

As a student, you may experience a range of challenges that interfere with learning, such as strained relationships, increased anxiety, substance use, feeling down, difficulty concentrating, or lack of motivation. These mental health concerns or stressful events can diminish your academic performance and reduce your ability to participate in daily activities. CMU offers services that can help, and treatment does work. Learn more about confidential mental health services available on campus at:

- **Counseling and Psychological Services:** <http://www.cmu.edu/counseling/>
Phone (24/7): 412-268-2922

Please remember that support is always available—don't hesitate to reach out.