POLS 4641H: The Science of Cities (Honors)

Spring 2026

Professor:	Joe Ornstein	**Time:**	TTh 11:35am – 12:55pm
Email:	jornstein@uga.edu	**Place:**	302 Baldwin Hall
Website:	https://joeornstein.github.io/pols-4641		

Over half of the Earth's population lives within the sea of city lights visible on the satellite image above. These cities are the centers of global commerce and culture, but in order to function, they require effective governance. Cities need roads, schools, police, fire protection, parks, buses, sewers, and electricity. Many of our most pressing political problems — including education, transportation, criminal justice, housing, and climate change — are in large part problems of city politics.

In this course, we explore how research from political science, economics, sociology, psychology, and mathematics can help us build cities that are healthier, safer, fairer, and more livable for their residents. The semester will be organized into 12 weeks, each of which will focus on a particular theme in the scientific study of cities. These themes span foundational research in urban economics, political geography, municipal politics, transportation, and housing policy.

Course Objectives

Upon successful completion of the course, students will be able to:

- Summarize key concepts from research on cities in political science, economics, and related fields. See **Weekly Quizzes** for details on how this competency will be assessed.
- Translate academic research into engaging stories for a non-technical audience. See **Paper Deep Dives** for details on how this competency will be assessed.
- Synthesize ideas from class and apply them to a range of current issues. See **Chats** for details on how this competency will be assessed.

Course Structure

We will meet twice a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays. See our course website for a more detailed schedule and list of readings. Your grade for the course will be based on three components:

- **Weekly Quizzes (60 points total).** Each week we will focus on a different theme from the science of cities. For each theme, I will assign a core reading (1-2 book chapters or journal articles). At the start of class each Tuesday, students will take a short quiz in which they will be asked to summarize one or more key concepts from the lecture and/or reading. These quizzes will be graded pass/fail, each worth 5 points.You can miss two of these quizzes without incurring a penalty (effectively, you begin the semester with 10 points). To meet expectations, quiz responses must be accurate and clear enough that someone unfamiliar with the topic could understand the response.
- **Paper Deep Dives (60 points).** During the semester, each student will deliver four in-class presentations walking through an academic paper of their choice. Eligible papers are linked on the course website. These presentations must adhere to the "PechaKucha" style: twenty slides displayed for twenty seconds each (mostly images, no more than twenty words per slide, no notes). This is a challenging presentation format; the purpose of this assignment is to ensure that you deeply understand a reading and can translate dry, technical academic research into something engaging for a non-technical audience. I will grade these presentations on the following dimensions:
  - **Style**: The presentation is engaging, delivered with confidence, and adheres to the required format (5 points).
  - **Accuracy**: The research is described accurately and does not omit important aspects of the research design or results. The presenter can respond cogently to followup questions (7 points).
  - **Relevance**: The presentation makes clear why the audience should care about the research, connecting it to historical events or current issues as appropriate (3 points).
- **Chats (30 points).** Twice during the semester, each student will sit for a 15-minute chat with Professor Ornstein during office hours. These chats, which will be unaided and graded (15 points each), will focus on topics of the professor's choice. The first should be completed during the two weeks before spring break (Feb 24 - Mar 5), and the second should be completed during the final week of class. The purpose of these chats is to assess retention and ability to apply ideas we've learned to real-world challenges.

The components listed above sum to 150 points. At the end of the semester, I will convert your numeric grade to a final letter grade according to the following scale: 135-150 (A), 130-135 (A-), 125-129 (B+), 120-124 (B), 115-119 (B-), 110-114 (C+), 105-109 (C), 100-104 (C-), below 100 (F).

Office Hours & Email Policy

I will be available for students to drop in and chat every Tuesday afternoon from 1:00pm-2:50pm. My office is Baldwin 304C. If this time is unavailable for you, please feel free to schedule an appointment. If

you send me an email, please allow me 24 hours to respond. I am not available to respond to messages after 5pm or on weekends.

Academic Honesty

Remember that when you joined the University of Georgia community, you agreed to abide by a code of conduct outlined in the academic honesty policy called *A Culture of Honesty*. Note that, for this class, I do not place any restrictions on use of language models like ChatGPT for studying or creating your presentations. These tools can be quite helpful when trying to understand technical work.

Mental Health and Wellness Resources

- If you or someone you know needs assistance, you are encouraged to contact Student Care and Outreach in the Division of Student Affairs at 706-542-7774 or visit https://sco.uga.edu. They will help you navigate any difficult circumstances you may be facing by connecting you with the appropriate resources or services.
- UGA has several resources for a student seeking mental health services or crisis support.
- If you need help managing stress anxiety, relationships, etc., please visit BeWellUGA for a list of FREE workshops, classes, mentoring, and health coaching led by licensed clinicians and health educators in the University Health Center.
- Additional resources can be accessed through the UGA App.