

Special Topics in American Politics:

The Politics of Public Policy

POLSCI 109B 2025

Course Description

Government policy deeply influences every aspect of our lives, including the quality of the universities we attend, how much it costs for a gallon of gas, what training we must obtain to take what jobs, what technologies are available to us to use, who we can marry, whether we can afford critical necessities such as housing, and what medical treatments we are allowed or not allowed to obtain.

Why do governments make the policies they do? How can advocates craft effective political strategies to influence government policy?

This course focuses on understanding the political forces that shape public policy, including interest groups, public pressure, political parties, and voters. In contrast to a public policy course, this course will *not* consider what ideal public policies *should* be, but rather consider *why governments make the policies they do*.

This course is suitable for anyone interested in politics or policy. Students will learn tools that will allow them to think like political strategists and understand how they and others influence government in practice.

Prerequisites

There are no prior course requirements.

Course Goals

After successfully completing this course, you will be able to:

- Understand and apply frameworks for understanding the role of interest groups, political parties, and public pressure in government decision-making.
- Describe how the political influence of interest groups, lobbyists, voters, and ideas work in practice.
- Analyze political controversies through a framework that allows you to identify strategies advocates for each side might use to gain an upper hand.
- Produce analyses of public policy debates that understand the political underpinnings of those debates.

Instructor Information, Contact, Office Hours, & Communication

Course Instructor

Professor David Brockman

- Email: Please send mail within bCourses, otherwise dbrockman@berkeley.edu.

Graduate Student Instructors (GSIs)

While the instructor will interact with the whole class and will oversee all activities and grading, as well as being available to resolve any issues that may arise, the GSIs will be your main point of contact. Your GSIs are responsible for assisting you directly with your questions about assignments and course requirements, as outlined in the Assignments and Calendar. The GSIs will also facilitate ongoing discussion and interaction with you on major topics in each module.

- Margaret Kenney: margaret_kenney@berkeley.edu
- Zachary Hertz: zachary_hertz@berkeley.edu

Office Hours

The course instructor and GSIs will offer virtual office hours, when students can communicate real time (synchronously) using Zoom. These chats can be valuable for discussion, answering questions, and reviewing for the exam.

Sign up on the Google Sheet linked on bCourses to attend office hours and get the link.

Course Mail

Make sure to check the Course Mail for messages from the instructor. You can access course email within bCourses by clicking on the Inbox link or choose to have your course mail forwarded to your personal email account or your phone.

We will try our best to reply to your messages within 24 hours (on weekdays). Please refrain from last-minute emails, as we cannot guarantee an immediate response. Do not expect an email response over the weekend. Please only write emails of a professional nature, and limit them to shorter questions which may be answered in a sentence or two. Broad questions should be reserved for office hours—and we encourage you to visit our virtual office hours via Zoom.

Course Materials and Technical Requirements

Required Materials

All course readings and required materials will be provided within the bCourses platform.

Technical Requirements

This course is built on a Learning Management system (LMS) called Canvas and you will need to meet these [computer specifications to participate within this online platform](#).

Optional

Canvas allows you to record audio or video files of yourself and upload them in the course. Although doing so is not required for any of the activities, using these features will enhance your engagement in the course. If you would like to use these features, you will need to have a webcam and a microphone installed on your computer.

Technical Support

If you are having technical difficulties please alert one of the GSIs immediately. However, understand that neither the GSIs, nor the professor can assist you with technical problems. You must call or email tech support and make sure you resolve any issues immediately.

In your course, click on the "Help" button on the bottom left of the global navigation menu. Be sure to document (save emails and transaction numbers) for all interactions with tech support. **Extensions and late submissions will not be accepted due to "technical difficulties."**

Learning Activities

VERY IMPORTANT

You won't be able to access your course material until you read and make your pledge to Academic Integrity.

You are expected to fully participate in all the course activities described here.

1. Read all assigned readings
2. Watch and listen to the lecture presentations
3. Read web-based announcements and postings assigned during the course
4. Compose and post assigned commentary and responses to lectures and readings
5. Complete all required assignments and project
6. Complete the final exam

Modules

A module is a grouping of topics related to one area of study, typically with readings, lectures and various kinds of assignments. Each module contains a list of Learning Outcomes for the module. Your assignments reflect the learning activities to perform to reach those outcomes. For an at-a-glance view of due dates and projects, refer to the course **Calendar** within bCourses.

Reading Assignments

Each module includes assigned readings relevant to each topic covered in that module.

Multimedia Lectures

Recorded lectures support your readings and assignments but also contain additional material that may be included in the exams. Each lecture has been broken into sections. You are expected to take notes while viewing the lectures as you would in a regular classroom. You may also choose to print a handout of the slides that are provided in PDF format. Due to the inclusion of numerous images, videos, and animations, many of the lectures are considerable in file size and may take some time to download. For those of you with limited bandwidth, we strongly encourage you to download the longer lectures before attempting to view them.

Discussion Forum Participation

During the 6-week course, you will participate in six group discussion assignments – one per week – in which we ask you to write reflectively and critically about the discussion topic. Your posts and responses are considered your class participation and represent a unique opportunity for you to exchange views with your group-mates, share experiences and resources, and ensure your understanding of the course material.

Discussion groups have been pre-assigned and include other members of your GSI section. When you navigate to a discussion forum, you will automatically be taken to your group's instance of that discussion and to your group's space within the course. When finished with the discussion, you will need to navigate from your group space back to the main course space in order to continue participating in other aspects of the course.

While the Discussion Forum assignments are asynchronous (not real time), you will be expected to make an initial posting by 11:59 pm Wednesday (PDT) and to respond to at least two or more other students' postings by 5:00 pm Friday; continued participation throughout the remainder of the week is highly encouraged. See the instructions within each discussion forum for further guidelines.

Assigned group discussion questions are designed for students to connect the lecture, videos and readings with one's understanding of materials. Usually, there are no right or wrong answers; however, quality responses include reasonable assumptions, detailed explanations, and real-life examples. While each discussion assignment will have its own directions and grading scheme please see the sample rubric below:

Table 2: Discussion Rubric Base

	Exemplary	Satisfactory	Needs Development
Quantity and Timeliness (15%)	Submits both their own post and peer responses on time.	Submits their own post by deadline, but does not comment on peer's posts.	Does not submit their own post by first discussion deadline
Spelling and mechanics (10%)	Responses are free of grammatical, spelling or punctuation errors.	Responses are largely free of grammatical, spelling or punctuation errors.	Responses contain numerous grammatical, spelling and/ or punctuation errors.
Demonstrates understanding of applicability to personal perceptions (50%)	Post and responses include deep examination of learning and changes in your approach. They show an open, non-defensive ability to self-appraise, discussing challenges and areas for growth. Asks and attempts to answer difficult questions and could include other resources that extend the learning of the community.	Post and responses include cautious examination of learning and approach, engaging in some self-disclosure and self-appraisal , but resists asking or answering the difficult questions about perceptions/positions and/or experiences.	Limited examination of your learnings. Little self-disclosure, minimal risk in connecting concepts from class to personal shifts in perspective. Self-disclosure tends to be superficial and factual, without self-reflection.
Generates learning within the community (25%)	Posts include open-ended questions that elicit responses and reflections from other learners, and responses build upon and integrate multiple views from other learners to take the discussion deeper.	Posts include open-ended questions that elicit responses and reflections from other learners, and responses build upon the ideas of other learners to take the discussion deeper.	Posts include closed-ended questions or do not attempt to elicit responses and reflections from other learners, and/or responses do not build upon the ideas of other learners to take the discussion deeper.

Of students' six discussion forum posts, four will be graded for completion and two randomly selected posts will be graded according to the rubric above.

Close Reading Assignments

Over the course of the class, you will have two "close reading" assignments where you will interact with your peers to comment on and ask questions about an important reading. Being part of an online class can sometimes mean missing the feeling of being part of a learning community. Collaborative close reading assignments seek to give you that opportunity through annotating the readings (asynchronously) together.

Paper

The paper will involve applying theories of public policymaking we learned in the class to a current or recent public policy issue. The paper must be at least 8 pages double spaced and must apply at least three of the theories we learned in class. Specific assignment details will be distributed over bCourses.

Synchronous Office Hour Attendance

You'll be required to attend two office hour sessions (with either a GSI or the professor -- either counts). **You must attend at least one of these sessions during the first half of the course.**

Final Exam

You will take a timed three-hour, open-book final exam. The final exam will cover content from all six modules. The timed exam will include short-answer questions and essay questions. There will be no make-up exam.

The final exam will be on Thursday, July 3, 2025. You can complete the exam any time that day.

Reminder: Your Course End Date

Your course will end on July 3. As you work through the course, please keep the end date in mind, and if you want to save any commentary or assignments for future reference, please make sure to print or copy/paste those materials before your access ends.

Grading and Course Policies

Your final course grade will be calculated as follows:

Table 1: Final Grade Percentages

Category	Percentage of Grade
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Participation: Weekly discussion forum posts (including commenting on a peer's discussion forum post)	20%
Participation: Close reading assignments	5%
Check-Your-Understanding quizzes	5%
Attendance at two synchronous office hours sessions (at least one before the middle of the term; office hours with GSI and Professor both count)	5%
Paper	30%
Final Exam	35%

It is important to note that not all components are graded online and included in the online course grade book. Because of this, the online course grade book will not display your overall course grade at any given time or your final grade. It should simply be used to assess your performance on the components that are included within it: the discussions, written assignments and midterm exam. Your final letter grade will be mailed to you by the registrar's office.

I challenge you to go beyond the grade. Though you go to Berkeley and academic achievement is for most Cal students a fundamental part of their identity, this class has the potential to give you a hundred times more than what an "A" represents. You can, if you play this right, emerge as a much more effective and more satisfied person and leader than you are the day you begin this class.

Late Work

5% of your grade will be deducted from late work every day it is late. This applies to all assignments.

Regrades

You may request your GSI re-grade an assignment if you think your grade is unfair. You must wait 24 hours before requesting a re-grade. However, note that a re-grade may result in a lower grade than your original grade.

Course Policies

Promptness

Homework assignments and discussion forum postings all have specific final due dates and times. You will not receive full credit if assignments are submitted after the indicated due date.

Further, each online activity must be submitted through the course website by the due date.

Email submissions will not be accepted. Students who wait until the final hours prior to a submission deadline risk having problems with their ISP, hardware, software, or various other site access difficulties. Therefore, it is advisable to submit assignments and tests through bCourses early. Lateness on assignments will generate a 0 without PRIOR consent from the instructor.

Honor Code

The student community at UC Berkeley has adopted the following Honor Code: "As a member of the UC Berkeley community, I act with honesty, integrity, and respect for others." The expectation is that you will adhere to this code.

Collaboration and Independence

Reviewing lecture and reading materials and studying for exams can be enjoyable and enriching things to do with fellow students. This is recommended. However, unless otherwise instructed, homework assignments and the online exam are to be completed independently and materials submitted as homework should be the result of one's own independent work.

Collegiality

During our discussions, challenges must be posed professionally and respectfully. Discriminatory, intimidating, and otherwise intolerant language will not be permitted and will be addressed immediately.

Cheating

A good lifetime strategy is always to act in such a way that no one would ever imagine that you would even consider cheating. Anyone caught cheating on a quiz or exam in this course will receive a failing grade in the course and will also be reported to the University Center for Student Conduct. The expectation is that you will be honest in the taking of exams.

Plagiarism

All written work submitted in this course, except for acknowledged quotations, is to be expressed in your own words. It should also be constructed upon a plan of your own devising. The Berkeley Campus Code of Student Conduct defines plagiarism as "the use of intellectual material produced by another person without acknowledging its source" and stipulates that plagiarism includes:

1. Copying from the writings or works of others into one's academic assignment without attribution, or submitting such work as if it were one's own;
2. Using the views, opinions, or insights of another without acknowledgment; or

3. Paraphrasing the characteristic or original phraseology, metaphor, or other literary device of another without proper attribution.

Unacknowledged use of the words or ideas of others from any medium (print, digital, or otherwise) is plagiarism. The submission of plagiarized work will, under University rules, render the offending student subject to an F grade for the work in question or for the whole course, and will also make him/her liable for referral to the Student Judicial Affairs Office for further disciplinary action. Educate yourself about the campus code of conduct in relation to plagiarism. Ignorance is not an excuse. If you feel overwhelmed about an assignment, speak to the professor or your GSI. DO NOT PLAGIARIZE!

Academic Integrity and Ethics

Cheating on exams and plagiarism are two common examples of dishonest, unethical behavior. Honesty and integrity are of great importance in all facets of life. They help to build a sense of self-confidence, and are key to building trust within relationships, whether personal or professional. There is no tolerance for dishonesty in the academic world, for it undermines what we are dedicated to doing - furthering knowledge for the benefit of humanity.

Incomplete Course Grade

Students who have substantially completed the course but for serious extenuating circumstances, are unable to complete the final exam, may request an Incomplete grade. This request must be submitted in writing or by email to the GSI and course instructor. You must provide verifiable documentation for the seriousness of the extenuating circumstances. According to the policy of the college, Incomplete grades must be made up within the first three weeks of the next semester.

Students with Disabilities

Any students requiring course accommodations due to a physical, emotional, or learning disability must contact the [Disabled Students' Program \(DSP\)](#). They will review all requests on an individual basis.

- Request your Disabled Student Program Specialist to send the instructor a formal request before the official course start date by email.
- In addition, notify the instructor and your Online Learning Support Specialist, which accommodations you would like to use.
 - Your Online Learning Support Specialist is Tracie Allen and her email is summer_online_support@berkeley.edu

End of Course Evaluation

Before your course end date, please take a few minutes to participate in our Course Evaluation to share your opinions about this course. You will be receiving the Course

Evaluation via email. The evaluation does not request any personal information, and your responses will remain strictly confidential. You may only take the evaluation once.

*Subject to Change

Course Outline*

Week 1: Introduction: Voters, Parties, and the Four I's (May 27 - June 1)

Topics

- Course Introduction
- Four I's Framework: Institutions, Interests, Issues, and Information
- Voters and Political Parties

Readings

- Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*, p. 1-18
- Bawn et al., "A Theory of Parties", p. 573-585
- Rodden, *Why Cities Lose*, Intro, Ch. 6; Ch. 7
- Optional: *Party Position Change in American Politics*, ch. 3

Assignments

- Discussion Forum

Week 2: Interests (June 2 - 8)

Topics

- Why are organized interests powerful?
- The Collective Action Problem
- Concentrated versus Distributed Interests
- Distributive Politics Spreadsheet
- Case Study: SB 35

Readings

- Madison, Federalist No. 10
- Arnold, *The Logic of Congressional Action*, Ch. 4

Assignments

- Discussion Forum
- Close Reading Assignment

Week 3: Institutions: Congress (June 9 - 15)

Topics

- The Re-Election Goal
- Safe versus Marginal Districts
- Committees and Legislative Expertise
- Parties and Partisan Polarization in Congress
- Pivotal Politics Framework
- Case Study: Obamacare

Readings

- Smith, *American Congress*, Ch. 5
- Curry and Lee, *The Limits of Party*, Ch. 3

Assignments

- Discussion Forum

Week 4: Institutions: The Executive Branch and Courts (June 16 - 22)

Topics

- Presidential Vetoes and the Politics of Blame
- Presidential “Soft Power”
- Congressional Delegation to Executive Agencies
- Congressional Oversight of Executive Agencies
- Influencing the Bureaucracy
- Judicial Branch
- Are Judges “Politicians in Robes”?

Readings

- Eshbaugh-Soha, “Going Public and Presidential Leadership”
- Sen and Bonica, *Judicial Tug of War*, Ch. 1

Assignments

- Discussion Forum
- Close Reading Assignment

Week 5: Information: Lobbying, Ideas, and Information (June 23 - 29)

Topics

- Money in Politics
- Information and Policymaking
- Lobbying as Legislative Subsidy
- The Revolving Door
- Grassroots Lobbying
- Public Persuasion: How to Influence Public Sentiment

Readings

- Nownes, *Total Lobbying*, ch. 2; p. 57-68
- Boehner, *On the House*, p. 189-205

Week 6: Issues: Agenda Setting (June 29 – July 3)**Lectures**

- What is “the agenda” and why does it matter?
- Kingdon’s “Three Streams” framework
- Policy Windows
- Influencing the Agenda
- Agenda Seeding
- Venue Shopping
- Case Studies

Readings

- Graetz and Shapiro, *Death by a Thousand Cuts*, ch. 1, 7, 8
- The New Yorker, “How Police Unions Fight Reform”

Assignments

- Paper Due
- Reminder: Final Exam

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