

PLSC 8000: Introduction to American Politics

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AFFILIATION

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Note: This is a public version of the Fall 2025 course syllabus. It focuses on course organization and readings, while omitting details on university-specific information on dates, accommodations, and logistical notes. Future versions of the class will differ by semester and instructor.

Course Goals

PLSC 8000 is a seminar designed for Yale PhD students interested in American Politics. This class, PLSC 8100 (behavior, fall), and PLSC 8030 (institutions, spring) form the sequence that Ph.D. students are recommended to take for the examination in American politics. My goal is that you will come out of the class with all of the following:

- A solid understanding of major topics and debates that animated the American Politics literature, including the empirical basis of these claims and a genealogy of ideas,
- a solid understanding of how the US federal government generally operates and basic historical knowledge of American Politics,
- familiarity with the current research frontier in American Politics, and
- experience doing a bit of actual research, e.g., observation (New Haven politics) and data collection (counting things)

These goals guide the reading list as well. Every week typically features a selection from a canonical book, and one or two more recent books or articles on the same topic.

Course Schedule and Readings

See below for the core readings you will be responsible for reading and discussing. The list is generally in descending order of importance, and in the order I recommend reading them in.

1 Intro

1. David R. Mayhew, ["Robert A. Dahl: questions, concepts, proving it"](#) (*Journal of Political Power*, 2015)
 2. Larry McEnerney, ["The Craft of Writing Effectively"](#), (University of Chicago Social Sciences, 2014)
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2 Influence I: Local Politics	<p>Activity: discussion with John DeStefano, New Haven Mayor (1994-2014), on Dahl's <i>Who Governs</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Robert A. Dahl, <i>Who Governs: Democracy and Power in the American City</i> (Yale University Press, 1961). Chapters 1 (The Nature of the Problem), 6 (Shadow and Substance: The Social and Economic Notables), 10 (Leaders in Urban Redevelopment), 16 (Pattern A: Spheres of Influence), 17 (Pattern B: The Executive-centered Coalition), 24 (Overview: Actual and Potential Influence) 2. Sarah F. Anzia, <i>Local Interests: Politics, Policy, and Interest Groups in US City Governments</i> (The University of Chicago Press, 2022). Chapters 1 (Interest Groups and Public Policy in US Local Government), 2 (The Policy-Focused Approach to Studying Interest Groups), 3 (How Active Are Interest Groups in Local Politics?), 4 (What Kinds of Interest Groups Are Most Active?) <p><i>Optional:</i> Raymond E. Wolfinger, <i>"Nondecisions and the Study of Local Politics"</i> (<i>American Political Science Review</i>, 1971)</p>
3 Influence II: Money and Lobbying	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Martin Gilens, <i>Affluence and Influence: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America</i> (Princeton University Press, 2014). Chapters 2 (Data and Methods), 3 (The Preference/Policy Link), 5 (Interest Groups and Democratic Responsiveness), 8 (Money and American Politics) 2. Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, <i>"Winner-Take All Politics: Public Policy, Political Organization, and the Precipitous Rise of Top Incomes in the United States"</i> (<i>Politics & Society</i>, 2010) 3. Richard L. Hall and Alan V. Deardorff, <i>"Lobbying as Legislative Subsidy"</i> (<i>American Political Science Review</i>, 2006). <i>Read to the conclusion, but you can skip the figures</i> 4. Stephen Ansolabehere, John de Figueiredo, James M. Snyder, Jr., <i>"Why is There so Little Money in U.S. Politics?"</i> (<i>Journal of Economic Perspectives</i>, 2003). <i>Skim first half on levels of spending as background</i> <p><i>Skim if time allows:</i> Marco Battaglini et al., <i>"Unobserved Contributions and Political Influence: Evidence from the Death of Top Donors"</i> (<i>National Bureau of Economic Research working paper</i>, 2024)</p>

4 **Influence III:
Presidential Power**

1. William G. Howell, [Power Without Persuasion: The Politics of Direct Presidential Action](#) (Princeton University Press, 2003). Preface and Chapters 1 (Presidential Power in the Modern Era), 4 (Theory Testing, only on data construction), 5 (Congressional Constraints on Presidential Power), and 6 (The Institutional Foundations of Judicial Deference)
 2. Kenneth Lowande, [False Front: The Failed Promise of Presidential Power in a Polarized Age](#) (The University of Chicago Press, 2025). Chapters 1 (Presidential Power in a Polarized Age), 3 (Counting on Action), 4 (How Presidents Act), and 8 (Executive Power in Democracy)
- Optional:* Martin H. Redish & David M. Epstein, ["The Unitary Executive in the Age of American Authoritarianism"](#) (*Wake Forest Law Review*, 2024)

5 **Incentives I:
Spatial Model of
Politics**

1. Keith Krehbiel, [Pivotal Politics: A Theory of U.S. Lawmaking](#) (The University of Chicago Press, 1998). Chapters 1 (Basics) and 2 (Theory)
2. David R. Mayhew, [Divided We Govern: Party Control, Lawmaking, Investigations, 1946-2002](#) (Yale University Press, 1991). Chapters 1 (Introduction), 3 (Lawmaking: Selecting the Laws), 7 (Conclusion)
3. *background as an accessible explainer:* Charles Stewart II, *Analyzing Congress* (Norton, 2012). Chapter 1, (An (Unusual) Introduction to the Study of Congress)

6 **Incentives II:
Politics with an
Audience**

1. Frances E. Lee, [Insecure Majorities: Congress and the Perpetual Campaign](#) (The University of Chicago Press, 2016). Chapters 3 (The Logic of Confrontation) and 9 (The Perpetual Campaign and the US Constitutional System)
2. Brandice Canes-Wrone, Michael Herron, and Kenneth Shotts, ["Leadership and Pandering: A Theory of Executive Policymaking"](#) (*American Journal of Political Science*, 2001)
3. Gregory A. Huber and Sanford C. Gordon, ["Accountability and Coercion: Is Justice Blind When It Runs for Office?"](#) (*American Journal of Political Science*, 2004)

7 **Parties I: Politics
without Parties**

1. V. O. Key Jr., [Southern Politics in State and Nation](#) (The University of Tennessee Press, 1949). Chapters 1 (Of the South), 2

(Virginia: Political Museum Piece), 5 (Florida: Every Man for Himself), 11 (Mississippi: The Delta and the Hills), 14 (Nature and Consequences of One-Party Factionalism), 15 (Hoovercrats and Dixiecrats), 21 (Conduct of Elections), 25 (Southern Suffrage Restrictions: Bourbon Coup D'Etat?)

2. Gary C. Jacobson, ["It's Nothing Personal: The Decline of the Incumbency Advantage in US House Elections"](#) (*The Journal of Politics*, 2015), *focus on the results; you can skim the discussion section*
3. Shigeo Hirano and James M. Snyder, [Primary Elections in the United States](#) (Cambridge University Press, 2019). Chapter 1 (More Democracy) and 11 (Primaries and Polarization) (focus on the Utah conventions and skim the rest)

Fall Break

8 Parties II: Collective Decisionmaking

- Skim as case: Douglas Irwin, [Peddling Protectionism](#) (Princeton University Press, 2011), Introduction and Chapter 1 (Domestic Politics, 1-51) *focus on the congressional rules of debate for Smoot-Hawley*
 - 1. Frances C. Lee and James M. Curry, [The Limits of Party: Congress and Lawmaking in a Polarized Era](#) (The University of Chicago Press, 2020). Chapters 2 (The Persistence of Bipartisan Lawmaking), 3 (Why Do Majority Parties Fail?), 5 (Bipartisanship and the Decline of Regular Order), 7 (Constancy and Continuities)
 - 2. Gary W. Cox and Mathew D. McCubbins, [Setting the Agenda: Responsible Party Government in the U.S. House of Representatives](#) (Cambridge University Press, 2005). Chapter 11 (Conclusion)
 - 3. Keith Krehbiel, [Information and Legislative Organization](#) (University of Michigan Press, 1991). Chapter 3 (Informational Theories of Legislative Organization)
- background for committees:* Charles Stewart, *Analyzing Congress*, Chapter 8 (Committees in Congress)

9 Parties III: Realignment and change

1. Eric Schickler, [Racial Realignment: The Transformation of American Liberalism, 1932-1965](#), (Princeton University Press, 2016). Chapters 1 (Transforming American Liberalism), 4 (Liberalism Transformed: The Early Civil Rights Movement and the Liberal Lobby) and 9 (Facing a Changing Party: Democratic Elites and Civil Rights)

2. Herbert P. Kitschelt and Philipp Rehm, ["Secular Partisan Realignment in the United States: The Socioeconomic Reconfiguration of White Partisan Support since the New Deal Era"](#) (*Politics & Society*, 2017)
3. Larry M. Bartels, Review: ["What's the Matter with What's the Matter with Kansas?"](#) (*Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, 2006)

10 **The Public I: The Michigan School**

1. Philip E. Converse, ["The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics"](#), (*Critical Review*, 1964). *you can start from Table 1 and focus more on the tables rather than full text*
2. Gabriel S. Lenz, ["Follow the Leader: How Voters Respond to Politicians' Policies and Performance"](#) (The University of Chicago Press, 2012). *Chapters 1 (Rum Punch or Issue Voting?) and 8 (Following, Not Leading)*
3. Robert S. Erikson, Michael B. Mackuen, and James A. Stimson, ["The Macro Polity"](#) (Cambridge University Press, 2012), *Chapters 1 (A Model of the Macro Polity) and 9 (A Governing System: Laws and Public Opinion)*.

11 **The Public III: Policy Representation**

1. Kathleen Bawn et al., ["A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands and Nominations in American Politics"](#) (*Perspectives on Politics*, 2012)
2. David E. Broockman, ["Approaches to Studying Representation"](#) (*Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 2016)
3. Elizabeth Theiss-Morse and John R. Hibbing, ["Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs About How Government Should Work"](#) (Cambridge University Press, 2002). *Chapters 1 (Policy Space and American Politics), 5 (Public Assessments of People and Politicians), and 6 (Americans' Desire for Stealth Democracy)*

12 **Disciplinary boundaries**

1. Stephen Skowronek, John Dearborn, and Desmond King, ["Phantoms of a Beleaguered Republic: The Deep State and the Unitary Executive"](#) (Oxford University Press, 2021). *Chapters 1 (Push Comes to Shove), 8 (Depth in Appointment), 9 (Depth in Oversight), and 10 (A Reckoning with Depth)*
2. Sahil Chinoy and Martin Koennen, ["Political Sorting in the U.S. Labor Market: Evidence and Explanations"](#) (working paper,

2025). *Focus on the methodology and how the three studies relate to each other*

3. Jacob S. Hacker, Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, Paul Pierson, and Kathleen Thelen, "[The American Political Economy: Markets, Power, and the Meta Politics of US Economic Governance](#)" (*Annual Review of Political Science*, 2022)

Optional: Stephen Skowronek, *The Adaptability Paradox: Political Inclusion and Constitutional Resilience* (The University of Chicago Press, 2025)

13 Review

- No new reading. Please prepare notes noting, for each week 2-11, per announcement

I have selected a reading list that only focuses on 1 or 2 core readings a week. They should be read closely for discussion. In selecting the reading, I have tried to highlight essential and influential work that represents the range of methodologies in the discipline. I have also put an additional and intentional emphasis on authors from the Yale political science department. I have also intentionally placed two or three readings from the same author to show the development of a literature.

I have drawn from the syllabi of Jacob Hacker, Greg Huber, and Josh Kalla to inform this list.

Course Policies and Assignments

Discussion Leadership counts for **30% of your course grade** and is a weekly exercise. Every student must come to class prepared with having read the core readings and distilled some of their thoughts on the reading. At the beginning of each class, I will randomly select a student from the class to begin discussion with a 5-minute summary of the readings and with three discussion questions for the class. You do not need to submit a written reading response, although you're welcome to bring a handout or notes for the whiteboard if you feel more comfortable with that than a purely oral presentation.

There will be four paper assignments spread out through the class, representing the rest of your grade.

Paper 1: Essay Question

Using the reading assigned for the money and politics week, write an essay answering the following question:

Political spending of all forms (lobbying, campaign donations, investments in organization-building and grassroots mobilization, etc.) has risen dramatically in the last generation. Yet political scientists struggle to find conclusive evidence that these substantial investments yield substantive payoffs for the individuals and groups who make them. One potential conclusion is that such spending actually matters relatively little, whether because of diminishing returns or the offsetting effects of competing actors or the difficulty of affecting electoral or policy change itself. An alternative conclusion is that there are large payoffs for at least some kinds of investments but, for methodological reasons, political scientists have not been able to measure them. Where do you come down on this issue? In answering this question, please focus on a few policy areas or types of political activity and discuss and critique the empirical evidence. What kinds of data or analyses would allow us to adjudicate among these starkly competing interpretations?

Rules and Guidelines

This is a question from the American Politics August 2025 General Exam. That exam is open-book and open-note. In that exam, you are “not to consult another live person or to use AI/ChatGPT.”, but for this assignment, you may consult other people or use AI in the manner outlined in the PLSC 8000 course policy.

In the real exam, you have 8 hours to answer 3 questions. Here, you can take as long as you want. There is no minimum/maximum length I will require. As a guideline, I will note that past students have written good or excellent answers to this question in as long as 8 double-spaced pages and as short as 4.

This question has multiple parts. You do not need to give equal amounts of weight to each subquestion. Please focus on (1) making a clear argument on “where do you come down on this issue”, e.g. by including a sentence “I argue that ...” in the first or second paragraph, and (2) focus on one type of political activity (e.g., lobbying or donation) and make sure to “discuss and critique” the evidence. You do not need to spend much time proposing a new research design.

Paper 2: New Haven Assignment

Please visit a public space in New Haven (outside of class time) on a topic inspired by Dahl's *Who Governs*. Write a research note of the observation, complemented by statistics and relevant academic literature.

Components

- Make sure your observation is framed as a case of a question of politics asked in *Who Governs*: e.g., public policymaking, influence, urban redevelopment, local politics.
- Your description of what you observed. Be specific about the basics: “who, what, when.” As in Dahl/Key, “if possible, count things.”
- Use statistics from public sources to supplement your observation and make comparisons.

- Search the political science literature on the topic, and use it to contextualize your findings. This lit review can be very short. Do not cite something you have not actually read.
- As in any paper, make your sources clear. I expect this to take about 5-10 pages, double-spaced, but this is a loose recommendation.

Guidelines on doing and writing about observations/interviews

- Be reasonable. I recommend you act as a resident of New Haven first, and as a researcher second. Have fun and see where your curiosity takes you.
- A published example comes from an observation of Boston politics: Levine (2016), "Privatization of Political Representation", *American Sociological Review*
- The example above are serious research projects that require an IRB. Your project is only meant to serve as a foray into researching "with your feet", not as something you eventually publish or make public.

Paper 3: Data Assignment

This assignment is meant to give you practice in one specific part of a typical research paper: collecting your own data and explaining it clearly. This is not an assignment on quantitative methods or causal inference. It is about something that happens prior to analysis, and is no less important.

Assignment

Please extend one of the time series featured in a class reading with newer data. Submit a write-up with the following:

1. A motivation for the importance of the topic, and what the existing literature showed.
2. A clear methodology of how you extended the time series. See "Grading."
3. Brief, necessary background information that is needed to appreciate the context or methodology.
4. Clearly and cleanly presented figures/tables with captions. See "Grading."
5. A comprehensive walk-through of the figure/table with text, including examples where appropriate.
6. Brief discussion of implications. There is no required length, but I expect all of this to take about 6-9 double-spaced pages. If it is getting much longer, consider relegating parts to an appendix.

Expectations

The dataset collection, cleaning, and interpretation (or all three of these) should be substantial. I cannot be exhaustive of all the potential datasets you might analyze, but, for example, looking up the results of the last 10 US Senate elections would be too trivial. In contrast, replicating Mayhew's "Important Laws", or re-estimating Stimson's Mood time series on your own, would be sufficiently more substantial, even if only for a short period. When working with administrative

data, sometimes downloading the dataset is trivial but interpretation entails a substantial amount of work (what is included in a line item of spending, and what is not?).

Paper 4: Literature Assignment

Assignment

Pick a topic from the course readings. Write a paper that identifies an enduring research question that you are interested in, summarizes what we know from the existing literature, and includes proposal for how you might push the frontier of this research.

Components

Your paper should roughly have the following components:

1. The relevant setting for your topic. This should introduce and explain the importance of the topic. For example, if you talk about money and politics, you might explain the definition of lobbying, its prevalence, and why people should care about it.
2. A research question. This does not need to be an original research question. To the contrary, I would prefer you pick a well-trodden question that remains of wide interest. Such big questions are rarely definitively closed, so there will be always something new to study in them. A good place to start are the questions from our [department field exams](#). These questions generally ask about big, somewhat open-ended questions on faculty's minds.
3. The classic, well-established work in this area. A good place to start is our department [reading list](#), which was last updated in 2019. You should pick several of these and read them. Issues from the *Annual Review of Political Science* or Google Scholar can also be helpful.
4. One or two pieces of cutting-edge work in this area that are too new to be covered in the 2019 reading list. You can look up the recent issues in top-tier journals, or top-tier university presses.
5. Your specific assessment on unresolved controversies and open-ended questions, and a possible research plan to pursue it. Your proposal should be feasible, say, something that you might try over the summer, and it would be ideal if you had a concrete dataset or case study in mind. You are welcome to re-analyze an existing paper's dataset, or integrate findings from your data assignment. However, you are not required to present new analysis of this sort. I expect this to take about 10-15 pages, double-spaced, but this is a loose recommendation.

Guidelines

- For this assignment, it is more important to read deeply into existing (good) work rather than trying to come up with a new idea. Of course, my hope is that this project will lead to

something you might pursue in your dissertation. But that takes time and you will have many more opportunities to develop your own ideas (especially if this is your first year in graduate school). If you are a second year student, I would expect to see more of a defined research proposal and potentially preliminary data analysis.

- When you explain your topic, try to use plain language, define any jargon upfront, and avoid confusion. Although academic literature is essentially a conversation with a small community of experts (as we saw in week 1's video by Larry McEnerney), you should still err on the side of writing for the general public rather than an expert in the field. Even experts prefer accessible writing.
- You do not need to have a voluminous bibliography. Do not cite work that you have not read. For example, discussing one book, one classic article, and one new article in some depth is likely much better than discussing ten articles in cursory fashion.
- Feel free to email / talk me with topics you plan to write on or books you plan to read. I may be able to give you feedback on what articles are or (are not) worth reading. Grades will be assigned by clarity of the question you define, the appropriateness of your literature review, and the internal consistency and clarity of your writing