

Syllabus
State and Local Politics (PLSC 2470-1)
Professor Seth Masket
Spring 2006

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Purpose

The purpose of this class is to learn about the differing political institutions and practices in the various United States. We will compare and contrast the states to allow us to draw conclusions about American politics in general. Many of the examples used in this course will come from the state of Colorado, although we will also draw from other states. To a lesser extent, we will also focus on local governments and how they interact with the states.

In addition to readings and class discussions, we will be doing some data analysis to enhance our discussion of state politics. Thus this course will not only to teach you about state and local politics, but provide you with fluency in data analysis and modern research methods. *This is not a statistics class.* We will simply be using some basic statistical techniques to help us understand important substantive differences between states. Plan on bringing your laptop to class from the second week on. You should have Microsoft Excel installed on your laptop. Please see me if you have any difficulties meeting these requirements.

You are expected to attend all lectures. You are responsible for all the materials covered in the readings *and* in class.

Work

Your grade in this class will consist of your performance on four different items:

1. A *midterm*, to be held in class on Thursday, April 27th. This will consist of both short answers and an essay.
2. A *final*, to be held in class on Tuesday, June 6th. This will consist of both short answers and an essay, and will cover material from the entire course.
3. A *research paper* in which you investigate either crime or education policy in various states. A detailed handout explaining this paper will be given to you by the third week of class. A 6-8 page paper detailing your findings is due Tuesday, May 23rd, at the beginning of class.
4. *Short data analysis assignments*. Each week, you will learn a new skill for analyzing or displaying state politics data. You will be required to do a short assignment each week on this. These assignments will typically require you to create a graph or a table and provide a brief explanation of it. These will rarely exceed one page in length.

The grading will be weighted as follows:

Midterm – 25%

Final – 30%

Research paper – 35%

Short data analysis assignments – 10%

Etiquette

Although I will spend some of our class time lecturing, we will have many in-class discussions. In these discussions, you are encouraged to use your personal experiences and perspectives, as well as your understanding of the course material and current events. Direct personal attacks against others in the class are not permitted. Improper language (anything you can't say on a primetime network show) is not permitted. Insulting anyone inside or outside the class on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, religion, political belief, or national background is not permitted. Violations of these rules will be reflected in your grade and, if they continue, may result in disciplinary action by the University.

Contacting Me

I frequently check e-mail (smasket@du.edu), so that is usually the best way to get in touch with me. I can also be reached on my office phone (x12718). My regular office hours are Wednesdays from 9AM to 12PM. If you need me to get back to you within the same day, definitely contact me before 9PM. I can't promise I'll look at e-mail after that.

Students with Special Needs

Please contact me as soon as possible if you have a documented learning disability or other condition that requires accommodations, such as a separate testing room or extra time on exams.

Syllabus

Required Texts

Smith, Greenblatt, and Buntin, *Governing States & Localities* (CQ Press, 2005)

Wright, *Inside the Statehouse* (CQ Press, 2005)

Other readings will be made available on the course Blackboard website. Those readings are listed below and marked with a computer symbol (🖨). If you have trouble accessing any of those readings, please notify me immediately.

Week 1: Introduction to State Politics – (March 28th, 30th)

Who does what? What do state governments do that the federal government doesn't?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of federalism?

Readings:

- Smith, Chapters 1 and 2

Week 2: State Constitutions – (April 4th, 6th)

How do state constitutions differ from the U.S. Constitution in purpose and substance?

What does it take to amend or rewrite a state constitution?

Readings:

- Smith, Chapter 3
- U.S. Constitution, state constitution selections 🖨

Data analysis: Introduction to the state politics data set. Getting comfortable with Excel. Sorting and listing variables.

Week 3: Political Culture – (April 11th, 13th)

How do states differ from each other culturally? Why do some states remain conservative over the decades while others remain liberal?

Readings:

- Smith, Chapter 4

Data analysis: Generating new variables. Creating bar graphs.

Week 4: Legislatures, Part I – (April 18th)

What are the various jobs of state legislators? How do they ultimately produce legislation, and who does the legislation serve?

Readings:

- Wright, Chapters 2, 3, 7, 8


Data analysis: Creating tables. Mean comparisons.

No class on April 20th

Week 5: Legislatures, Part II – (April 25th, 27th)

How does the legislative process work in Colorado?

Readings:

- Selections from Straayer, *The Colorado General Assembly* 





Data analysis: Correlations.

Midterm on Thursday, April 27th

Week 6: Redistricting – (May 2nd, 4th)

Are legislators using or abusing their crucial power to draw legislative districts? What kind of effects does redistricting have on the political system?

Readings:



- Gurwitt, “Larry Bartels: Playing Solomon” 
- Woellert, “Where do you Draw the Line?” 
- Welch, “The Technocracy Behind Politics” 
- Masket, Winburn, Wright, “The Limits of the Gerrymander” 

Data analysis: Histograms

Week 7: Parties & Interest Groups – (May 9th, 11th)

How do parties function? Who runs them? Do they get in the way of good government, or are they essential to it?

Readings:

- Straayer, “Political Parties and Partisanship” 
- Selection from Samish, *The Secret Boss of California* 

Data analysis: Graphing scatterplots

Week 8: Local Government – (May 16th)

What is the relationship between local and state governments? What kinds of functions do local governments perform?

Readings:

- Smith, chapter 10
- Peirce, “Privatized Neighborhoods: The Future We Want?” 

Film in class on May 18th (“Street Fight”)

Data analysis: More scatterplots

Week 9: Governors – (May 23rd, 25th)

What are the jobs of governors? Why have America's governors become so powerful in states that were supposed to be dominated by legislatures?

Readings:

- Smith, chapter 7
- “Governor” by Robert Lorch 
- Wright, “Working with the Executive Branch, Part I – Madeleine Kunin”



Data analysis: Regression

Research papers due Tuesday, May 23rd

Week 10: Direct Democracy – (May 30th, June 1st)

Can the people govern by themselves? Which states are using initiatives, referenda, and recalls, and are they better for it?

Readings:

- Bowler and Donovan, “Direct Democracy in the American States” 
- Kousser, “The California Governor’s Recall” 

Final review

Final in class Tuesday, June 6th