

Law and American Political Development

Political Science 250
Tuesdays 12:00 to 2:50
2145 Watkins

Spring 2026

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Course Overview

This course will explore critical questions of law and institutional development in American politics across time. We consider a historical-institutionalist perspective as a lens on the relationship between law, politics, culture, economics, and social forces.

The study of American Political Development (APD) emerged a half-century ago as scholars sought to better understand American state-building. The field began with the questions of why the power of the courts and of parties grew up through the late 19th century, and why dynamics changed in ensuing decades. Since then, the APD approach has grown to consider other big questions: How has the American political system transformed since the Founding? How do scholars identify and trace the critical periods of state-building? In what ways did the civil rights movement shape the contours of citizenship? What is the role of legal institutions in development? APD scholars situate their analyses in the long term. Through this focus, they are able to piece together informative accounts of the institutions that govern America. This course is not simply interested in explaining a particular moment in time; our task is to ask big questions about stability and change.

Readings

Most readings will be available on Canvas or via the UCR library. There are four books you will need to acquire, however.

-Paul Frymer, *Building an American Empire*, Princeton University Press, 2017.

-Richard Bense. *The Political Economy of American Industrialization, 1877-1900*, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

-Dan Carpenter, *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy: Reputation, Networks, and Policy Innovation in Executive Agencies, 1862-1928*, Princeton University Press, 2001.

-Megan Ming Francis, *Civil Rights and the Making of the Modern American State*, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Class Schedule

Week One, 3/31: Lecture

Week Two, 4/7: Foundations of American Political Development

Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, *The Search for American Political Development*, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Introduction

Béland, Daniel, *Policy Feedback: How Policies Shape Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 2022.
Chapter 2

Adam Sheingate, "Institutional Dynamics and American Political Development," *Annual Review of Political Science* 17 (2014), 462-75.

Sean Gaimard, *Agents of Empire: English Imperial Governance and the Making of American Political Institutions*, Cambridge University Press, 2024.

Chapters 1 and 4

Week Three, 4/14: Settler Colonialism

Aziz Rana, "Colonialism and Constitutional Memory," *UC Irvine Law Review*, 2015.

Paul Frymer, *Building an American Empire*, Princeton University Press, 2017.

Selections

You will need to purchase this book.

Week Four, 4/21: Reconstruction

Rick Valelly, *Two Reconstructions*, University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Chapters 1, 2, and 6

W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 1935 and multiple re-prints.

Chapters 1 through 4

Week Five, 4/28: Industrialization

Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877-1920*, Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Selection posted on Canvas.

Richard Bense. *The Political Economy of American Industrialization, 1877-1900*, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Selections.

You will need a purchase this book.

Recommended:

Suresh Naidu, "Recruitment Restrictions and Labor Markets: Evidence from the Postbellum U.S. South," *Journal of Labor Economics*, Vol 28, No. 2 November 2008.

Week Six, 5/5: The Regulatory State

Dan Carpenter, *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy: Reputation, Networks, and Policy Innovation in Executive Agencies, 1862-1928*, Princeton University Press, 2001.

Selections.

You will need a purchase this book.

Emily Zackin and Chloe Thurston, *Political Development of American Debt Relief*, University of Chicago Press, 2024.

Chapters 1 and 4

Recommended:

Suzanne Mettler, *The Submerged State: How Invisible Government Policies Undermine American Democracy*, University of Chicago Press, 2011.

Chapter 1

Week Seven, 5/12: Jim Crow

Robert Mickey, *Paths Out of Dixie: The Democratization of Authoritarian Enclaves in America's Deep South, 1944-1972*, Princeton University Press, 2015.

Kimberley Johnson "Jim Crow Reform and the Democratization of the South." In *Race and American Political Development*, pp. 155-179.

Week Eight, 5/19: Civil Rights

Megan Ming Francis, *Civil Rights and the Making of the Modern American State*, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Selections.

You will need a purchase this book.

Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, Princeton University Press, 2000.

Introduction.

Recommended:

Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past*, *The Journal of American History*, March 2005

<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jah/91.4/hall.html>

Week Nine, 5/26: Crime and Incarceration

Vesla Weaver, "Frontlash: Race and the Development of Punitive Crime Policy," *Studies in American Political Development*, 2007.

Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*, Harvard University Press, 2016.

Chapters 1 and 8

Kirstine Taylor, *Sunbelt Capitalism and the Making of the Carceral State*, University of Chicago Press, 2025.

Chapters 1 and 5

Week Ten, 6/2: Newest Directions in The Field

Danny Daneri and Paul Frymer, "The Invisible Farmworker: Racial Political Economy, Policy Development, and the Second Dimension of Power," *Polity* 2026-04, Vol.58 (2), p.306-335

Grogan, Colleen M. Grogan, "Medicaid's Political Development since 1965: How a Fragmented and Unequal Program Has Expanded," *Journal of Health Politics, Policy, and Law* (2025) 50 (2): 137–164.

John A. Dearborn, "Contesting the Reach of the Rights Revolution: The Reagan Administration and the Unitary Executive," *Studies in American Political Development*, May 2025, pp. 83-109

Ann-Marie Szymanski, "Air Pollution Control in New Jersey and Ohio: Institutional Legacies and State Building, 1954–1970," *Studies in American Political Development*, August 2025

Short Papers: 50% of grade

For four of the nine weeks upcoming in the term, you will submit a brief analysis of that week's class readings on Monday night, before class meets. You may choose which weeks to write. At least two need to be in April.

Your analysis can take many forms. You can compare and contrast this week's readings with each other, with readings from prior weeks, or with readings from other classes. You can focus on one paper or book and evaluate its strengths and weaknesses. You can assess the implications of week's paper or books for future research questions.

Don't simply summarize the readings. If you'd like, you may focus on just one of the week's readings.

You may be asked to provide a verbal recap of your analysis for the class.

Maximum length of short papers is 3 pages.

Term Paper: 50% of grade

You will select a research question about American political development and law. Describe the question and then produce a literature review. In other words, you'll identify how existing research can inform and improve the development of hypotheses on this question. I expect that while you may draw on class readings, you will conduct extensive independent reading.

You won't be graded on your research question, although it does have to be plausible. The objective is for you to identify a question that you think is important and examine the literature that relates to it. It's not unusual to discover, during the literature review, that your original question has already been answered. Give yourself time so that you re-craft your question if needed.

The maximum length of your term paper is 25 pages.

Academic Integrity

As a student in Political Science 250, you agree to uphold the fundamental standards of honesty, respect, and integrity, and you accept the responsibility to encourage others to adhere to these standards.

Unsure what constitutes academic integrity? See UCR policies and procedures here:

<https://conduct.ucr.edu/policies/academic-integrity-policies-and-procedures>

If you would like further clarification about whether a particular action constitutes academic misconduct, please ask me for guidance before an assignment is due. "I didn't know" is never an acceptable excuse for academic misconduct.

Use of Technology

It is unacceptable to use technology that substitutes for your own independent work. Spell check is okay. Any technology that rewrites or reorganizes sentences and paragraphs, summarizes content, or generates analysis is not. This includes AI tools such as Grammarly, Chat GPT, and any similar software.

Attribution

Whenever you refer to factual information or to an author's argument, you must provide an attribution. This applies when you quote someone or when you summarize another's ideas or findings.

You cannot make minor edits to another's phrasing. You must either quote the author or restate the author's ideas with significantly different phrasing. Please include a parenthetical phrase in the text that includes the author's last name and the date of publication. If you're referring to a quote or to information or ideas from particular page(s), include the page number(s) to which you are referring. Example: (Jones 2010, 22). In addition to providing a parenthetical citation in the text, you should include full bibliographic information in a list of references at the end of the paper.

Check with a style manual on how to structure your bibliography.

Plagiarism is a very bad idea. A paper that includes plagiarized materials of any kind will earn a grade of 0.