

**Princeton School of Public and International Affairs**  
**Graduate Program**  
**Summer 2022**

**August 11-13**  
**Wallace 300**

**Introduction to American Political Institutions**  
**Charles M. Cameron**

---

This course provides a very brief introduction to American political institutions and public policy. The course is intended for and restricted to non-American masters-level students of public policy.

The course does not assume any prior familiarity with American political institutions, politics, history, personalities, or public policy. There are no grades. There is a brief provocative reading for the last session. However, active engaged thoughtful participation in seminar is expected. In that sense, the course is also an introduction to American-style graduate school.

The course consists of nine sessions with:

- Seven 50-minute lectures covering the basics of American government,
- One simulation introducing American elections in comparative perspective, and
- One discussion of important recent events in American politics and possible future developments.

The amount of material covered in the class is far more than can be absorbed in a compressed span, even by elite policy professionals. However, you will find that over time, the content of the course will come back to you and help you decipher the often bizarre and mysterious American political system, as you encounter it in other classes and professionally. At least, that is the goal.

To facilitate this, a copy of *all the session slides and course materials have been placed for you on line*, as well as a selection of graphs and data about many aspects of American life, politics, and policy. You may peruse these at your leisure.

**Course Web Page**

The slides, lecture notes, rules for the election simulation, useful/interesting charts and graphs, and the brief reading for Session Nine are available at:

<https://scholar.princeton.edu/ccameron/intro>

**Course Organization & Schedule**

Thursday 4.00-4.50	Session 1: Introduction, Constitutional Design, Incentive Systems
Thursday 5.00-5.50	Session 2: Congress
Thursday 6.00-6.50	Dinner + Session 3: The President
Friday 9.00-9.50	Session 4: The Federal Civil Service
Friday 10.00-10.30	Session 5: U.S. Courts & Legal System
Friday 10.40-11.50	Session 6: The Elections Game: Understanding American Elections
Saturday 9.00-9.50	Session 7: Media, Interest Groups, Political Parties
Saturday 10.00-10.50	Session 8: The Main Contours of American Public Policy
Saturday 11.00-11.50	Session 9: Recent Developments and the Future

## Guide to Sessions

### Session 1: Introduction/Constitution & Incentive Systems

#### You will learn:

- 1) How the U.S. Constitution sets up the government
- 2) How the U.S. constitutional design differs from a parliamentary system
- 3) The logic behind the separation-of-powers design
- 4) The varieties of “checks and balances” built into the system
- 5) The incentives for policy actors created by the constitutional design

### Session 2: Congress

#### You will learn:

- 1) Why Congress is so powerful – in theory
- 2) How Congress is organized
- 3) How a bill becomes a Law
- 4) The extent of ideological polarization in Congress
- 5) The consequences of ideological polarization

School House Rock: How a Bill Becomes a Law

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFroMQKiag>

### Session 3: The President

#### You will learn:

- 1) Why the president is constitutionally weak
- 2) How presidents nonetheless create power
- 3) The 5 jobs of the president
- 4) The 6 tools presidents use to perform the jobs

### Session 4: The Federal Civil Service

#### You will learn:

- 1) How the federal civil service is organized
- 2) The four personnel policies that make the federal civil service unique
- 3) The adverse consequences of the four policies
- 4) Possible reforms and barriers to reform

### Session 5: U.S. Courts and the Legal System

#### You will learn:

- 1) How the U.S. legal system differs from a civil law system
- 2) How the federal judiciary is organized, and why
- 3) How state and federal courts divide their jobs
- 4) How courts force administrative agencies to obey the rule of law
- 5) Why the Supreme Court is limited in its ability to affect social change

## Session 6: The Elections Game

### You will learn:

- 1) Why candidates select particular policy platforms
- 2) Why there are only two effective parties in the US
- 3) What happens when candidate platforms are controlled by policy extremists

Rules for the party game

## Session 7: Non-state Actors & Influence Activities

### You will learn:

- 1) How the media has changed over time, and what the political consequences are
- 2) Why, for citizen knowledge of politics, “the mean is low but the variance is high”
- 3) Why the number of interest groups exploded in the 1970s, and what difference it makes
- 4) How firms have become political activists, but why that can be dangerous for them
- 5) How reform of political parties facilitated congressional polarization
- 6) How lobbying works

Real lobbyists at work

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lbv3kMYcME&t=275s>

## Session 8: American Public Policy

### You will learn:

- 1) How and why the US government grew over time
- 2) Why the federal government is “an insurance company with an army”
- 3) Where the federal government gets its money
- 4) What state and local governments do
- 5) How and why the federal government is a “hidden state”

## Session 9: The Future of American Politics

Recent developments and the immediate future. Also, a chance for you to discuss anything else about bizarre America that you want to.

Two Provocative Readings

Brett Deveraux, “Is the United States Exceptional?” July, 2022. Putting aside the deliberately incendiary language: the U.S. is very big, very rich, and unprecedentedly powerful – so far.

Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson, “Beyond Constitutional Crisis: Perdition or Salvage?” Is the U.S. headed for dissolution – a switch from one exceptional country to two ordinary ones? Maybe.

Manuscript, August 2022.

Charles Cameron  
Monday, August 8, 2022  
Princeton, NJ