

PS129 Understanding Politics

Seminar Leaders: Berit Ebert, Aysuda Kölemen, Boris Vormann

Course Times: Wednesdays 14:00-17:15

Location: Seminar rooms, lecture hall and city visits as announced below

Email: b.ebert@berlin.bard.edu; a.kolemen@berlin.bard.edu; b.vormann@berlin.bard.edu

Office Hours: by appointment

Course Description

This class covers three aspects of what an academic engagement with politics presupposes. First, it provides an introduction to key concepts (nation, democracy, power, federalism, institutions, etc.), debates (e.g. state-market relations, subsidiarity, globalization, etc.), and traditions of thought (e.g. (neo-)liberalism, realism, Marxism, etc.) in political science. As such, the class facilitates a deeper understanding of the role of political science as an academic discipline within the broader range of social science traditions. Second, the course explores historical developments of the past, providing students with an overview of actors and institutions at various scales within and beyond nation-states as well as the evolution of the global political economy. Finally, the course introduces students to foundational methodological tools and academic skills. In sum, students will gain familiarity with central concepts, debates and theory traditions in political science and its subfields, deepen their understanding of major developments, players and power relationships in recent global political history, and develop foundational methodological skills.

Requirements

Required Textbooks

→ Course Reader

→ White-Spunner, Barney. 2020. Berlin: The Story of a City. London: Simon & Schuster.

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Accommodations

Bard College Berlin is committed to inclusion and providing equal access to all students; we uphold and maintain all aspects of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and Section 3 of the German Disability Equality Act of April 27, 2002 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 1468). If you have a disability, or think you may have a disability, please contact the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, Atticus Kleen, (accommodations@berlin.bard.edu) to request an official accommodation.

Requests for accommodations should be made as early as possible to ensure adequate time for coordination and planning. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and may require advance notice to implement.

If you have already been approved for accommodations with the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, please arrange to meet with me outside of class so that we can develop an implementation plan.

Students may face extenuating circumstances related to various personal or external factors, which impact their academic performance. While these circumstances often do not fall within

the legal framework of Disability Accommodations, Bard College Berlin is committed to supporting students experiencing such circumstances. A student needing a short extension or a replacement assignment because of an extenuating circumstance is encouraged to make arrangements directly with instructors if possible. If further support is needed, please visit the Bard College Berlin Accessibility page. Questions about this process can be directed to James Harker (j.harker@berlin.bard.edu) or Maria Anderson-Long (m.andersonlong@berlin.bard.edu).

Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) should not affect the participation grade or require documentation.

Bard College Berlin may not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where a professor agrees to accept a late assignment, it should be submitted by the new deadline agreed upon by both parties. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students receive mid- and end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Assignments and Grade Breakdown

Oral

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| ● Participation | 30% (2*15%) |
| This seminar involves thoughtful and active participation, based on the readings and the topics covered in the course, in class discussions and working groups. The classroom is a protected space and you should feel free to voice your arguments and comments. Please do not hesitate to address the seminar leaders if you feel that this is not the case. | |

Written

- | | |
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| ● Mid-term (Oct 15, 2025) | 30% |
| The in-class mid-term exam for "Understanding Politics" will encompass a range of questions designed to evaluate students' grasp of the course material and their ability to engage in critical reflection. This assessment will include short answer prompts and essay questions that require detailed analysis and synthesis of key political concepts and theories discussed throughout the semester. Students will be expected to demonstrate their understanding of political systems, ideologies, and institutions, as well as their ability to critically evaluate contemporary political issues and debates. The exam aims to assess not only factual knowledge but also the capacity to apply theoretical insights to real-world political scenarios. | |
| ● Final exam (Dec 10, 2025) | 40% |
| The final exam will be an in-class essay to evaluate your critical thinking, analytical skills, and mastery of the course material. This format aims to demonstrate your ability to construct a well-organized, coherent, and compelling argument based on the course content. Ensure you come prepared with a thorough understanding of class topics, as this is your chance to showcase your knowledge and analytical abilities in a focused, time-constrained setting. Good luck! | |

Schedule

1) Sept 3	<p>What is Politics? → Meet in the Lecture Hall</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is Politics? Actors, Processes, Institutions 2. Political science and its subfields 3. Introduction to politics faculty 4. Discussion of syllabus <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hague (2016), Introduction • Mansbridge (2014), What is Political Science For?
2) Sept 10	<p>States and Nations → Meet in in Seminar Rooms</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Seminar Groups 2. Lecture (BE): “Sovereignty, Democracy and the State” <p>Readings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gellner (1983), Nations and Nationalism • Wallerstein (2004), The Rise of the Modern State System • Manow and Ziblatt (2014), The Layered State
3) Sept 17	<p>1740-1840: Nationbuilding (Tour with Aya Soika) → Meet at M1 station “Hackescher Markt”</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White-Spunner, Berlin, Chapters 4 & 5 • For more context, we recommend the first half of White-Spunner’s talk
4) Sept 24	<p>States and Markets → Meet in in Seminar Rooms</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Seminar Groups 2. Lecture (BV): “States and Markets: Different Traditions of Thought” <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tonkiss and Slater (2004), Market Society
5) Oct 1	<p>1840-1871: Unification and Industrialization (organized by Boris) → Meet in the foyer of Technikmuseum (Trebbiner Str. 9, 10963 Berlin)</p> <p>Readings: White-Spunner, Berlin, Chapter 6 Please watch Tooze, Bismarck, Realpolitik and the Birth of a Nation</p>
6) Oct 8	<p>Imperialism and Colonialism → Meet in in Seminar Rooms</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Seminar Groups 2. Lecture (AK): “Imperialism” <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Howe (2002), Empire: A Very Short Introduction, ch. 1 • Dubois (1915), African Roots of the War • Bhambra (2022), Reparatory Social Science <p>Optional:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White-Spunner, Berlin, Chapter 7
7) Oct 15	<p>Mid-term exam</p>

***Fall break, Oct. 20 - Sun Oct. 26 ***

8) Oct 29

Fascism and Totalitarianism → Meet in in Seminar Rooms

1. Seminar Groups
2. Lecture (BE): “A Response to Fascism: The European Union”

Readings:

- De la Torre (2025), Populism and Fascism
- Kershaw (1989), The Nazi State: An Exceptional State?
- Schumann (1950), Schumann declaration May 1950
- Rufo (2024), The New Right Activism
- Brooks (2024), My Unsettling Interview with Steve Bannon

9) Nov 5

1918-1945: Democratic Failure and Fascism (organized by Berit)
→ Gedenkstätte und Museum Sachsenhausen (Straße der Nationen 22; D-16515 Oranienburg) → Please be there at 2pm sharp!

Reading:

- White-Spunner, Berlin, Chapters 8 & 9

10) Nov 12

Fordism in the Global Context → Meet in in Seminar Rooms

1. Seminar Groups
2. Lecture (AK): “Fordism and Worlds of Welfare”

Readings:

- Nye (2013), America's assembly line

11) Nov 19

1945-1989: Cold War and Bretton Woods Order (organized by Aysuda)
→ Stasimuseum, Normannenstraße 20/Haus 1, 10365 Berlin

Reading:

- White-Spunner, Berlin, Chapters 10 & 11

12) Nov 26

Neoliberal Globalization and Uneven Development → Meet in in Seminar Rooms

1. Seminar Groups
2. Lecture (BV): “Neoliberalization and the Global City”

Readings:

- Coe et al. (2007), Introduction to Economic Geography
- White-Spunner, Berlin, Chapter 12

13) Dec 3

Instability of the International Liberal Order → Lecture Hall

- Seminar Group
- Conclusions and Evaluations

Readings:

- Dicken (2001), The State Really Does Matter
- Mead (2014), The Return of Geopolitics
- Ikenberry (2014), The Illusion of Geopolitics

14) Dec 10

Final Exam