

PS129 Understanding Politics

Seminar Leaders: Berit Ebert, Boris Vormann

Course Times: Group A (Ebert): Mon & Wed 14:00-15:30 // Group B (Vormann): Wed & Frid 14:00-15:30

Location: Seminar rooms, lecture hall

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Office Hours: by appointment

Course Description

This course provides a broad introduction to political science as an academic discipline, equipping students with the conceptual, historical, and methodological foundations necessary for rigorous engagement with politics. Moving through five thematic blocks, the course begins by situating political science as a discipline and introducing the state as an object of study, before turning to political philosophy — power, authority, freedom, justice, and the major ideological traditions and their critiques. It then moves into comparative politics, examining competing theories of the state (institutionalist, Marxist, liberal, Weberian/Hintzean, feminist) and the role of political culture, before turning to international relations, including the history and theory of the global order, security, international organizations, the European Union, global political economy, environmentalism, and debates over a post-Western order. The course concludes by introducing key methodological and epistemological debates in political science, including the divide between positivist and interpretivist approaches and the relationship between scholarship and political engagement. By the end of the course, students will have gained familiarity with central concepts, debates, and theoretical traditions across the subfields of political science, developed an understanding of major actors and power relationships in modern political history, and acquired foundational methodological tools for independent academic work in the social sciences.

Requirements

Required Textbooks

→ Course Reader

→ Robert Garner, Peter Ferdinand, Stephanie Lawson. 2026. *Introduction to Politics. Sixth Edition*. Oxford University Press.

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 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 exam (Oct 16, 2026) | 30% |
| The in-class mid-term exam 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 scenarios. | |
| ● Final exam (Dec 11, 2026) | 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! | |

Week
beginning

Session 1

Session 2

I. Political Science as a Discipline

What is politics, and how do we study it academically? This opening section introduces students to political science as a discipline, exploring some of its central questions, core concepts, and major subfields. We examine the nature of political analysis and the role of the state as a foundational object of study.

1
Aug 31

Analyzing Politics

Please read:

- Garner et al., Chapter 1
- Mansbridge, *What is Political Science For?* (2014)

Politics and the State

- Garner et al., Chapter 2
- Weber, *Economy and Society* (1922/2019)

II. Political Philosophy: Foundational Ideas and Ideologies

Why should anyone obey political authority? This section engages foundational questions of political philosophy, exploring what makes rule legitimate, how freedom and justice have been theorized, and what ideological traditions — from liberalism to Marxism to feminist thought — have shaped political thinking.

2
Sept 7,

Power and Authority

- Garner et al., Chapter 3
- Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (1974/2005)

Freedom and Justice

- Garner et al., Chapter 5
- Kelsen, *What is justice?* (1973)

3
Sept 14

Traditional Ideologies

- Garner et al., Chapter 6
- Locke, *Second Treatise* (1689), Ch. 2
- Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), excerpts
- Marx/Engels, *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845)

Critiques of Dominant Ideologies

- Garner et al., Chapter 7
- Foucault, *Truth and Power* (1977)
- Young, *Five Faces of Oppression* (1991)

III. Comparative Politics: Perspectives on the State?

How do political systems differ across time and place, and why does it matter? This section introduces students to comparative politics through competing theories of the state — institutionalist, Marxist, liberal, Weberian/Hintzean, and feminist — before turning to the role of political culture in shaping governance.

4
Sept 21

What is an Institution?

- Garner et al., Chapter 8
- North, *Institutions* (1991)

Marxist State Theory

- Marx, "Preface" (1859), paragraph
- Poulantzas, *The Problem of the Capitalist State* (1969)
- Miliband, *The Capitalist State: Reply to Poulantzas* (1970)

5
Sept 28

Liberal State Theory

- Locke, *Second Treatise* (1689), Ch. 19
- Dahl, *A Critique of Ruling Elite Model* (1958)

Weberian and Hintzean Theories

- Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime" (1985)
- Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions* (1979), Ch. 1 excerpt

6 Oct 5	Feminist State theory - MacKinnon, <i>Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: Toward Feminist Jurisprudence</i> (1983) - Pateman, <i>The Sexual Contract</i> (1988), Ch. 1	Political culture - Garner et al., Chapter 9 - Mitchell, <i>The Limits of the State</i> (1991)
7 Oct 12	Summary and Mid-term Preparation - Manow/Ziblatt, <i>The Layered State</i> (2014) - Vom Hau, <i>State Theory: Four Analytical Traditions</i> (2014)	Midterm Exam

***Fall break Oct 19-25 ***

IV. International Relations: Global Order This section examines the theories, institutions, and power arrangements that have shaped the modern international order. We begin with the origins and theoretical approaches of international relations as a field, before turning to security, international organizations, and regional integration through the case of the European Union. The section then considers global political economy, environmentalism, and debates over a post-Western order.		
8 Oct 26	What is International Relations? - Garner et al., Chapter 16 - Wallerstein, <i>The Rise of the State System</i> (2004)	Theories and Approaches Garner et al., chapters 17 & 18
9 Nov 2	Security - Garner et al., Chapter 19 - Hobbes, <i>Leviathan</i> (1651), Ch. 13	International Organizations - Garner et al., Chapter 21 - Kant, <i>Toward Perpetual Peace</i> (1795), excerpt
10 Nov 9	The European Union: A Case apart? - Hooghe/Marks, <i>Multi-level Governance</i> (2001) - Grimm, <i>EU's Democratic Legitimacy</i> (2017)	Global political economy - Garner et al., Chapter 22 - Marx, <i>Communist Manifesto</i> (1848), Chapter 1
11 Nov 16	Environmentalism - Garner et al., Chapter 23 - Ostrom, <i>Governing the Commons</i> (1990), chapter 1	A Post-Western Order? - Garner et al., Chapter 24 - Fanon, <i>The Wretched of the Earth</i> (1961), conclusion

V. Political Science Methods and Approaches How do political scientists actually produce knowledge? This closing section introduces students to key methodological and epistemological debates in the discipline, including the divide between positivist and interpretivist approaches and questions about political science's status as a science. We also reflect on the relevance of the social sciences and the tension between academic scholarship and political engagement.		
12 Nov 23	Epistemology and Ontology Furlong and Marsh, <i>A Skin not a Sweater</i> (2010)	Is Political Science a Science? Keohane et al., <i>The Science in Social Science</i> (1994)
13 Nov 30	A Human Science? Shapiro, <i>The Flight from Reality</i> (2005)	Relevance and Role of the Social Sciences - Burroway, <i>For Public Sociology</i> (2004) - Lukianoff/ Haidt, <i>The Coddling of the American Mind</i> (2015)
14 Dec 7	Conclusions	Final Exam