

**Economics 410**  
**Public Choice, Fall 2021**  
**Instructor: Garrett Jones**  
**Office Hours:**      **M 3-4 outside GMU Panera**  
                          *(Argo Tea in bad weather, location subject to change)*  
                          **T 2-3 via Zoom, also by appointment**

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Welcome to our in-person course! This semester we'll use the economic way of thinking to understand politics—an approach that was pioneered and developed by many of my colleagues here at George Mason University, including Richard Wagner, Bryan Caplan, Alex Tabarrok, the late Gordon Tullock, and the late Nobel Laureate James Buchanan. And since I've worked on Capitol Hill a few times, I'll be able to bring into the classroom some knowledge of how modern politics works.

Our course, which meets every Monday, is organized into weekly lessons. You'll see that the weekly lessons include a mix of readings, PowerPoints, and videos. When we meet once a week, I will rarely lecture for the entire time. Instead, you'll come to class having studied the basics of the week's material, and we'll use a substantial portion of class time—around a third—for in-class experiments, practice, problem-solving, and discussion. On Blackboard, the course material is always available at the tab denoted "**Learn Here: Weekly Lessons**".

Every lesson has accompanying PowerPoint slides that I've created. Sometimes they focus precisely on the assigned readings, and sometimes I'm discussing elements of public choice that aren't covered at all in the textbook. In that way, the PowerPoints work like a traditional lecture—and I'll complement those PowerPoints with in-class lecture as well.

You'll see that I've also provided links to short videos on YouTube that cover some issues better than I could myself—obviously so in the cases of Gordon Tullock and Elinor Ostrom, who explain some of their most influential ideas themselves. I was fortunate to hear both of them speak while they lived, and these short videos capture some part of their personal presence.

Every week I'll hold both in-person and Zoom office hours. Also, you'll have short mandatory Blackboard quizzes most weeks. They're open book, only 5 questions each, they cover quite basic material, and you're welcome to work on them with your classmates. But they do have a **fixed time limit**—*and once the clock starts ticking you can't stop it*. The quizzes will add up to 10% of your semester grade. I assign them so you have a basic idea of what topics I'm interested in, and to encourage you to keep up with the material. The median score, based on past experience, will likely be 5/5.

Your two exams—a midterm and a final—will both be **in-person** exams with 100-minute time limits.

The single midterm exam and the scheduled final will each be 35% each of your semester grade. The quizzes, a big homework assignment due in the first half of the semester, and two writing assignments due in the second half of the semester, will together add up to the final 30%.

**Required Textbooks, available in the University Bookstore and online at modest prices:**

Kenneth Shepsle, *Analyzing Politics*, Second Edition.  
Garett Jones, *10% Less Democracy*.

Both books are fortunately inexpensive relative to most course textbooks, and *10% Less Democracy* is available for Kindle and other e-reader formats.

The first half of the semester we'll focus on Shepsle's textbook, which surveys classical public choice—also known as classical political economy. Shepsle, a professor at Harvard and coauthor of a leading introductory textbook on American politics, has himself been a major contributor to this literature.

In the second half of the semester, we'll focus on behavioral and institutional approaches to political economy—with my new book, *10% Less Democracy*, as a guide through much of that literature.

**Additional Readings**

I have assigned additional required readings beyond the two textbooks. All are available via Blackboard under “Learn Here: Weekly Lessons”—if I don’t provide a PDF, I’ve provided a direct link. The course outline mentions most of the readings, but Blackboard will contain all of them.

***Course Outline***

**Week 1: August 23**

**The Power of the Median Voter Theorem**

Shepsle, Chapter 1. Shepsle, Chapter 5, pages 90-99.

Plunkitt of Tammany Hall, “Honest and Dishonest Graft.”

Cal Poly Pomona, Median Voter Theorem illustration, video.

**Week 2: August 30**

**Condorcet & Arrow & Dividing the Dollar**

Shepsle, Chapters 2-4, rest of Chapter 5.

James Buchanan, “Public Choice: Politics Without Romance.”

Kelsey Houston-Edwards on Voting Systems and the Condorcet Paradox, video.

### **Week 3: September 6**

#### **Lies & Strategy**

Shepsle, Chapters 6.

Overview of Timur Kuran's *Private Truths, Public Lies*, at Harvard University Press.

Application of Timur Kuran's *Private Truths, Public Lies* to the Arab Spring, at Harvard University Press.

538.com applies Kuran's theory to President Trump (October 2019).

### **Week 4: September 13**

#### **Alternative Voting Methods, Including Unanimity**

Shepsle, Chapter 7.

Buchanan & Tullock, excerpts from *Calculus of Consent* on unanimity rule.

### **Week 5: September 20**

#### **Cooperation and Collective Action**

Shepsle, Chapters 8-9.

Gordon Tullock explains why he doesn't vote, video.

### **Week 6: September 27**

#### **Ostrom and Institutional Diversity**

Shepsle, Chapters 10.

Elinor Ostrom, Nobel Lecture.

Elinor Ostrom explains the challenge of managing common pool resources in an interview with the OECD, video.

### **Week 7: October 4**

#### **The Median and Meaning**

Shepsle, "Summary of Part II," pages 226-228.

Eric Levitz, "David Shor's Unified Theory of the 2020 Election," *New York Magazine*.

"Daisy" Advertisement, from Lyndon Johnson's 1964 presidential campaign, video.

### **Week 8: October 11**

#### **The Midterm**

#### **Midterm Exam: 30% of grade**

### **Week 9: October 18**

#### **The Division of Labour is Limited By the Extent of the Government**

Shepsle, Chapter 11, also Chapter 12, pages 369-379.

Timur Kuran interviews Douglass North on institutions, video.

"I'm Just a Bill," *Schoolhouse Rock*, video.

## **Week 10: October 25**

### **Congress without Chaos**

Shepsle, Chapter 12.

Fenno, Richard F. "The House Appropriations Committee as a political system: The problem of integration." *American Political Science Review* (1962).

Sullivan, Terry. "Voter's paradox and logrolling." *Public Choice* (1976).

## **Week 11: November 1**

### **Niskanen, McNollGast, and the Supply Side of Government**

Shepsle, Chapter 13.

PBS NewsHour segment on Congressional oversight.

## **Week 12: November 8**

### **Money and Influence in Politics**

Ansolabehere, Stephen, John M. De Figueiredo, and James M. Snyder Jr. "Why is there so little money in US politics?." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* (2003).

Dwight Eisenhower's Military-Industrial Complex Speech.

Bruce Yandle, "Bootleggers and Baptists: The Education of a Regulatory Economist."

Maggie Koerth, 538.com, "Money and Elections: A Complicated Love Story," 2018.

Michael Munger on classic Krueger/Tullock rent-seeking, video.

Fusion, 2-minute overview on whether money buys elections, video.

Historians reflect on Eisenhower's Military-Industrial Complex speech, video.

## **Week 13: November 15**

### **10% Less Democracy**

*10% Less Democracy*, Introduction and Chapters 1-5.

Peter Orszag, "Too Much of a Good Thing," *The New Republic*, 2011.

Diana Thomas on rational voter ignorance, 2 minute video.

Minute Videos, "Democratic peace theory," 2 minute video.

## **Week 14: November 22**

### **The Case Against 10% Less Democracy**

*10% Less Democracy*, Chapters 6-10.

Critiques of *10% Less Democracy* by *The Economist*, Arnold Kling, and Bryan Caplan.

William F. Buckley on professors versus the phone book, 1 minute video.

## **Week 15: November 27**

### **Papers in Non-Market Decision Making**

Hans Noel, "Ten Things Political Scientists Know that You Don't," *The Forum*, 2010.

Gary Miller, *Managerial Dilemmas: The Political Economy of Hierarchy*, Introduction.

### **Final Exam: Monday, December 13, 4:30pm. Please plan accordingly**

I reserve the right to slightly alter the syllabus (deleting or shifting a chapter, for instance), as well as to require a few short (<10 pages) additional readings over the course of the semester. Blackboard will contain the complete list of readings for the semester.

## **Honor Code**

Please keep in mind that George Mason is an Honor Code University. All forms of academic dishonesty are forbidden in this course. Exams must entirely reflect your own work.

## **Grading**

Blackboard Quizzes:	10% total
Long Homework (1 <sup>st</sup> half of semester):	10% total
Short Papers (2 <sup>nd</sup> half of semester):	10% total
Midterm:	35%
Final:	35% (mandatory)

I will drop the two lowest Blackboard Quiz scores: these dropped scores will take the place of makeup quizzes or work-arounds for temporary computer problems.

I will also provide sample exam questions at least one week before the midterm and the final—they’re not a comprehensive guide to the exam, but they’ll show what general types of questions I ask. The final will focus on the second half of the course, but naturally concepts in the first half will unavoidably show up on the final, and the median voter theorem will appear on the final in some form.

## **Students with Disabilities**

Disability Services at George Mason University is committed to providing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students by upholding the laws that ensure equal treatment of people with disabilities. If you are seeking accommodations for this class, please first visit <http://dsgmu.wpeengine.com/> for detailed information about the Disability Services registration process. Then please discuss your approved accommodations with me. Disability Services is located in Student Union Building I (SUB I), Suite 2500. Email: ods@gmu.edu | Phone: (703) 993-2474

## **To repeat:**

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