

Economics 410
Public Choice, Fall 2022
Instructor: Garrett Jones
100% Online Course

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Office Hours: W 1:30-3pm via Zoom, and gladly by appointment

Welcome to our online course! This semester we'll use the economic way of thinking to understand politics—an approach 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 our course some knowledge of how modern politics works.

Our course is organized into weekly lessons. You'll see that the weekly lessons include a mix of readings, PowerPoints, and videos. On Blackboard, the course material is always available at the tab denoted "***Learn Here: Weekly Lessons.***"

Officially, I'm beginning every class week on Monday morning and ending early class week on Sunday night. Accordingly, assignments and quizzes will be *due* Sunday night before 11pm. You're always welcome to finish these tasks earlier in the week, but they're due Sunday night. *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 our textbook. In that way, the PowerPoints work like a traditional lecture. Also note that in many weeks, my Blackboard commentary ends up turning into a test-relevant lecture as well.

You'll see that I've 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 Nobel Laureate 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 Zoom office hours, and I'm glad to set up more upon request—feel free to come alone or set up small groups if you prefer. I won't set up weekly mandatory or optional lectures, since I really do want this to be an asynchronous course with the two exceptions noted below.

Also, you'll have short mandatory Blackboard quizzes most weeks. They're open book, should only take a few minutes if you've read in advance, and they cover quite basic material. But they do have a **fixed time limit**—*and once the clock starts ticking you can't stop it*. The quizzes (along with a few discussion board assignments) will add up to 10% of your semester grade. I assign the quizzes 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 quiz score, based on past experience, will likely be 5/5.

Your two exams—a midterm and a final—will both be **online** exams with 60-minute time limits. In both cases, the appointments will be **fixed**: The midterm will be on Wednesday, October 12, from 2pm to 3pm, and the final will be Wednesday, December 7, from 2pm to 3:30pm.

These are the only two mandatory appointments in this course:

**Wednesday, October 12, from 2pm to 3pm
Wednesday, December 7, from 2pm to 3:30pm.**

I'm keeping the examination times shorter than usual since the testing is remote: The exams are open-book, but with the short time period you'll have to be well prepared in advance for these brief exams.

The single midterm exam and the scheduled final will each be 35% each of your semester grade. The quizzes, discussion board assignments, two homework assignments 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.
Garrett 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. He's written the textbook in an informal style that does a good job substituting for an in-class lecture.

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 will be 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. And of course, my short essays and videos included in some Weekly Lessons are also assigned course material, often serving in lieu of a lecture.

Course Outline

Complete for textbook readings, subject to revision for the rest.

The date for each week notes the Monday, with two important Wednesday exceptions.

Week 1: August 22

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 29

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 5

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.

[Basic Voting Homework due Sunday night, September 11]

Week 4: September 12

Alternative Voting Methods, Including Unanimity

Shepsle, Chapter 7.

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

Week 5: September 19

Cooperation and Collective Action

Shepsle, Chapters 8-9.

Proto, Rustichini, and Sofianos [discuss their experiments](#) on which group traits predict cooperation in the repeated prisoners' dilemma, London School of Economics report.

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

[Advanced Voting Homework due Sunday night, September 18]

Week 6: September 26

Ostrom and Institutional Diversity

Shepsle, Chapters 10.

Elinor Ostrom, Nobel Lecture, excerpts.

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

Week 7: October 3**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*.
Assorted Shorian Populist Materials, post 2020, TBD as events arise.

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

Week 8: The Midterm, on Wednesday, October 12, at 2pm.**Midterm Exam: 35% of grade****Week 9: October 17****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 24**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), excerpts.

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

Simon Bazelon and Matt Yglesias. "The Rise and Importance of Secret Congress (2021).

Week 11: Halloween**Niskanen, McNollGast, and the Supply Side of Government**

Shepsle, Chapter 13.

PBS NewsHour segment on Congressional oversight.

Week 12: November 7**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.

[First Essay on Congressional Oversight due Sunday, November 13]

Week 13: November 14

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 21

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.

[Second Essay on The Case Against 10% Less Democracy due Sunday, November 25]

Week 15: November 26

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: Wednesday, December 7, 2:00pm. 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 and Discussions:	10% total
2 Homeworks (1 st half of semester):	10% total
Short Papers (2 nd 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.wpengine.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. Do feel free to contact me with any questions you might have about accommodations; I'm very glad to work with you.

To repeat:

Final Exam: Wednesday, December 7, 2:00pm. Please plan accordingly