

POLSCI 5109: Frontiers in Formal Theory and Comparative Politics

Lectures: 2:00–4:50pm, Seigle 207
Instructor: Elaine Yao (eyao@wustl.edu)
Office hours: [Sign up here](#), or e-mail for appointment

Term: Spring 2026
Credits: 3 hours
Office: Seigle 288

Course Description

This course explores frontiers in comparative politics and political economy through formal modeling. Its aim is to equip PhD students to contribute to active literatures using contemporary theoretical tools. Readings combine “pure” theory papers that have been fruitfully adapted into substantive political science research with comparative politics work that successfully incorporates formal-theoretic methods.

This is not intended to be either a comparative politics survey or general-purpose course in formal theory. The goal is instead to examine how selected formal tools can illuminate topics at the heart of comparative politics, such as propaganda and persuasion, media freedom, institutional weakness and persistence, and collective action.

The course is organized around theoretical frameworks rather than substantive topics or regions. Each section pairs “pure” and “applied” theoretical papers pertinent to political science/political economy. The theory papers represent the frontier of the modeling toolkit and emerging directions in economic theory. More applied pieces demonstrate how these tools can be used to generate substantive insights about regime change, policymaking, representation, and democratic backsliding. Students are not expected to master every proof, but they are expected to engage the frameworks critically and think about how they might adapt them in their own work.

Required texts: All readings and course materials will be uploaded to the canvas site. No additional materials are required.

Prerequisite: Theories of Individual and Collective Choice I (or equivalent training in game theory). It will be very helpful, though not required, to have completed Theories of Individual and Collective Choice II.

Learning objectives for students:

- To have written a model which constitutes the basis or a major part of a third-year paper, dissertation chapter, or publication;
- To be able to see and draw linkages between the tools of formal theory tools and substantive topics in comparative politics;
- To be able to understand the major classes of models and solution concepts that constitute the formal theoretical frontier of political science.

Course Organization and Requirements

I will generally lecture on the pure theory foundation, while students will present an applied piece leveraging the same tools. We'll then discuss the frameworks, identifying their merits and limitations, and brainstorming possible extensions or research directions.

Grading, assessments and deadlines. The student's grade will be based on the following criteria. Late assignments will be penalized by 5% each day they are late.

- Two draft **model sketches**, due on 2/15 and 3/22 (**10%** of the grade **each**)
- A **final paper** which more fully develops a model, due on 5/4 (**25%**)
- A **one-on-one meeting with me** to discuss model ideas. This can be anytime between the start of Week 2 and end of Week 12. (**10%**)
- An in-class "**lightning talk**" during the final two weeks of classes where students share their final paper model (**10%**)
- **Attendance and engagement** are required. Students may miss one class with no excuse or penalty. Absences for valid academic reasons (e.g. conferences/talks/seminars) are also excused if notification is given at least a week in advance. (**10%**)
- **Presentation of one of the papers listed under the course schedule.** A sign-up sheet will be circulated the first week. Students are expected to be present and engaged at one another's presentations. (**25%**)

The **grading scale** is standard and as follows. Students who take the course Pass/No Pass must score at least 70% to obtain a Pass.

| Score Range | Grade | Score Range | Grade |
|-------------|-------|-------------|-------|
| 97–100 | A+ | 77–79 | C+ |
| 93–96 | A | 73–76 | C |
| 90–92 | A- | 70–72 | C- |
| 87–89 | B+ | 67–69 | D+ |
| 83–86 | B | 63–66 | D |
| 80–82 | B- | 60–62 | D- |

AI and collaboration policy. You are free to ask generative AI questions, but you cannot pass off its output as its own. Similarly, you are free to discuss your projects and papers with classmates, but assessments will be graded on an individual basis. If students would like to collaborate or coauthor a model sketch with each other, they should talk to me.

Communication policy: I aim to respond to emails within 24 hours of receiving them during business days (M–F). If you don't receive a reply by then, feel free to send a follow-up.

Expectations and guidelines

- **Inclusive Learning Environment.** Please be respectful of your peers and mindful of the classroom environment. To facilitate an inclusive and productive learning environment, a number of resources are described below, which I encourage you to be familiar with.
- **Academic Integrity.** You are expected to understand and adhere to, the University's [academic integrity policy](#). In all academic work, the ideas and contributions of others (including generative AI) must be appropriately acknowledged and work that is presented as original must be, in fact, original. If you have any doubts about this, please ask.
- **Unauthorized recording.** Except as otherwise expressly authorized by the instructor or the university, students may not record, stream, reproduce, display, publish or further distribute any classroom activities or course materials. This includes lectures, class discussions, advising meetings, office hours, assessments, problems, answers, presentations, slides, screenshots or other materials presented as part of the course. If a student with a disability wishes to request the use of assistive technology as a reasonable accommodation, the student must first contact the Office of Disability Resources to seek approval. If recording is permitted, unauthorized use or distribution of recordings is also prohibited.
- **Disability resources.** WashU supports the right of all enrolled students to an equitable educational opportunity and strives to create an inclusive learning environment. In the event a physical or online environment, learning activity, or learning interaction results in barriers to your inclusion due to a disability, please contact WashU's Disability Resources (DR) to engage in a process for determining and communicating approved accommodations. As soon as possible after receiving an accommodation from DR, send me your WashU Accommodation Letter. Because accommodations are not applied retroactively, initiate your request to DR prior to, or at the beginning of, the academic term to avoid delays in accessing accommodations once classes begin. Please see disability.washu.edu for more information.
- **Sexual assault and harassment.** If you are a victim of sexual discrimination, harassment or violence, we encourage you to speak with someone as soon as possible. Understand that if you choose to speak to me as an instructor, I must report your disclosure to my department chair, dean, or the Gender Equity and Title IX Compliance Officer, which may trigger an investigation into the incident. You may also reach out to the [Relationship & Sexual Violence Prevention \(RSVP\) Center](#) to discuss your rights and your options with individuals who are not mandatory reporters. [Confidential resources](#) are also available.
- **Religious holidays.** To ensure accommodations can be made for students who miss class, assignments, or exams to observe a religious holiday, please inform me in writing before the end of the third week of class, or as soon as possible if the holiday occurs during the first three weeks of the semester. For more information, please see the university's [Religious Holiday Class Absence Policy](#).
- **Emergency preparedness.** Before an emergency affects our class, students can take steps to be prepared by downloading the WashU SAFE App. In addition, each classroom contains a "Quick Guide for Emergencies" near the door.
- **Resources for students.** WashU provides a wealth of support services that address academic, personal, and professional needs. To start exploring resources that can help you along the way, please visit: [Resources for Students](#).

Schedule of Topics

Papers marked with a ✕ represent “canonical theory” papers. Gray-colored “optional” papers are relevant but may not be covered in class.

I. INFORMATION AND PERSUASION

Information Design

- ✕ Kamenica, Emir, and Matthew Gentzkow. 2011. “Bayesian persuasion.” *American Economic Review* 101(6): 2590–2615.
- ✕ Lipnowski, Elliot, and Doron Ravid. 2020. “Cheap talk with transparent motives.” *Econometrica* 88(4): 1631–1660.
- ✕ Lipnowski, Elliot, Doron Ravid, and Denis Shishkin. 2022. “Persuasion via weak institutions.” *Journal of Political Economy* 130(10): 2705–2730.
- Gehlbach, Scott, and Konstantin Sonin. 2014. “Government control of the media.” *Journal of Public Economics* 118: 163–171.
- Boleslavsky, Raphael, Mehdi Shadmehr, and Konstantin Sonin. 2021. “Media freedom in the shadow of a coup.” *Journal of the European Economic Association* 19(3): 1782–1815.
- Prato, Carlo, and Ian R. Turner. 2022. “The institutional foundations of the power to persuade.” *American Journal of Political Science*.

Verifiable information and disclosure games

- ✕ Grossman, Sanford J., and Oliver D. Hart. 1980. “Disclosure laws and takeover bids.” *The Journal of Finance* 35(2): 323–334.
- ✕ Grossman, Sanford J. 1981. “The informational role of warranties and private disclosure about product quality.” *Journal of Law and Economics* 24(3): 461–483.
- ✕ Milgrom, Paul R. 1981. “Good news and bad news: Representation theorems and applications.” *The Bell Journal of Economics* 12(2): 380–391.
- ✕ Dye, Ronald A. 1985. “Disclosure of nonproprietary information.” *Journal of Accounting Research*: 123-145.
- ✕ Jung, Woon-Oh, and Young K. Kwon. 1988. “Disclosure when the market is unsure of information endowment of managers.” *Journal of Accounting Research*: 146-153.
- ✕ Acharya, Viral, Peter DeMarzo, and Ilan Kremer. 2011. “Endogenous information flows and the clustering of announcements.” *American Economic Review* 101.7: 2955-2979.
- Denisenko, Anna, Catherine Hafer, and Dimitri Landa. 2024. “Competence and advice.” *American Journal of Political Science*.

- Denisenko, Anna, Catherine Hafer, and Dimitri Landa. 2025. “Non-monotonic disclosure in policy advice.” Working paper.
- Schnakenberg, Keith, Jacob Montgomery, and Zion Little. 2026. “Pre-registration and private experimentation.” Working paper.

II. INSTITUTIONAL DYNAMICS

Experimentation and collective choice

- ✠ Keller, Godfrey, Sven Rady, and Martin Cripps. 2005. “Strategic experimentation with exponential bandits.” *Econometrica* 73(1): 39–68.
- Hirsch, Alexander. 2016. “Experimentation and persuasion in political organizations.” *American Political Science Review* 110(1): 68–84.
- Callander, Steven. 2011. “Searching for Good Policies.” *American Political Science Review*, 105.4: 643-662.

Collective experimentation and institutional control

- ✠ Strulovici, Bruno. 2010. “Learning while voting: Determinants of collective experimentation.” *Econometrica* 78(3): 933–971.
- Gieczewski, Germán, and Svetlana Kosterina. 2024. “Experimentation in endogenous organizations.” *Review of Economic Studies* 91(3): 1711–1745.

Institutional change, or the marvels of MPE

- ✠ Acemoglu, Daron, and James A. Robinson. 2001. “A theory of political transitions.” *American Economic Review* 91(4): 938–963.
- ✠ Lagunoff, Roger. 2009. “Dynamic stability and reform of political institutions.” *Games and Economic Behavior* 67(2): 569–583.
- ✠ Bai, Jinhui H., and Roger Lagunoff. 2011. “On the faustian dynamics of policy and political power.” *The Review of Economic Studies* 78(1): 17–48.
- Padró i Miquel, Gerard. 2007. “The control of politicians in divided societies: The politics of fear.” *The Review of Economic Studies* 74(4): 1259–1274.
- Svulik, Milan W. 2009. “Power sharing and leadership dynamics in authoritarian regimes.” *American Journal of Political Science* 53(2): 477–494.
- Egorov, Georgy, and Konstantin Sonin. 2026. “Why did Putin invade Ukraine? A theory of degenerate autocracy.” Forthcoming, *American Journal of Political Science*.
- Leventoğlu, Bahar. 2014. “Social mobility, middle class, and political transitions.” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 58(5): 825–864.

Relational Contracts (March 16)

- ✠ Levin, Jonathan. 2003. "Relational incentive contracts." *American Economic Review* 93(3): 835–857.
- ✠ Dixit, Avinash, Gene M. Grossman, and Faruk Gul. 2000. "The dynamics of political compromise." *Journal of Political Economy* 108(3): 531–568.
- ✠ Baker, George, Robert Gibbons, and Kevin J. Murphy. 2002. "Relational contracts and the theory of the firm." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 117(1): 39–84.
- Padró i Miquel, Gerard, and Pierre Yared. 2012. "The political economy of indirect control." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 127(2): 947–1015.
- Liu, Zanhui, Zhaotian Luo, Yucheng Qiu, Tianyang Xi, and Hongding Zhu. 2025. "Governing Local Bureaucracy in a Centralized State." Working paper.
- Luo, Zhaotian, Zanhui Liu, Yucheng Qiu, and Shuyi Yu. 2025. "A Relational Theory of Power Alternation." Working paper.

III. COLLECTIVE ACTION, NARRATIVES, AND IDENTITY

Global Games and Coordination (March 23)

- ✠ Morris, Stephen, and Hyun Song Shin. 1998. "Unique Equilibrium in a Model of Self-Fulfilling Currency Attacks," *American Economic Review*, 88, 587–597.
- ✠ Angeletos, George-Marios, Christian Hellwig, and Alessandro Pavan. 2007. "Dynamic global games of regime change: Learning, multiplicity, and the timing of attacks." *Econometrica* 75(3): 711–756.
- ✠ Echenique, Federico, and Aaron Edlin. 2004. "Mixed equilibria are unstable in games of strategic complements." *Journal of Economic Theory* 118(1): 61–79.
- Edmond, Chris. 2013. "Information manipulation, coordination, and regime change." *The Review of Economic Studies* 80(4): 1422–1458.
- Casper, Brett, and Scott Tyson. 2014. "Popular protest and elite coordination in a coup d'état." *The Journal of Politics*.
- Little, Andrew T. 2017. "Coordination, learning, and coups." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61(1): 204–234.
- Gieczewski, Germán, and Korhan Kocak. 2025. "Collective procrastination and protest cycles." *American Journal of Political Science* 69.4: 1406-1419.

Narratives (March 30)

- ✠ Eliaz, Kfir, and Ran Spiegler. 2020. "A model of competing narratives." *American Economic Review* 110(12): 3786–3816.
- Horz, Carlo, and Korhan Koçak. 2025. "I alone can fix it: The strongman narrative and democratic backsliding." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* (accepted.)

Identity (April 6)

- ✠ Shayo, Moses. 2009. "A model of social identity and political behavior." *American Economic Review* 99(3): 147–174.
- Penn, Elizabeth Maggie. 2008. "Citizenship versus ethnicity: The role of institutions in shaping identity choice." *The Journal of Politics* 70(4): 956–973.
- Sambanis, Nicholas, and Moses Shayo. 2013. "Social identification and ethnic conflict." *American Political Science Review* 107(2): 294–325.
- Horz, Carlo. 2024. "Identity propaganda." *British Journal of Political Science* 54.2 : 313-338.
- Chau, Tak-Huen. 2025. "Who belongs to the nation?" Working paper.
- Acharya, Avidit, David D. Laitin, and Anna Zhang. 2018. "'Sons of the soil': A model of assimilation and population control." *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 30.2: 184-223.