

POL 1101 Government of the United States

Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter School of Public Policy
Georgia Institute of Technology
Fall 2026

Class Meetings: Tuesday and Thursday, 2:00pm – 3:15pm
Clary Theater, Bill Moore Student Success Center

Instructor: Dr. Devon Thurman
Email: dthurman6@gatech.edu
Office hours: Location TBD
Tuesdays 3:30 – 4:30pm, or by appointment

Course Description

This course considers core questions in political science through the lens of American politics and government. It is about politics, institutions, public policy, and the people who occupy the space we call the political arena: elected officials and those who want their jobs; parties and interest groups that work to determine who wins office and what officeholders do once they get there; the civil servants and appointed officials who staff the bureaucracy and see that laws and regulations are actually enforced; and “we the people,” voters and nonvoters alike, who sustain the whole arrangement.

The course is organized in four parts. We begin with the foundations of American government, with a focus on the Constitution as a product of political compromise and on federalism as the ongoing negotiation between national, state, and local authority—including the government of Georgia. Second, we turn to political behavior: public opinion, the media, parties, campaigns, voting, and organized interests. Third, we examine the powers and constraints of Congress, the presidency, the bureaucracy, and the federal courts. Finally, we study what these institutions actually produce, in economic and social welfare policy, health and environmental policy, and foreign policy.

Throughout, we return to a set of questions common across the subfields of political science. How do political groups form and stay together? How are individual preferences translated into a group choice? How do groups implement and enforce their decisions? How can and should representation work? In studying the founding, we will examine how the framers used a constitution to coordinate on political order, and how drafting that document presented a coordination problem of its own. In studying institutions, we will evaluate how the structure of American government helps to—and fails to—ensure compliance with established rules. And in studying behavior, we will take up voting as a collective action problem, the role of identity in the formation of political groups, and the question of who representatives speak for and how.

A note on timing: the November 2026 midterm elections fall in the middle of our semester, on Tuesday, November 3. We will use that campaign, and Georgia’s races in particular, as a running case study.

Learning Goals

In this course you will learn to:

1. Define core concepts and models of political science;
2. Explain general problems of American politics, and the provisions and principles of the United States Constitution and the Constitution of Georgia that structure them;
3. Identify these central problems in real-world examples from American government past and present;
4. Evaluate and analyze competing explanations of political outcomes;
5. Construct and defend an argument on a contested political question, and reconstruct the strongest version of the opposing case.

Core IMPACTS

Core IMPACTS refers to the core curriculum, which provides students with essential knowledge in foundational academic areas. This course will help students master course content and support their broad academic and career goals. POL 1101 carries credit in two Core IMPACTS areas.

Political Science and U.S. History (Citizenship)

Orienting Question:

- How do I prepare for my responsibilities as an engaged citizen?

Learning Outcome:

- Students will demonstrate knowledge of the history of the United States, the history of Georgia, and the provisions and principles of the United States Constitution and the Constitution of Georgia.

Career-Ready Competencies: Critical Thinking, Intercultural Competence, Persuasion.

Social Sciences

Orienting Question:

- How do I understand human experiences and connections?

Learning Outcome:

- Students will effectively analyze the complexity of human behavior, and how historical, economic, political, social, or geographic relationships develop, persist, or change.

Career-Ready Competencies: Intercultural Competence, Perspective-Taking, Persuasion.

How the Course Develops These Competencies

Competency	Where You Will Practice It
Critical Thinking	Evaluating competing explanations for political outcomes; exam questions that ask you to apply institutional concepts to cases we have not discussed in class.
Persuasion	Written exam questions that ask you to take a position on a contested question and defend it with evidence and course concepts.
Perspective-Taking	Written exam questions that ask you to reconstruct the strongest version of an argument you do not hold; in-class discussion of contested issues.
Intercultural Competence	Units on civil rights, public opinion and political socialization, and representation; sustained attention to how Americans of different backgrounds experience the same institutions differently.
Citizenship and Its Responsibilities	The Georgia and U.S. constitutional module; the midterm election case study; class discussion conducted under shared norms of civil disagreement.

Required Text and How to Get It

Edwards, George C., III, Martin P. Wattenberg, and William G. Howell. *Government in America: People, Politics, and Policy*, 19th edition (2025 update). Pearson, 2025.

ISBN-13: 9780138359065. Please verify this ISBN before you buy. Earlier editions of this book are widely available and considerably cheaper, but chapter numbering and content have shifted between editions, and the reading schedule below will not line up.

You do not need to buy the most expensive option. Several formats give you the same text:

- **Pearson+ eTextbook, monthly subscription** — roughly \$11 per month, cancellable. For a single semester this is the cheapest route, and it is the one I would choose. Available at [pearson.com](https://www.pearson.com).
- **Pearson+ eTextbook, full-term access** — roughly \$65 for access through February 2027, at the same link.
- **Print** — roughly \$90 new from the publisher. Used and rented copies are usually cheaper elsewhere; check the ISBN above.

Prices listed are as of August 2026 and may change. If cost is a barrier for you, come talk to me—quietly, and without explaining your circumstances if you would rather not. We will find a way for you to have the reading.

Additional short readings—including the Declaration of Independence, *Federalist* 10 and 51, selected provisions of the Constitution of the State of Georgia, and a small number of contemporary articles—will be posted on Canvas at no cost. All assigned readings should be completed *before* the class meeting for which they are listed.

Course Requirements and Grading

Your grade is based on 1,000 total points, distributed as follows.

Component	Points	Percent
Exam I	200	20%
Exam II	200	20%
Exam III	200	20%
Final Exam	300	30%
Attendance and Participation	100	10%
Total	1,000	100%

Final letter grades follow the Institute scale: A (90–100%), B (80–89%), C (70–79%), D (60–69%), F (below 60%). Georgia Tech does not use plus/minus grading, so there is no A– or B+ in this or any other course here. I do not curve individual exams, but I reserve the right to adjust the final scale in students’ favor if warranted.

Exams

There are four exams, including the Final. Exams are given in class and are closed book. Each covers the chapters and supplementary readings designated on the course outline below; the Final Exam emphasizes Part IV but assumes command of the constitutional and institutional material from the whole semester.

Each exam combines multiple-choice questions with at least one written response in which you construct and defend an argument in your own words. These written questions are where the course’s Persuasion and Perspective-Taking outcomes are assessed, so they are graded on the quality of the reasoning, not on whether you reach a particular conclusion. I will circulate a study guide at least one week before each exam, and we will hold a review session in the class meeting before it.

Missed Exams

If you miss one of the three midterm exams, your score on the Final Exam, expressed as a percentage, will be applied to the missed exam in its place. A student who misses Exam II and earns 84% on the Final, for example, receives 168 of 200 points for Exam II. This is available for **one** missed midterm only, and it cannot be used to replace a low score on an exam you actually sat for. Notify me by email within 48 hours of the missed exam.

The practical effect is that the Final counts for substantially more of your grade if you miss a midterm, and it becomes the only place the missed material is tested. Sitting the exam on the scheduled date is very much in your interest.

Serious circumstances that this policy does not fit—an extended illness, a death in the family, a documented Institute conflict, or missing more than one exam—are handled individually. Come talk to me.

Final Assessment Policy

This course concludes with a final examination worth 300 of the 1,000 points available. It is held during the final examination period, December 10–17, 2026, at the date and time assigned by the Registrar’s Office under the Final Exam Matrix. I will confirm our slot in class and on Canvas as soon as it is published.

The Final emphasizes Part IV, but assumes command of the constitutional and institutional material from the whole semester, since policy debates depend on it. No assignments, projects, or presentations are due during the final instructional days, December 7–8, 2026.

Attendance and Participation

Attendance is expected. This is a large lecture, so I will not take roll every day. Instead, on a number of unannounced class meetings across the semester, I will pose a short question during class and ask you to submit a brief response electronically before the period ends. These items are graded for good-faith engagement rather than for correctness, and your lowest three scores are dropped, which is intended to cover ordinary illness, travel, and interview conflicts without any need to notify me.

I will announce the platform and the exact number of items during the first two weeks of the semester and post the details on Canvas. Submitting a response for a class meeting you did not attend is a violation of the Academic Honor Code.

Course Policies

Class Meetings and the September 3 Remote Session

We meet in person in Clary Theater with one exception: **Thursday, September 3 will be held online.** That session meets at our regular time, 2:00 – 3:15pm, and I will post the meeting link and platform on Canvas in advance. Please plan to join as you would attend in person; the material covered that day is on Exam I.

Classroom Discourse

We will discuss subjects on which reasonable people disagree, sometimes intensely. Two ground rules. First, disagree with arguments, not with people. Second, represent the other side accurately before you take it apart. My aim is not to move you toward any political conclusion. It is to make you better at reaching your own, and better at explaining it to people who started somewhere else. Students are expected to keep abreast of current events relevant to course coverage and to participate in discussion in a civil and respectful manner.

Academic Honesty

Students are expected to comply with the Georgia Tech Academic Honor Code, the text of which is available at policylibrary.gatech.edu. Suspected violations are referred to the Office of Student Integrity. If you are uncertain whether something is permitted, ask me first—that conversation is always cheaper than the alternative.

Generative AI

Exams are closed-book and closed-device, and no AI assistance of any kind is permitted on them. You are welcome to use AI tools in your own studying—to quiz yourself, to work through a concept you did not follow in lecture—though be aware that these systems state incorrect things about American government with considerable confidence, and the textbook is the authority for this course. Participation responses must be your own.

Disability Accommodations

Georgia Tech is committed to equitable access. Students needing accommodations should register with the Office of Disability Services (disabilityservices.gatech.edu) and provide me with their accommodation letter as early in the semester as possible. Students needing accommodations for exams in particular should inform me in advance and we will make the necessary arrangements.

Student-Faculty Expectations

Georgia Tech’s catalog sets out what students and faculty can expect from one another. In this class, that means you can expect me to show up prepared and on time, to keep office hours, to tell you in advance when the syllabus changes, to explain how I grade before I grade you, and to return your work quickly enough that it is still useful. Your grade will reflect your performance against stated criteria, not your rank against your classmates.

I expect you to arrive having done the reading, to bring questions, to sit exams when they are scheduled, and to tell me early rather than after the fact when something has gone wrong.

You can find the full statement at catalog.gatech.edu/rules/21.

Student Well-Being

College is demanding, and Georgia Tech is more demanding than most. If you are struggling—academically or otherwise—please reach out early, to me or to one of the Institute’s resources. The Center for Mental Health Care and Resources (mentalhealth.gatech.edu, 404-894-2575) is the place to start for counseling and mental health support; Stamps Health Services handles medical care; and the Office of the Dean of Students (404-894-2565) can help when a personal or family emergency starts affecting your coursework.

Communication

Course announcements, readings, and grades are on Canvas. I respond to email within one business day on weekdays. Please use your @gatech.edu address and include “POL 1101” in the subject line.

Course Outline

Readings are listed by chapter of Edwards, Wattenberg, and Howell (EWH); supplementary readings marked (C) are posted on Canvas. Chapter 13, on the budget, is not assigned; we take up taxing and spending within the economic policy unit instead. Exam dates are firm

barring an Institute closure. Topics for individual days are provisional and may shift; I will announce any changes in class and on Canvas at least one class period in advance.

Part I. Constitutional Foundations

Date	Topic	Reading
Tue Aug 25	Course introduction	<i>None</i>
Thu Aug 27	Introducing Government in America	EWB Ch. 1
Tue Sep 1	The Constitution	EWB Ch. 2; Declaration of Independence (C)
Thu Sep 3	Online session. The Constitution, continued	EWB Ch. 2
Tue Sep 8	The Constitution, continued	<i>Federalist</i> 10 and 51 (C)
Thu Sep 10	Federalism	EWB Ch. 3
Tue Sep 15	The Constitution of Georgia and state government	Georgia Constitution, selections (C)
Thu Sep 17	Civil Liberties and Public Policy	EWB Ch. 4
Tue Sep 22	Civil Rights and Public Policy	EWB Ch. 5
Thu Sep 24	Civil Rights, continued; review for Exam I	EWB Ch. 5
Tue Sep 29	Exam I (Ch. 1–5, Georgia module, Canvas readings)	—

Part II. People and Politics

Date	Topic	Reading
Thu Oct 1	Public Opinion and Political Action	EWB Ch. 6
Tue Oct 6	<i>No class — Fall Recess</i>	—
Thu Oct 8	The Mass Media and the Political Agenda	EWB Ch. 7
Tue Oct 13	Political Parties	EWB Ch. 8
Thu Oct 15	Campaigns and Voting Behavior	EWB Ch. 9
Tue Oct 20	Campaigns and Voting Behavior, continued	EWB Ch. 9
Thu Oct 22	Interest Groups	EWB Ch. 10
Tue Oct 27	Exam II (Ch. 6–10)	—

Part III. The Policymakers

Date	Topic	Reading
Thu Oct 29	Congress	EWB Ch. 11
Tue Nov 3	<i>Election Day.</i> Congress, continued	EWB Ch. 11
Thu Nov 5	Election debrief; The Presidency	EWB Ch. 12
Tue Nov 10	The Presidency, continued	EWB Ch. 12

Date	Topic	Reading
Thu Nov 12	The Federal Bureaucracy	EWB Ch. 14
Tue Nov 17	The Federal Courts	EWB Ch. 15
Thu Nov 19	The Federal Courts, continued	EWB Ch. 15
Tue Nov 24	Exam III (Ch. 11, 12, 14, 15)	—
Thu Nov 26	<i>No class — Thanksgiving</i>	—

Part IV. Policies

Date	Topic	Reading
Tue Dec 1	Economic and Social Welfare Policymaking	EWB Ch. 16
Thu Dec 3	Policymaking for Health Care, the Environment and Energy	EWB Ch. 17
Tue Dec 8	Foreign Policymaking; course review	EWB Ch. 18

Final Exam. Held December 10–17, 2026, at the time assigned by the Registrar’s Office. Emphasizes Part IV, and assumes the constitutional and institutional material from the whole semester. See the Final Assessment Policy above.

This syllabus is a working document. Any changes will be announced in class and posted to Canvas.