

**How Washington Really Works
George Mason Govt 467 / POGO 550
University of Pennsylvania Pol. Sci. 3992**

Fall 2025

**Fridays, Noon – 4:00 PM
Penn Biden Center, Suite 600
101 Constitution Ave. at C Street, NW
Washington, D.C.**

Professors

**Dr. Ezekiel Emanuel (Penn) (zemanuel@upenn.edu)
Office hours by appointment**

**Steven Pearlstein (GMU) (spearls2@gmu.edu)
Office hours: Mon 3-4:15 / Wed 10:30-12 (Fairfax)
Fri 11-12 (Biden Ctr.)
or by appointment**

Teaching Assistants

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Course Description

The purpose of this course is to provide students with an understanding of how decisions and policy are really made in Washington. Through six case studies, the course will explore modern American policy debates, politics and institutional dynamics, with a particular focus on the personalities, motivations, and ambitions of elected leaders. The role of interest groups, think tanks and media will also be examined. The course will use Socratic-style lectures, class discussions, and weekly class speakers to explore these issues. In the final weeks of the course, students working in groups of politically-like-minded colleagues will be tasked with crafting comprehensive, politically realistic policy proposals to reduce poverty, restore American democracy and deal economic and military challenge posed by China. Enrollment is by permission of the instructor. Students must have familiarity with, and interest in, modern American history, politics and government.

Two Schools, One Course

This course will be offered jointly to students from both the University of Pennsylvania and George Mason University and co-taught by one professor from each school. The course will be held on neither campus, but at the Penn Washington located at the base of Capitol Hill in Washington D.C. Students from both schools will attend the same class sessions, read the same materials and be evaluated in the same manner.

Course materials—this syllabus, some of the assigned readings and videos, lecture slides, discussion threads, presentation group assignments and periodic announcements—will be available through the Penn portal of Canvas, to which Mason students will also have access.

On most days Penn students will be provided Amtrak tickets to travel to and from Washington for our class sessions. Trains will leave from Philadelphia's 30th St. Station around 8:45 am and from Washington's Union Station shortly before 5:00 pm. Students should meet teaching assistants at the station 20 minutes before departure.

On days when we have site visits in Washington (see schedule below), Penn students will travel to and from Washington by bus that will leave at 9:00 am from the Penn Bookstore on Walnut Street. Mason students will also travel on the bus from the Biden Center to the site of those trips and dinners at professors' houses.

Mason students can reach the Penn Washington by Metro. It is a short walk from the Metro Red Line stations at Judiciary Square or Union Station. Garage parking is expensive and street parking is not always easy to find and is time limited. Professors' houses are near the Cleveland Park Metro station on the Red Line.

Class Sessions

Class sessions will be held in the large conference room at Penn Washington that overlooks the US Capitol. Students should alternate weekly between sitting at the large table at the center of the room and sitting in the chairs arrayed along the sides of the room. Please do NOT sit at the conference table two weeks in a row. Upon entering the conference room, students should retrieve their name cards from the conference table and either place them on the table in front of them or raise them when they want to speak during the class session. That's how we'll get to know each other's names. Return name cards to the table at the end of each class session.

Each weekly session will normally begin at noon with a short quiz on the week's assigned reading. The quiz will be followed immediately by an hour-long lecture by one of the professors on that week's case study. Students are expected to have done the assigned reading and video viewing for the week and be ready to respond to questions posed by the professors. Warning: you may be called on whether you raise your hands or not.

After the lecture, we will normally break for a complimentary lunch, with alternative options for those with dietary restrictions and preferences. There are various locations around Penn Washington and the sixth-floor lobby for small groups to gather and eat. You should use this time to get to know fellow students (particularly those you don't already know) and meet with your presentation groups. When finished, leave the area around you as clean as you found it.

After lunch, we will reconvene in the conference room for an hour-long discussion about that week's case study moderated by the professors. The discussion will begin with

several questions posed in advance by the professors and previously posted on Canvas. You should keep these questions in mind while doing the assigned reading.

After a short break, we will hear a guest speaker from the Washington policy community. Professors will “interview” the guest for about 30 minutes, followed by questions from students. Students are expected to come to class with probing, thoughtful questions for guests. On weeks of class trips (see schedule below), we may hear from speakers as part of the visit.

During the final three weeks of the course, class sessions will be entirely given over the group presentations by students, followed by a guest speaker.

Use of computers, cell phones and other recording devices are not permitted during class sessions.

Special Tours and Dinners in DC

On several Fridays during the semester, tours and talks have been arranged for the Capitol, the Supreme Court and the African American Museum (see class schedule below). On two of those days—the first session in September and the last one in December—you are also invited for an informal dinner at the professors houses in Washington. For those first and last sessions, Penn students will travel to and from Washington by bus, and all students will travel by the same bus from Penn Washington to site visits and professors’ houses.

Reading and Quizzes

On most weeks, there will be a short quiz – multiple choice or short answers—whose sole purpose is to determine if you have done the assigned reading for the week. There will be six quizzes and we will disregard the one with the lowest score (including a missed quiz) in calculating your final grade. If you are absent for whatever reason, there will be no makeup quizzes.

Fair Warning: the assigned reading and viewing for this course is very “lumpy.” On the weeks of the case studies, there is considerable amount of reading – so much that it can’t be done at the last minute. On other weeks, it is much lighter. This unevenness will require you to plan your work well in advance, an important life skill to learn.

Most of the assigned books for this course are written by journalists who understand Washington and can write a compelling narrative that is at once sophisticated and accessible to general readers. Whenever possible, we have eliminated non-essential portions of books from the assigned reading. Because that was not always possible, however, you should learn to skip over less relevant passages that get too far into the weeds or shed little light on the way Washington works. Knowing when and how to skim is another good life skill to learn.

Group Presentations

Early in the course, after completing a brief questionnaire, students will be divided into nine presentation groups based on your political leanings and your relative interest in three topics: poverty, American democracy and US policy toward China.

The task for each group will be to come up with an effective five-point policy proposal on one of those three topics for a hypothetical presidential candidate. The plan should be both politically viable and consistent with the group's ideological leanings (You will receive more guidance on presentations later in the semester.) During each of the final three class sessions, the three groups assigned to that week's topic will give a 30-minute presentation explaining their proposals. Group members will then respond to questions from professors and other students. All group members should have at least some speaking role in the presentation.

Groups will be evaluated on their presentations based on the thoroughness of research, the clarity and sophistication with which they define the problem, the soundness and sophistication of their proposals to solve it, the political logic behind the proposals and the quality of the oral and graphic presentation. For the presentations, groups may use up to 12 slides. Each group should provide a one-page printed summary of their plan that the rest of the class can use to follow along with the presentation.

Although groups should try to operate by consensus, each should select one student to moderate its deliberations, assign tasks and communicate with the teaching assistant assigned to assist that group.

Presentation groups can meet during lunch on Fridays and online outside of class on Zoom. Teaching assistants will help set up those online meetings. There will also be time for an in-person group meeting during a few of the class sessions. A recent book that gives a good overview on each of the presentation topics is listed in this syllabus. It was chosen for a reason. Group members should be familiar with it prior to their first meeting on Sept. 19.

Each group will receive a grade and a written evaluation of its presentation.

Final Policy Memos

For their final papers, students will write their own 15-page "policy memo" (excluding charts and graphs) on the topic of their group's presentation. The paper should be in memo form and directed to a hypothetical, like-minded presidential candidate you've chosen to work for. Like your group presentation, it should define the problem, outline a five-point plan for solving it and include a discussion of the policy and political tradeoffs and logic behind the plan. If your proposal involves public spending, you should estimate the **annual** spending and how you propose to pay for it, either through new tax revenue or reduced spending for existing programs.

Please note that your memo need not be—and probably should not be—the same as the presentation group plan. Rather, it should reflect your own personal concerns, analysis,

policy preferences and political calculus rather than your group's. Memos can also incorporate feedback you have received to your group presentations as well as additional thought and research. Criteria for the papers will be the same as for the presentation. Memos will be due Dec. X, and should be submitted through Canvas (Penn students) or as a Word attachment to an email to Prof. Pearlstein (Mason students).

As an interim step, you are encouraged to submit a detailed outline/summary of your memo a week after your group's presentation. Professors will respond with comments and suggestions on the outline.

Class Discussions and Free Expression

Discussion and debate are at the heart of this course, and the course will only be successful if all students contribute to that discourse. At least 15% of each student's grade will be determined by the quality and quantity of your class participation.

Courses about public policy and politics inevitably involve sensitive and controversial topics about which reasonable people disagree. Students are likely to read or hear opinions that are different from their own. Part of becoming an educated person is learning how to engage with divergent perspectives. In class and during group discussions, all students should feel free to express thoughts and opinions that may be at odds with those of professors or other students or which challenge currently prevailing views on campus. The only requirement is that you express your views in a way that is respectful of the values, opinions, and reasoned arguments of others in the class. We are all continuously trying to formulate our settled positions. Any student unwilling to accept these basic rules of free, open and respectful discussion should not enroll in this course.

Course Evaluation

Attendance and Class Participation	25%
Quizzes	20%
Group Presentations	20%
Policy Memo	35%

Academic Standards

Academic Standards exist to promote authentic scholarship, support the institution's goal of maintaining high standards of academic excellence, and encourage continued ethical behavior of faculty and students to cultivate an educational community which values integrity and produces graduates who carry this commitment forward into professional practice.

As members of the George Mason University community, we are committed to fostering an environment of trust, respect, and scholarly excellence. Our academic standards are the foundation of this commitment, guiding our behavior and interactions within this academic community. The practices for implementing these standards adapt to modern practices, disciplinary contexts, and technological advancements. Our standards are embodied in our courses, policies, and scholarship, and are upheld in the following principles:

- **Honesty:** Providing accurate information in all academic endeavors, including communications, assignments, and examinations.
- **Acknowledgement:** Giving proper credit for all contributions to one's work. This involves the use of accurate citations and references for any ideas, words, or materials created by others in the style appropriate to the discipline. It also includes acknowledging shared authorship in group projects, coauthored pieces, and project reports.
- **Uniqueness of Work:** Ensuring that all submitted work is the result of one's own effort and is original, including free from self-plagiarism. This principle extends to written assignments, code, presentations, exams, and all other forms of academic work.

Violations of these standards—including but not limited to plagiarism, fabrication, and cheating—are taken seriously and will be addressed in accordance with university policies. [The process for reporting, investigating, and adjudicating violations is outlined in the university's procedures here.](#) Consequences of violations may include academic sanctions, disciplinary actions, and other measures necessary to uphold the integrity of our academic community.

The principles outlined in these academic standards reflect our collective commitment to upholding the highest standards of honesty, acknowledgement, and uniqueness of work. By adhering to these principles, we ensure the continued excellence and integrity of George Mason University's academic community.

Student responsibility: Students are responsible for understanding how these general expectations regarding academic standards apply to each course, assignment, or exam they participate in; students should ask their instructor for clarification on any aspect that is not clear to them.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

Disability Services at George Mason University is committed to upholding the letter and spirit of the laws that ensure equal treatment of people with disabilities. Under the administration of University Life, Disability Services implements and coordinates reasonable accommodations and disability-related services that afford equal access to university programs and activities. Students can begin the registration process with Disability Services at any time during their enrollment at George Mason University. If you are seeking accommodations, please visit the [Disability Services website](#) for detailed information about the Disability Services registration process. Disability Services is located in Student Union Building I (SUB I), Suite 2500. Email: ods@gmu.edu. Phone: (703) 993-2474.

Student responsibility: Students are responsible for registering with Disability Services and communicating about their approved accommodations with their instructor in advance of any relevant class meeting, assignment, or exam.

FERPA and Use of GMU Email Addresses for Course Communication

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) governs the disclosure of education records for eligible students and is an essential aspect of any course. **Students must use their GMU email account** to receive important University information, including communications related to this class. Instructors will not respond to messages sent from or send messages regarding course content to a non-GMU email address.

Student responsibility: Students are responsible for checking their GMU email regularly for course-related information, and/or ensuring that GMU email messages are forwarded to an account they do check.

Title IX Resources and Required Reporting

As a part of George Mason University's commitment to providing a safe and non-discriminatory learning, living, and working environment for all members of the University community, the University does not discriminate on the basis of sex or gender in any of its education or employment programs and activities. Accordingly, **all non-confidential employees, including your faculty member, have a legal requirement to report to the Title IX Coordinator, all relevant details obtained directly or indirectly about any incident of Prohibited Conduct** (such as sexual harassment, sexual assault, gender-based stalking, dating/domestic violence). Upon notifying the Title IX Coordinator of possible Prohibited Conduct, the Title IX Coordinator will assess the report and determine if outreach is required. If outreach is required, the individual the report is about (the "Complainant") will receive a communication, likely in the form of an email, offering that person the option to meet with a representative of the Title IX office.

For more information about non-confidential employees, resources, and Prohibited Conduct, please see University Policy 1202: [Sexual and Gender-Based Misconduct and Other Forms of Interpersonal Violence](#). Questions regarding Title IX can be directed to the Title IX Coordinator via email to TitleIX@gmu.edu, by phone at 703-993-8730, or in person on the Fairfax campus in Aquia 373.

Student opportunity: If you prefer to speak to someone confidentially, please contact one of Mason's confidential employees in [Student Support & Advocacy \(SSAC\)](#), Counseling and [Psychological Services \(CAPS\)](#), [Student Health Services \(SHS\)](#), and/or the [Office of the University Ombudsperson](#).