

POLS 2306: Introduction to Texas Government

Spring 2025

Nickolas Rios-Professor

Course Time: MW 2:30pm-3:55pm

Office Hours: MW 4:30-5:45pm via
Zoom & By Appointment

Classroom: CAS 158

Office: @ TJC in J127; no on campus office

Course Description & Objectives

This course is designed to introduce students to the institutions of the Texas government, using the prior civic understanding each student has. The course investigates the behavioral trends that explain how individuals work within these institutions to change laws. The course also explores topics where students can challenge their understanding of government by comparing how state politics is unique from the federal government and identifying the dates of significant reforms to the lawmaking process.

Learning Objectives

The course is designed with the objective of obtaining a comprehensive knowledge of Texas's politics by the end of the semester. This can be reflected by the ability to:

- Analyze philosophical foundations of the state's political system by comparing the political culture of regions in Texas.
- Describe how branches of government in Texas interact with one another and what that means for the power one individual can have.
- Appraise current events to highlight the importance of both constitutions in today's society.
- Consider the formation of partisan preferences and how evaluate how partisanship has shaped Texas into a one-party state and the consequences of this affiliation.

Students who will do the best in the course will understand how political contexts shape how institutions function and identify the processes in which the public can influence how the government operates.

Required Book is a Free Open-Source Text

Sterken, Jr. Robert, Marcus Stadelmann, and Eric Lopez. 2019. *Uncovering Texas Politics*. Tyler, TX: University of Texas at Tyler.

[This is a free online textbook available on the course page.]

With Additional Newspaper and Articles to supplement [all free]

Computer with internet and Word processing capability.

Student Conduct

I have high expectations for each student in this class, which are based on your academic performance to get to this point and my belief that you will treat each of your fellow classmates with respect. This includes inside, as well as outside the classroom. My goal is to facilitate a supportive and engaging class experience for everyone and one part of that is eliminating disruptive behavior. Using technology in a way that distracts others and demonstrates a lack of respect for the instructor is unacceptable. This includes but is not limited to the use of cell phones, laptops, tablets, or other devices.

Students who are found to be in violation of the expectations put forward in the syllabus including plagiarism, disrespectful behavior, among other issues may be asked to leave for the remainder of class or removed from the class entirely.

Expectations for all work

All work must be original - including only direct quotes without any analysis will result in a 0. Work that largely summarizes or only paraphrases work from other sources will not receive more than a B-. A paper must synthesize arguments and facts to build justifications for the author's main point (or argument).

All missed in-class activities will be counted as a zero, if not discussed **BEFOREHAND**.

There will be a no make-up policy for assignments; however, some assignments will be dropped.

All out of class assignments are due at midnight or 11:59pm on the following day of class; unless otherwise specified. Failure to turn in an assignment on time will result in a penalty of one letter grade; however, assignments submitted after two days will **NO LONGER BE ACCEPTED**.

All readings are expected to be completed before class. Although not all readings will be discussed in class, this does not negate your responsibility to know the assigned material.

Absences are required to be communicated to the professor at the earliest reasonable expectation.

School related absence are excused; however, must be communicated prior with online assignments expected to be submitted on the same due date as the class. In class assignments or alternative assignments will be required to be submitted prior to departure.

Artificial Intelligence

UT Tyler is committed to exploring and using artificial intelligence (AI) tools as appropriate for the discipline and task undertaken. We encourage discussing AI tools' ethical, societal, philosophical, and disciplinary implications. All uses of AI should be acknowledged as this aligns with our commitment to honor and integrity, as noted in UT Tyler's Honor Code. Faculty and students must not use protected information, data, or copyrighted materials when

using any AI tool. Additionally, users should be aware that AI tools rely on predictive models to generate content that may appear correct but is sometimes shown to be incomplete, inaccurate, taken without attribution from other sources, and/or biased. Consequently, an AI tool should not be considered a substitute for traditional approaches to research. You are ultimately responsible for the quality and content of the information you submit. Misusing AI tools that violate the guidelines specified for this course (see below) is considered a breach of academic integrity. The student will be subject to disciplinary actions as outlined in UT Tyler's Academic Integrity Policy.

For this course, work submitted by students in this course will be generated by themselves. This includes all process work, drafts, brainstorming artifacts, editing, and final products. I expect all work students submit for this course to be their own. I have carefully designed all assignments and class activities to support your learning. Doing your own work, without human or artificial intelligence assistance, is best for your efforts in mastering course learning objectives. This extends to group assignments where students must create collaboratively create the project. Any instance of the following constitutes a violation of UT Tyler's Honor Code: a student has another person/entity do any portion of a graded assignment, which includes purchasing work from a company, hiring a person or company to complete an assignment or exam, using a previously submitted assignment and/or using AI tools/models (such as, but not limited to ChatGPT). Any violation of my personal policy on AI, will result with a 0 on the assignment and appropriate action with the university.

Assignment Groups

Reflections & Quizzes: 100 points

To have an engaging conversation, we have to start with a common understanding about a topic each week. This will start by answering questions from the reading and your existing knowledge or quiz questions to recall specific details. Each of these assignments will be worth 10 points (excellent, sufficient, lacking detail, incorrect, poor, incomplete) or percentage of quiz questions correct. The top ten will count towards your overall grade.

Additionally, students should be prepared for a quiz *MINIMUM* once a week sporadically provided in the first half of a random day of class. This does not necessarily grant there to be no quiz for the remainder of the week. Additionally, reflections or quizzes can take a variety of forms outside of the traditional question format. This can include a self-reflection essay of the reading, group work, or other format and/or styles.

Participation: 50 points

Class discussions will mostly operate as an open floor for discussion, sparked by questions that transition between topics, and if need be, will use the Socratic Method if participation is uneven or lacking on a topic.

Additionally, attendance is not wholly the source of points; however, it is impossible to participate, if one is not in class. Furthermore, attending class but choosing not to participate or be engaged does not necessitate a good grade in participation. This includes being off task.

Letter to State Legislator: 25 points

A key to representation is communication your interests to those with the authority to make a decision. You have the freedom to select a policy related topic that interests you and fits within the scope of state law. The purpose of this assignment is that you:

- 1) identify the appropriate recipient of your request, by addressing the letter to someone who has authority in the Texas government.
- 2) communicate your thoughts with a person who has the power to effectively address your concern, by realizing who you write to matters.
- 3) describe the action you want to be taken on the issue and justify why the action should be taken. This is important, because you can see if the action you advocate for was attempted and the legislator is able to evaluate the strength of your request by how well it aligns with your information and their goals.
- 4) recognize the limited power of each government position and each legislative action. This means your language should be precise and not defer to the reader to interpret what the parameters of your objective is.

Letter Requirements: Format your letter as a professional correspondence with appropriate placement of addresses (letterheads are acceptable), salutations, date, and single spaced. Additionally, staff and representatives receive a great deal of correspondence so the letter needs to be short (not more than two pages). Be clear, concise, and descriptive as you specify what goal you seek, why, and how that should be done.

Simulation to Amend the State Constitution: 25 points

Texas has had the same constitution since 1876, which has been amended 507 times. Get to know what is in the state constitution and how it can be changed. This group project will include multiple assignments where you identify what to amend in the current Texas Constitution (what is missing or what needs to be changed) and present a new alternative. Once you are familiar with the structure of the constitution's articles, you will be able to work on clauses and identify concepts the state has not yet included in the constitution. At the end of the semester, as a group, you will propose a new constitution for the state of Texas (much like the state did in 1974, when the plan fell by 3 votes in the Legislature). This will be an entirely in-class assignment.

Three Unit Exams: 200 points

Three exams are each worth 100 points. Each exam will offer different types of questions: short-answer, true/false, definition, importance/significance, and multiple-choice questions. Each question will hold different point values. Missing an exam will result in an automatic 0. There will be a no make-up policy; however, only the top two exams will be counted towards a student's final grade.

Final Exam: 100 points

The final exam, worth 100 points will be cumulative in that you are asked to draw connections across topics covered throughout the class. The final exam will follow a similar structure to that of prior exams with added questions to account for the additional time.

Extra Credit: To Be Determined

At minimum students may expect an opportunity to receive an additional 5 points added to a Unit Exam and Final Exam. Extra credit assignments must be completed by the week prior to the exam week. This meaning Friday for assignments involving discussion with the professor and Saturday for online submitted assignments. There will be no late submissions for partial credit for extra credit. Additionally, there may be other opportunities; however, only the 5 points are guaranteed to be offered. Lastly, any student who receives a 0 for academic dishonesty will be ineligible and/or forfeit any potential extra credit points as well.

Make-Up Assignments:

As this class is classified as a face-to-face course, the expectation is students will attend all classes; however, it is understood that emergencies and situations will inevitably arise. It is for this very reason students will be offered a reasonable amount of make-up or alternative assignments. Students are expected to communicate absences with efficient evidence to receive a replacement assignment.

Grading:

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| Reflections & Quizzes | Weekly | 100 points |
| Participation | In-Class | 50 points |
| Unit Exam I | Feb. 12 th | 100 points |
| Unit Exam II | March 12 th | 100 points |
| Unit Exam III ¹ | April 16 th | 100 points |
| Letter to the Legislature | March 5 th | 25 points |
| Constitution Amendment Simulation | April 7 th & 9 th | 25 points |
| Final Exam | April 30 th | 100 points |
| Total | | 500 points |

¹ Only the highest two "Unit Exams" will go towards your final grade.

Class Calendar:

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| Week 1 | Thinking About Texas |
| January 12th - January 18th | Course Intro |
| Week 2 | Texas Overview |
| January 19th - January 25th January 20 th | Reading: -Chapter 1 MLK Day [No Class] |
| Week 3 | Texas Constitutions |
| January 26th - February 1st | Readings: -Chapter 2 -“Bill Seeks To Amend Texas Constitution [...]” |
| Week 4 | Voting and Elections |
| February 2nd - February 8th | Reading: -Chapter 3 |
| Week 5 | Exam Week |
| February 9th - February 15th | Unit Exam I |
| Week 6 | Political Parties |
| February 16th - February 22nd | Reading: -Chapter 4 |
| Week 7 | Interest Groups |
| February 23rd - March 1st | Reading: -Chapter 5 |
| Week 8 | Texas Legislature |
| March 2nd - March 8th March 5 th | Readings: -Chapter 6 -“Analysis: The 2021 Texas House [...]” Assignment Due: -Letter to the Legislator |

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| Week 9 | Exam Week |
| March 9th - March 15th | Unit Exam II |
| Week 10 | SPRING BREAK |
| March 16th - March 22nd | No Class |
| Week 11 | Executive Branch and Governorship |
| March 23rd - March 29th | Reading: -Chapter 7 |
| Week 11 | Judicial Branch & Justice System |
| March 30th - April 5th | Reading: -Chapter 8 |
| March 31 st | Last Day to Drop with a "W" |
| Week 12 [Class-Vote] | Congressional Amendment Simulation |
| April 6th - April 12th | In Class: Congressional Workshop |
| Week 13 [Class-Vote] | Exam Week |
| April 13th - April 19th | Unit Exam III |
| Week 14 | Recap of Texas Government |
| April 20th - April 26th | |
| Week 15 | Final Exam Week |
| April 30 th | Final Exam |