GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY
ECONOMICS 410-DL1
Public Choice
Fall 2026

Instructor Charles Remien
E-mail: Cremien@gmu.edu
Class Location: Online | Via Canvas
Class Times: Online Asynchronous
Online Office Hours: 12:00 PM to 1:30 PM Mondays and Thursdays

SYLLABUS EDITION STATEMENT

The instructor holds the right to revise the syllabus at any time throughout the semester. Should the syllabus be revised, a new edition of the syllabus will be uploaded to Canvas and to the instructor's GMU webpage.

COURSE FOCUS

This is a research-oriented course in public choice, also known as political economy, economics of politics, and rational choice theory. It introduces students to basic concepts and debates in public choice, including the logic of collective action, the Median Voter Model, information, bargaining, competition, and constitutions. Additionally, this class has the goal of introducing students to many of the “fun” research topics in economics George Mason is world famous for. The main goal is to take students up to the research frontier, with a focus on what I think of as “cutting edge” topics: empirical public opinion research, ideology, Wittman's critique of the political failure literature, expressive voting, voter irrationality, behavioral political economy, dictatorship, and anarchy.

This is an undergraduate class designed for upperclassmen. The reading material is designed to give upperclassmen a familiarity with the literature and a feel for public choice at George Mason University.

STUDENT EXPECTATIONS

Students are expected to be mature enough to commit to reading assigned texts outside of class time. Time management is one of the most important skills taught in college and is expected of students in this class.

In addition, any assignments given in this class will be expected to be turned in on time. **No late work or make-up work will be accepted**. If a student is likely to miss the exam due to outside circumstances, that student must inform the instructor **BEFORE** the assigned day of the exam so the instructor and the student can attempt to find a solution. Students will be expected to submit their own work on assignments in accordance with the honor code.

GRADES

This class, like many others you will be taking in college, is primarily exam-based. Throughout the semester, you will be given a midterm and a final to test your understanding of the material covered in the instructor's lectures and in the assigned readings.

The table below demonstrates how grades will be assigned in this class. **There will be no curve**. A student's final grade will be the grade they earn, and there will be no arbitrary favoritism. Grades will be distributed according to the table below.

Letter Grade	Percentage
A	90% and above!
B	80%-89.9%
C	70%-79.9%
D	60%-69.9%
F	59.9% and below

Exams and Assignments

Exams will be taken online, using Honorlock during an open test-taking time announced before the exam. Students will be expected to have access to Canvas and have their technology capable of taking the exam. Exams are a mix of multiple-choice questions, short-answer questions, and potentially essay questions.

Given the nature of economics, the final exam builds from what was tested on the midterm as well as new material.

This class will also have participation assignments. In this class, participation assignments refer to small assignments I post to Canvas to track participation in this class and to serve somewhat like homework. Participation assignments should help make up for some of the lost participation that comes with this class being online and help students get exposed to some of the fun parts of public choice that go beyond the assigned readings for the exams. **This class does not accept late assignments or allow for makeup assignments.** Assignments will be given out on Canvas and will be due on the assigned date displayed on Canvas and on the assignment itself.

Category	Percentage
Total Participation Assignment Grade	15%
Midterm	40%
Final Exam	45%

This course will have **extra credit**, consisting of potentially questions on the exams or extra credit assignments; the creation of extra credit for this class is entirely up to the instructor's discretion. The instructor reserves the right to change how extra credit is given in this class throughout the semester, should he deem it necessary.

Sharing exam answers with other students who have not yet taken the exam will be considered a violation of the honor code. Violations of the honor code will result in an immediate failing grade for the course and a report to the GMU Honor Committee.

AI POLICY

The instructor is aware that students commonly use AI. However, given the exams and assignments of this course, AI will not be particularly useful. Exams are taken with Honorlock, and the proctoring videos will be reviewed by the instructor. Use of AI during exams is completely forbidden and will result in a 0. Participation assignments are to track student participation in the class first and foremost; the use of AI during these assignments defeats the purpose of said assignments. Assignments should show that each student independently thought about the assignment and should demonstrate each student's unique thoughts. AI may help students study, but it shouldn't be a replacement for studying.

AI in economics is known to mix up the schools of economic thought and also has a tendency to make up fake quotes from readings. So be very careful when asking AI for assistance studying, and don't let AI replace you studying, as you cannot rely on it to do your thinking for you.

STUDENTS NEEDING ACCOMMODATIONS:

George Mason University is committed to providing access to learning opportunities for all students by upholding the laws that ensure equal treatment of people with disabilities. If you need accommodations for this class, please visit http://ds.gmu.edu for detailed information about the disability services registration process. Then, after sending an Academic Accommodation Letter to my email, we can discuss your approved accommodations. *I am glad to make accommodations for students with disabilities.* Disability Services is located in Student Union Building 1 (SUB 1), Suite 2500 Email: ods@gmu.edu Phone: (703) 993-2474

It is critically important that students notify me properly, as described above, of their need for disability accommodations as soon as possible. I can only help students after being properly notified.

ALL OTHER COURSE POLICY STATEMENT

This course is conducted with all other course policies of George Mason University. For further information about these policies, students are recommended to read over the policies at https://stearnscenter.gmu.edu/home/gmu-common-course-policies/.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Weekly PowerPoints and their accompanying lecture videos will be posted to Canvas. Students are encouraged to print out the PowerPoints if they would like and take notes along with the lectures. In addition to the PowerPoints and the lectures, students will be expected to **READ** assigned readings each week. These readings come from 6 assigned books for this class, as well as articles linked in this document under each week. In the tentative schedule, books are referenced by the last name of the author; therefore, the authors' names in this syllabus go last, first.

It is incredibly important that students acquire and read these assigned readings, as some questions on the exams may pertain to assigned readings not covered by PowerPoints or lectures.

Author: Tullock, Gordon
Title: *The Social Dilemma*
ISBN13: 9780865975279
Additional Note: Sourcing this book by other means might be difficult; the instructor recommends purchasing it or renting it from the GMU bookstore.

Author: Wittman, Donald A.
Title: *The Myth of Democratic Failure: Why Political Institutions are Efficient*
ISBN13: 9780226904238

Author: Caplan, Bryan
Title: *The Myth of The Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies*
ISBN13: 9780691138732
Additional Note: This book is also available in audiobook form on Audible.

Author: Carpini, Michael & Keeter, Scott
Title: *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters*
ISBN13: 9780300072754

Author: Brennan, Geoffrey & Lomasky, Loren
Title: *Democracy and Decision: The Pure Theory of Electoral Preference*
ISBN13: 9780521585248

Author: Cooter, Robert D.
Title: *The Strategic Constitution*
ISBN13: 9780691096209
Additional Note: A free PDF version of this book is available at http://www.law.berkeley.edu/faculty/cooterr/PDFpapers/stratcon.PDF

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE:

My proposed schedule for the semester is as follows. If it proves too ambitious, I will try to *simply say less about each topic* rather than cut the topics for the final weeks.

Week 1: The Logic of Collective Action

- Pareto efficiency
- Kaldor-Hicks efficiency and deadweight costs
- The comparative institutions approach and "second best"
- Private versus social benefits and costs
- Negative externalities and "public bads"

- Positive externalities and "public goods"
- Bad but popular examples; good but unpopular examples
- Fallacies of group action
- Individual impact: probability and magnitude
- Calculating the probability of electoral decisiveness
- Empirical evidence on collective action problems

Readings:

Brennan and Lomasky, pp.54-65

Tullock, pp.174-85

Becker (1976)
https://casdev.unc.edu/ppeprogram/wp-content/uploads/sites/26/2020/02/Becker-The-Economic-Approach-to-Human-Behavior-1976.pdf

Week 2: Voting, I: The Basics

- Rational, instrumental voting
- Single-peaked preferences
- Two-party, winner-take all elections
- Political competition and platform convergence
- Voter participation and franchise restrictions
- The effect of fringe parties
- Multi-peaked preferences
- Individual and social intransitivity
- Multiple voting dimensions
- Tiebout and inter-governmental competition
- Some perverse incentives of non-profit competition
- Federalism: for and against

Readings:

Cooter, chapters 2, 6

Week 3: Voting, II: Information and Bargaining

- The economics of imperfect information
- Political knowledge and rational ignorance
- Empirical evidence on political knowledge
- Informed voting as a public good
- Education and voter ignorance
- Other group differences in political knowledge
- Voter ignorance, principal-agent problems, and optimal punishment
- The principle of aggregation
- Voter ignorance and the "miracle of aggregation"
- Uncertainty and platform convergence
- Divergence between median and mean preferences on a single dimension
- Log-rolling, bargaining, and the Coase theorem
- Bargaining to efficiency on one dimension
- Bargaining to efficiency on multiple dimensions
- Bargaining around intransitivity
- Pork barrel politics
- Restrictions on political competition: supermajority rules, term limits, spending limits

Readings:

Carpini and Keeter, pp.68-95, 142-147, 154-161, 188-209

Week 4: Voter Motivation, I: Selfish, Group, and Sociotropic Voting

- Is the median voter model correct?
- The self-interested voter hypothesis (SIVH)
- The Meltzer-Richards model
- Empirical evidence on the SIVH
- Sociotropic voting
- Group-interested voting
- Gelman on income and voting

- The SIVH versus the logic of collective action

Readings:

David Sears and Carolyn Funk, "Self-Interest in Americans' Political Opinions"
https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1990-97789-007

Week 5: Voter Motivation, II: Ideological Voting

- The dimensionality of U.S. political opinion
- Ideological voting
- Education, ideology, income, and opinion
- Case study: the determinants of party identification
- Case study: the determinants of economic beliefs
- The ideology*education interaction

Readings:

Carpini and Keeter, pp.242-258.

Week 6: Voter Motivation, III: Miscellaneous

- Religion
- Personality
- Genes
- Mainstream and polarization effects
- How well does policy match voter preferences?

Readings:

Larry Bartels, “The Opinion-Policy Disconnect.”
http://econfaculty.gmu.edu/bcaplan/bartels.pdf

Week 7: MIDTERM Friday October 9th, 2026 (Exact Hours TBD)

Week 8: Wittman and Democratic Failure

- Critiques of the economic approach
- Wittman's challenge to orthodox public choice
- "Extreme voter stupidity"
- "Serious lack of competition"
- "Excessively high transactions costs"
- The effect of asymmetric political information
- Wittman's sampler: Responses to diverse political failures
- Validity versus soundness

Readings:

Wittman, chapters 1-4, 6-8

Week 9: Expressive Voting

- The instrumental voting assumption
- Instrumental versus expressive value
- Decisiveness revisited
- Decisiveness and the relative prices of instrumental and expressive voting
- Expressive voting as political pollution
- Inefficient unanimity
- Application: Environmentalism
- Answering Wittman, I

Readings:

Brennan and Lomasky, chapters 1-3

Week 10: Ignorance, Irrationality, and Aggregation: Theory and Evidence

- Return to the "miracle of aggregation"
- Ignorance, irrationality, and systematic error

- Rational ignorance versus rational irrationality
- Systematically biased beliefs about economics
- Group differences in economic beliefs
- Systematically biased beliefs about other subjects?
- The Enlightened Preference Approach

Readings:

Caplan, preface and chapters 1-5

Week 11: Behavioral Political Economy

- Irrationality in the median voter model
- Application: Protectionism
- The efficiency of political irrationality
- The interaction of voter motivation and cognition
- Supply side of politics
- Irrationality and slack
- Answering Wittman, II [include exchanges]
- Availability cascades
- The idea trap
- Government growth and crisis

Readings:

Caplan, chapters 6-7

Machiavelli, The Prince, chapters 14-19
https://tacc.org/sites/default/files/flipbooks/2018-12/the-prince.pdf

Week 12: Dictatorship

- The stationary bandit model
- Constrained dictatorship
- The paradox of revolution

- The sociopathic bandit model?
- Totalitarianism and economic calculation
- Democratic transitions

Readings:

Tullock, pp.33-106, 186-224

Weeks 13: Constitutions

- The comparative institutions approach revisited
- Alternatives to dictatorship and democracy
- Are constitutional politics different?
- Constitutional reform and endogenous institutions
- Futarchy

Readings:

Wittman, chapter 10

Caplan, chapter 8 and conclusion

Hanson, Robin. "Shall We Vote on Values, But Bet on Beliefs?"
https://mason.gmu.edu/~rhanson/futarchy2013.pdf

Week 14: Anarchy

- Economic arguments for government
- The paradox of public good provision
- Are the functions of the night watchman state really public goods?
- Dispute resolution as a private good
- Rule formation as a private good
- Enforcement as a private good
- Moderate versus radical privatization
- Main objections to radical privatization
- Cowen, anarchism, and collusion

- National defense
- The transition problem

Readings:

Murray Rothbard, For a New Liberty, pp.267-299,
http://mises.org/rothbard/foranewlb.pdf

Peter T. Leeson, “Efficient Anarchy,” Public Choice (2007)
https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11127-006-9071-7

For Sure Extra Credit Reading (To be included in final exam or extra credit assignment TBD)

Peter T. Leeson, “Better Off Stateless: Somalia Before and After Government Collapse,” Journal of Comparative Economics (2007)
https://www.peterleeson.com/better_off_stateless.pdf

Final Exam Day: Friday, December 4th, 2026 (Exact Hours TBD)