Course Description

Over half of the Earth’s population now lives in cities. These urban areas form the backbone of the global economy, but in order to function, they require effective governance. Cities need roads, schools, police, fire protection, parks, mass transit, sewers, and electricity. In the United States, local government spending on these services constitutes roughly 25% of all government expenditures, and employs about 50% of the public workforce.

In this course, we will address the central questions in urban political economy. How do governments encourage or discourage urbanization? Why do local governments adopt some economic policies and neglect others? Does competition between city governments make everyone better off, or lead to a race to the bottom? Why are some places more corrupt than others? Does partisanship matter at the local level? How do ethnic diversity and segregation affect local governance?

Traditionally, urban politics has been considered a subfield of American Politics (well, at least in America). As a result, much of the research and examples I cite in class will come from US cities. Where possible, I will draw on comparative research from both developed and developing countries, including the United Kingdom, Brazil, India, China, and Japan.
Grading

Resident Expert Assignments - 60%

At the beginning of the semester, I will assign each student a random world city. As the course progresses, I expect that each student will become a “resident expert” on their city, and will use that knowledge to contribute to class discussion. Prior to each class session, I will post several short assignments to Canvas, some of which may involve conducting research on your assigned city. Please complete these assignments before class begins. (10% will be deducted from late assignments, and no assignments will be accepted one week past the due date.)

Midterm and Final Exam - 40%

The midterm will be held on Thursday, May 25, and final exam on Friday, June 23. They will be composed primarily of short response questions, and will test your understanding of the theories and evidence we discuss in class. The final will be cumulative.

Readings

The assigned readings are intended to complement, rather than duplicate, the material we discuss in class. Please read these before each session. The syllabus also includes a set of supplementary readings, most of which are academic papers that inform the lecture materials. You are not required to read these, but the intrepid among you who do are likely to end up with a more thorough understanding and a better grade.

Schedule

Tues, May 2: Introduction

Overview of the course; logistics

Thurs, May 4: The Origins of Urban Civilization

Urbanization and modernization; city-states and city-leagues

Assigned Readings:


Supplementary Readings:


**Mon, May 8: Urban Economics**

Economies of scale; agglomeration effects; scaling laws

*Assigned Readings:*


*Supplementary Readings:*


**Tues, May 9: Urban Economics, continued**

Economic geography; urban growth; city size distributions

*Assigned Readings:*


*Supplementary Readings:*


Thurs, May 11: Urban Economics, concluded
Tiebout models; local public finance; capitalization

Assigned Readings:

Supplementary Readings:

Mon, May 15: City Limits
The functions of local government; the Race to the Bottom; policy spillovers; tax competition

Assigned Readings:

Supplementary Readings:
Tues, May 16: Federalism and Fragmentation

Fiscal federalism; special districts; municipal debt; common pool problems

Assigned Readings:

- Special Districts: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO)

Supplementary Readings:


Thurs, May 18: The Big Sort

Partisan sorting; dominant regimes; representation and accountability

Selected Readings:


Supplementary Readings:


Mon, May 22: Machine Politics
History of urban political machines; corruption; clientelism

Assigned Readings:
- Riordan, William L. (1963). Plunkitt of Tammany Hall. (Chapters 1, 6, and 23).

Supplementary Readings:

Tues, May 23: Institutions
The Reform Movement; mayors vs. managers; electoral rules

Assigned Readings:

Supplementary Readings:
Thurs, May 25: Midterm

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Mon, May 29: Local Public Goods – Infrastructure
Transportation; water; electricity

Assigned Readings:


- Yglesias, Matthew (2016). “NYC's brand new subway is the most expensive in the world – that's a problem.” Vox

Supplementary Readings:


Tues, May 30: Local Public Goods – Quality of Life
Crime; pollution; education

Assigned Readings:


Supplementary Readings:


Thurs, June 1: Race and Segregation
Ethnic diversity and public goods; Schelling segregation models; political effects of segregation

Assigned Readings:

Supplementary Readings:

Mon, June 5: Urban Development
Moses vs. Jacobs; development projects; freeways and suburbanization

Assigned Readings:

Supplementary Readings:


**Tues, June 6: Land Use Policy**

Housing; growth controls; rent control; homelessness; the housing bubble

*Assigned Readings:*


*Supplementary Readings:*


**Thurs, June 8: Shrinking Cities**

*Assigned Readings:*

• Lee, Timothy B. November 28, 2016. “Economists are underestimating the costs of letting small Rust Belt cities shrink”. Vox.

• Stone, Lyman (2016). “What Happened to Atlantic City?” Medium.

*Supplementary Readings:*


Mon, June 12: Urbanization in the Developing World – East Asia
China’s growth miracle; Singapore

Assigned Readings:


Supplementary Readings:

- The Chinese Mayor (documentary currently streaming on Netflix)

Tues, June 13: Urbanization in the Developing World – India, Latin America, and Africa
Megacities; urbanization and economic development; slums

Assigned Readings:


Supplementary Readings:


Thurs, June 15: Bonus Day!
Topics by popular demand

Mon, June 19: Wrap Up

Fri, June 23: Final Exam
NOTE: Final exam held from 1:30 - 3:30 pm.