

PLSC 2255: Special Interest Politics in the US

MW 2:30-3:45pm
24 Hillhouse Room 108

Professor: Mellissa Meisels (MY-zulz)
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Course Canvas: <https://yale.instructure.com/courses/110448>
Most current syllabus: <https://yale.instructure.com/courses/110448/assignments/syllabus>

Course Description

This class examines how citizens and groups participate in US politics and policymaking via campaign contributions and lobbying. From elections all the way to bureaucratic policy implementation, special interests have many opportunities to attempt to pull policy closer to their preferences. Students will become familiar with the regulatory environments structuring current laws regarding the revolving door and campaign finance (e.g. *Citizens United*), potential avenues of participation for special interests (e.g. political donations, independent expenditures, lobbying), the goals and preferences of different types of special interests (e.g. individual donors, ideological and issue groups, public interest and identity groups, corporations, local governments), groups' organizational structures (e.g. PACs, Super PACs, "dark money" groups), and current evidence on widely-discussed reforms meant to curb the political influence of special interests.

Assignments

WEEKLY RESPONSE MEMOS (30%)

Starting in Week 3, you are expected to submit a one-page, double-spaced response memo which discusses at least one critical question related to each assigned reading for the week. Memos are due by 5PM on Sunday, with five memos due before the midterm and five memos due after the midterm. No memos are due the weeks of the midterm nor final.

Late work will receive a 5% penalty for each 24-hour period, such that your maximum possible grade on an assignment submitted between 5:01 PM on Sunday and 4:59 PM on Monday is 95%, another 5% will be deducted after 5PM on Monday, and so on.

EXAMS (70%)

You will take an in-class, hand-written midterm worth 30% of your grade, and an in-class, hand-written final on the last day of class worth 40% of your grade. Both will include multiple choice and written answers. Students may bring one standard letter-sized (8.5 in \times 11 in) or smaller piece of paper with handwritten or typed notes on one or both sides.

ASSIGNMENT SCHEDULE

Date	Assignment
9/7	Response Memo
9/14	Response Memo
9/21	Response Memo
9/28	Response Memo
10/5	Response Memo
10/13	In-Class Midterm Exam
10/19	Response Memo
10/26	Response Memo
11/2	Response Memo
11/9	Response Memo
11/16	Response Memo
12/3	In-Class Final Exam

CLASS POLICIES

CLASS COMMUNICATION

To ensure the most timely response, all email correspondence should include “PLSC 2255” in the subject and CC both Professor Meisels and TA Fiona.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY & AI

As discussed in the Yale College Undergraduate Regulations, you are expected to conduct yourself with the utmost integrity in your academic endeavors. While use of AI is not forbidden, it is unlikely to bolster the quality of your work given the nature of the assignments in this course. If you are unsure of whether the use of certain materials or software is acceptable when completing an assignment for this course, ask *before* you do so.

ACCESSIBILITY

Yale is committed to ensuring that students receive access to the accommodations they require in order to succeed. If you believe you may have a need for accessibility accommodations in this class, please get in touch with both Student Accessibility Services and myself at your earliest convenience.

Reading Schedule

Course readings will be made available on Canvas, and will consist primarily of political science book chapters and peer-reviewed articles. Many of the latter employ sophisticated statistical methods with which you may not be familiar — and that is okay. When combing through trickier readings, you should focus on identifying the author's main argument and finding, the argument that the author is responding to or challenging, and how this reading relates to other readings or concepts previously discussed in class. If aspects of a reading are unclear or you have other questions, take note of them and bring them up in class. Rest assured that others will have had similar thoughts.

WEEK 1 (8/27-8/29): INTRODUCTION AND CAMPAIGN FINANCE OVERVIEW

*Readings are for 8/29-9/3:

- Madison, James. *The Federalist* #10.
- Schattschneider, E. E. 1960. The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. Ch. 2.
- Schlozman, Kay Lehman, Sidney Verba, and Henry E. Brady. 2012. *The Unheavenly Chorus: Unequal Political Voice and the Broken Promise of American Democracy*. Princeton University Press. Ch. 1.
- Summary of *Citizens United v. FEC*: <https://www.fec.gov/legal-resources/court-cases/citizens-united-v-fec/>
- FEC contribution limits for 2026 election: <https://www.fec.gov/help-candidates-and-committees/candidate-taking-receipts/contribution-limits/>

WEEK 2 (9/3): CAMPAIGN FINANCE OVERVIEW CONT'D

- *Note that class will be held in ISPS A002 instead of our usual classroom
- Continued discussion of readings from previous week

WEEK 3 (9/8): POLITICAL PARTIES

- Bawn, Kathleen, Martin Cohen, David Karol, Seth Masket, Hans Noel, and John Zaller. 2012. "A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands and Nominations in American Politics." *Perspectives on Politics* 10(3): 571–97.
- Hassell, Hans J. G. 2016. "Party Control of Party Primaries: Party Influence in Nominations for the US Senate." *Journal of Politics* 78(1): 75–87.
- Oklobdzija, Stan. 2024. "Dark Parties: Unveiling Nonparty Communities in American Political Campaigns." *American Political Science Review* 118(1): 401–22.

WEEK 4 (9/15-9/17): INDIVIDUAL DONORS

- Kalla, Joshua L., and David E. Broockman. 2016. "Campaign Contributions Facilitate Access to Congressional Officials: A Randomized Field Experiment." *American Journal of Political Science* 60(3): 545–58.
- Grumbach, Jacob M., and Alexander Sahn. 2020. "Race and Representation in Campaign Finance." *American Political Science Review* 114(1): 206–21.
- Barber, Michael J. 2016. "Ideological Donors, Contribution Limits, and the Polarization of American Legislatures." *Journal of Politics* 78(1): 296–310.
- Meisels, Mellissa, Joshua D. Clinton, and Gregory A. Huber. 2024. "Giving to the Extreme? Experimental Evidence on Donor Response to Candidate and District Characteristics." *British Journal of Political Science* 54(3): 851–73

WEEK 5 (9/22-9/24): IDEOLOGICAL AND ISSUE GROUPS AND ACTIVISTS

- Karol, David. 2015. "Party Activists, Interest Groups, and Polarization in American Politics." In *American Gridlock: The Sources, Character, and Impact of Political Polarization*, eds. James A. Thurber and Antoine Yoshinaka. Cambridge University Press.
- Barber, Michael, and Mandi Eatough. 2019. "Industry Politicization and Interest Group Campaign Contribution Strategies." *Journal of Politics* 82(3): 1008–25.
- Meisels, Mellissa. "Campaign Agendas and Issue Group Strategy in Congressional Primaries." *Working paper*.
- Schlozman, Kay Lehman, Sidney Verba, and Henry E. Brady. 1995. "Participation's Not a Paradox: The View from American Activists." *British Journal of Political Science* 25(1): 1–36.

WEEK 6 (9/29-10/1): MARGINALIZED IDENTITY GROUPS

- Strolovitch, Dara Z. 2006. "Do Interest Groups Represent the Disadvantaged? Advocacy at the Intersections of Race, Class, and Gender." *Journal of Politics* 68(4): 894–910.
- Dwidar, Maraam A. 2022. "Coalitional Lobbying and Intersectional Representation in American Rulemaking." *American Political Science Review* 116(1): 301–21.
- Gause, LaGina. 2022. "Revealing Issue Salience via Costly Protest: How Legislative Behavior Following Protest Advantages Low-Resource Groups." *British Journal of Political Science* 52(1): 259–79.

WEEK 7 (10/6-10/8): CORPORATE CONTRIBUTIONS

- Hall, Richard L., and Frank W. Wayman. 1990. "Buying Time: Moneyed Interests and the Mobilization of Bias in Congressional Committees." *American Political Science Review* 84(3): 797–820.
- Powell, Eleanor Neff, and Justin Grimmer. 2016. "Money in Exile: Campaign Contributions and Committee Access." *Journal of Politics* 78(4): 974–88.

- Li, Zhao. 2018. "How Internal Constraints Shape Interest Group Activities: Evidence from Access-Seeking PACs." *American Political Science Review* 112(4): 792–808.
- Meisels, Mellissa. 2025. "Everything in Moderation? The Effect of Extremist Nominations on Individual and Corporate PAC Fundraising." *Political Science Research and Methods*.

WEEK 8 (10/20-10/22): "INSIDE" LOBBYING

- Kim, In Song, Jan Stuckatz, and Lukas Wolters. "Systemic and Sequential Links between Campaign Donations and Lobbying." *Journal of Politics*.
- Hall, Richard L., and Alan V. Deardorff. 2006. "Lobbying as Legislative Subsidy." *American Political Science Review* 100(1): 69–84.
- Crosson, Jesse M., Alexander C. Furnas, and Geoffrey M. Lorenz. 2020. "Polarized Pluralism: Organizational Preferences and Biases in the American Pressure System." *American Political Science Review* 114(4): 1117–37.
- Lorenz, Geoffrey Miles. 2020. "Prioritized Interests: Diverse Lobbying Coalitions and Congressional Committee Agenda Setting." *Journal of Politics* 82(1): 225–40.

WEEK 9 (10/27-10/29): "OUTSIDE" LOBBYING

- Kollman, Ken. 1998. *Outside Lobbying: Public Opinion and Interest Group Strategies*. Princeton University Press. Ch. 2.
- Hall, Richard L., and Molly E. Reynolds. 2012. "Targeted Issue Advertising and Legislative Strategy: The Inside Ends of Outside Lobbying." *Journal of Politics* 74(3): 888–902.
- Kalla, Joshua L., and David E. Broockman. 2022. "'Outside Lobbying' over the Airwaves: A Randomized Field Experiment on Televised Issue Ads." *American Political Science Review* 116(3): 1126–32.

WEEK 10 (11/3-11/5): REVOLVING DOOR LOBBYISTS

- Drutman, Lee, and Alexander Furnas. 2014. "K Street pays top dollar for revolving door talent." *Sunlight Foundation*.
- Blanes i Vidal, Jordi, Mirko Draca, and Christian Fons-Rosen. 2012. "Revolving Door Lobbyists." *American Economic Review* 102(7): 3731–48.
- Shepherd, Michael E., and Hye Young You. 2020. "Exit Strategy: Career Concerns and Revolving Doors in Congress." *American Political Science Review* 114(1): 270–84.
- Egerod, Benjamin C. K. 2022. "The Lure of the Private Sector: Career Prospects Affect Selection out of Congress." *Political Science Research and Methods* 10(4): 722–38.

WEEK 11 (11/10-11/12): EXECUTIVE BRANCH AND INTERGOVERNMENTAL LOBBYING

- Miller, David Ryan. 2023. "The President Will See Whom Now? Presidential Engagement with Organized Interests." *American Political Science Review* 117(3): 1019–35.
- You, Hye Young. 2017. "Ex Post Lobbying." *Journal of Politics* 79(4): 1162–76.
- Goldstein, Rebecca, and Hye Young You. 2017. "Cities as Lobbyists." *American Journal of Political Science* 61(4): 864–76.
- Barber, Michael, and Adam M. Dynes. 2023. "City-State Ideological Incongruence and Municipal Preemption." *American Journal of Political Science* 67(1): 119–36.

WEEK 12 (11/17-11/19): CAMPAIGN FINANCE AND REVOLVING DOOR REFORMS

- Kilborn, Mitchell, and Arjun Vishwanath. 2022. "Public Money Talks Too: How Public Campaign Financing Degrades Representation." *American Journal of Political Science* 66(3): 730–44.
- Yorgason, Chenoa. 2025. "Campaign Finance Vouchers Do Not Expand the Diversity of Donors: Evidence from Seattle." *American Political Science Review* 119(1): 508–16.
- Strickland, James M. 2020. "The Declining Value of Revolving-Door Lobbyists: Evidence from the American States." *American Journal of Political Science* 64(1): 67–81.
- Wirsching, Elisa Maria. 2025. "Sorting for K Street: Postemployment Regulations and Strategic Wage Setting in Congress." *Journal of Politics* 87(2): 664–79.

WEEK 13 (12/1): FINAL EXAM REVIEW