

The Politics of Punishment
PSCI 209
Fall 2025

I. Course Description

This seminar will evaluate the influence of political institutions on local law enforcement decision-making, with particular emphasis on constitutional design, public opinion, electoral incentives, political parties, bureaucratic accountability, oversight, fiscal incentives and organized interest groups. While grounded in contemporary developments, this course will also incorporate historical perspectives. Likewise, while substantively focused, we will pay close attention to social scientific evidence and research methods.

II. Contact and Meeting Details

Classroom Location and Meeting Times

Location: Gavett Hall Room 301
Mondays and Wednesdays, 15:25 – 16:40

Instructor

Professor Sidak Yntiso
Email: syntiso@ur.rochester.edu
Office Hours: Wednesdays, 14:00– 15:00 (in Harkness 320)

Teaching Assistant

Dot Sawyer
Email: dot.sawler@rochester.edu
Office Hours: T.B.A

III. Student Responsibilities

Class participation (10%): Active participation in classroom discussions and exercises is vital to effective learning. Students are expected to arrive well-prepared, ready to demonstrate a thorough comprehension of the assigned readings, and to engage with their peers' response papers (see below).

Response papers (30%): Students will prepare a 400–500-word response memo once every other week. Response papers may address one or more of the *required* readings assigned each week (all reading materials will be made available on Blackboard). While the format of the response memos may vary according to the content of the readings, each memo should reflect original thought and analysis, not summarize the assigned materials. Students may (a) identify one or more deficiencies in the arguments or evidence presented in the readings or (b) advance a case for why a particular aspect of the criminal justice system can be more effectively understood by

considering the perspectives, arguments, or evidence provided by that week's readings. Response papers will be graded against the following rubric:

- *Check plus (6/6 points)* - demonstrates an in-depth understanding of the reading material; provides exceptional insight into a significant deficiency, strength, or application of the reading's arguments.
- *Check (4/6 points)* - shows a basic familiarity with the reading material and some effort toward creating a coherent argument but mainly summarizes the text.
- *Check minus (2/6 points)*: indicates no familiarity with the reading material and a shallow engagement with the topic.
- *No or late submission (0/6 points)*

Students will be organized into two groups in accordance with seniority:

- Students in the Class of 2027 or 2028 in Group A and;
- Students in the Classes of 2025 or 2026 in Group B.

Each group will have five opportunities to write a response memo. Student assignments must be uploaded to Blackboard by 5 PM on the day of the Wednesday class meeting. Shortly after 5 pm, the option to upload a new assignment will close and submitted memos will be made available for viewing by the entire class.

Midterm exam (20%): Administered in class on *Monday, March 17*.

Final exam (40%): Administered in class on *Wednesday, May 7*.

Upper-Level Writing Students Only: In lieu of a final or midterm exam, students will write a 12-page research paper, due *Wednesday, May 6* (worth 40% of total grade). A summary of the research project, up to one page in length, is expected by 5 pm on *Monday, March 17* (worth 20% of total grade). Please note that any submissions received after either due date will be subject to a reduction in grade of one-third of a letter per day of delay (for example, from an 'A' to an 'A-').

IV. University Principles and Policies

Academic Honesty and Plagiarism: Students are expected to submit their own work. Any instance of academic dishonesty, cheating, or plagiarism will not be tolerated and may result in a zero grade for the submitted assignment. Review the University Academic Honesty Policy ([here](#)).

V. Schedule

Week 1. January 22

Introduction and Orientation

Optional Reading

- Wagner, Peter, and Wendy Sawyer. "Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2024." *Prison Policy Initiative*. March 14, 2024.

Week 2. January 27- January 29

Fundamental Political Dilemmas

Required Reading

- de Mesquita, Ethan Bueno. "Strategic Adjustment" *Political Economy for Public Policy*. Princeton University Press, 2016, pp. 197–217.
- Stevenson, Megan T. 2023. "Cause, Effect, and the Structure of the Social World." *Boston Law Review* 103: 2001-2047.

Week 3. February 3-5

Normative Foundations and Dilemmas

Assignments

- Group A response memos due by 5 pm on Monday, February 3

Required Reading

- Devlin, Lord Patrick. 1971. "Morals and the Criminal Law." In *Morality and the Law*, ed. Richard Wasserstrom. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing
- Hart, H. L. A. 1971. "Immorality and Treason." In *Morality and the Law*, ed. Richard Wasserstrom. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing
- Kadish, Sanford H. "The Crisis of Overcriminalization." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 374.1 (1967): 157-170.

Week 3. February 10-12

The Constitutional Governance of Punishment

Assignments

- Group B response memos due by 5 pm on Monday, February 10

Required Reading

- Stuntz, William J. Chapter 3. "Ideals and Institutions." In *The Collapse of American Criminal Justice*, Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Barkow, Rachel Elise. Chapter 7. "Institutional Intransigence." In *Prisoners of Politics*. Harvard University Press, 2019.

Week 4. February 17-19

Public Opinion

Assignments

- Group A response memos due by 5 pm on Monday, February 17

Required Reading

- Gilliam Jr, Franklin D., and Shanto Iyengar. "Prime Suspects: the Influence of Local Television News on the Viewing Public." *American Journal of Political Science* (2000): 560-573.

- Enns, Peter K. *Incarceration Nation*. Cambridge University Press, Chapters 4-6.

Week 5. February 24-26

Electoral Incentives

Assignments

- Group B response memos due by 5 pm on Monday, February 24

Required Reading

- de Mesquita, Ethan Bueno. "Influence Over Public Officials" *Political Economy for Public Policy*. Princeton University Press, 2016, pp. 282–304.
- Gordon, Sanford C., and Gregory Huber. "The effect of electoral competitiveness on incumbent behavior." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 2.2 (2007): 107-138.

Week 6. March 3-5

Electoral Parties and Electoral Distortions

Assignments

- Group A response memos due by 5 pm on Monday, March 3

Required Reading

- Thompson, Daniel M. "How partisan is local law enforcement? Evidence from sheriff cooperation with immigration authorities." *American Political Science Review* 114.1 (2020): 222-236.
- White, Ariel. "Misdemeanor Disenfranchisement? The demobilizing effects of brief jail spells on potential voters." *American Political Science Review* 113.2 (2019): 311-324.

Week 7. March 10-12

Spring Break (No class meeting)

Week 8. March 17-19

The Limits of Bureaucratic Accountability

Assignments

- Midterm administered in class on Monday, March 17.
- *Upper-Level Writing Students Only*: No class meeting. Research proposals due by 5 pm on Monday, March 17.

Week 9. March 24-26

The Limits of Bureaucratic Accountability (continued)

Assignments

- Group B response memos due by 5 pm on Monday, March 24

Required Reading

- Eckhouse, Laurel. "Metrics Management and Bureaucratic Accountability: Evidence from Policing." *American Journal of Political Science* 66.2 (2022): 385-401.
- Mummolo, Jonathan. "Modern police tactics, police-citizen interactions, and the prospects for reform." *The Journal of Politics* 80.1 (2018): 1-15.

Week 10. March 31-April 2

Officeholder Characteristics

Assignments

- Group A response memos due by 5 pm on Monday, March 31

Required Reading

- Shoub, Kelsey, Katelyn E. Stauffer, and Miyeon Song. "Do female officers police differently? Evidence from traffic stops." *American Journal of Political Science* 65.3 (2021): 755-769.
- McCrary, Justin. "The effect of court-ordered hiring quotas on the composition and quality of police." *American Economic Review* 97.1 (2007): 318-353.

Week 11. April 7-9

Race, Identity and Criminal Justice Outcomes

Assignments

- Group B response memos due by 5 pm on Monday, April 7

Required Reading

- Alesina, Alberto, and Eliana La Ferrara. "A test of racial bias in capital sentencing." *American Economic Review* 104.11 (2014): 3397-3433.
- Park, Kyung H. "Do Judges Have Tastes for Discrimination? Evidence from Criminal Courts." *Review of Economics and Statistics* 99.5 (2017): 810-823
- Rehavi, M. Marit, and Sonja B. Starr. "Racial Disparity in Federal Criminal Sentences." *Journal of Political Economy* 122.6 (2014): 1320-1354

Week 12. April 14-16

Fiscal Incentives

Assignments

- Group A response memos due by 5 pm on Monday, April 14

Required Reading

- United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division (2015). Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department. [Read just the report summary.]
- Ouss, Aurélie. "Misaligned incentives and the scale of incarceration in the United States." *Journal of Public Economics* 191 (2020): 104285.
- Harris, Allison P et al. "Fiscal Pressures and Discriminatory Policing: Evidence from Traffic Stops in Missouri." *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics* 5.3 (2020): 450-480.

Week 13. April 21-23

Organized Interest Groups

Assignments

- Group B response memos due by 5 pm on Monday, April 21

Required Reading

- Dharmapala, Dhammika, Richard H. McAdams, and John Rappaport. "Collective bargaining rights and police misconduct: Evidence from Florida." *The Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization* 38.1 (2022): 1-41.
- Page, Joshua. Chapter 1 (pages 1-8) and Chapter 3. In *The Toughest Beat: Politics, Punishment, and the Prison Officers Union in California*. Oxford University Press, 2011

Week 14. April 28-30

Technological Reform

Required Reading

- Yokum, David, Anita Ravishankar, and Alexander Coppock. "A randomized control trial evaluating the effects of police body-worn cameras." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116.21 (2019): 10329-10332.
- Stevenson, Megan T., and Jennifer L. Doleac. "Algorithmic Risk Assessment in the Hands of Humans." *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 16.4 (2024): 382-414.

Week 15. May 5-7

- No class meeting on Monday, May 5.
- Final exam administered in class on Wednesday, May 7.
- *Upper-Level Writing Students Only*: No class meeting this week. Research papers due by 5 pm on Tuesday, May 6.