

The Politics of Punishment
PSCI 209
Spring 2026

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: Bausch & Lomb Room 270

Tuesdays and Wednesdays, 11:05 – 12:20

Instructor

Professor Sidak Yntiso

Email: syntiso@ur.rochester.edu

Office Hours: Mondays, 10:00– 12:00 (in Harkness 320)

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:

- **Group A:** Students in the Class of 2028, 2029 or 2030:
- **Group B:** Students in the Classes of 2026, 2027 or Take 5.

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 Tuesday 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 *Tuesday, March 17*.

Final exam (40%): Administered in class (Date TBA)

Upper-Level Writing Students Only: In lieu of a final or midterm exam, students will write a 12-page paper, due *Tuesday, May 12* (worth 40% of total grade). A summary of the research project, up to one page in length, is expected by 5 pm on *Tuesday, 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 20 - 22

Introduction and Orientation

Optional Readings

- 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 2. January 27- January 29

Normative Foundations and Dilemmas

Assignments

- Group A response memos due by 5 pm on Tuesday, January 27

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 3-5

The Constitutional Governance of Punishment

Assignments

- Group B response memos due by 5 pm on Tuesday, February 3

Required Reading

- Stuntz, William J. Chapter 3. "Ideals and Institutions." In *The Collapse of American Criminal Justice*, Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Barkow, Rachel Elise. Chapters 2. "Normalizing Coercive Plea Bargaining: Bordenkircher v. Hayes." In *Justice Abandoned: How the Supreme Court Ignored the Constitution and Enabled Mass Incarceration*. Harvard University Press, 2025.

Weeks 3-4. February 10 and 17 and 19 (No class meeting on February 12)

Public Opinion

Assignments

- Group A response memos due by 5 pm on Tuesday, February 10

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 Tuesday, February 17

Required Reading

- Canes-Wrone, Brandice, Tom S. Clark, and Jason P. Kelly. "Judicial selection and death penalty decisions." *American Political Science Review* 108.1 (2014): 23-39.
- Gordon, Sanford C., and Gregory Huber. "The effect of electoral competitiveness on incumbent behavior." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 2.2 (2007): 107-138.
- Lim, Claire SH, and James M. Snyder Jr. "Is more information always better? party cues and candidate quality in US judicial elections." *Journal of Public Economics* 128 (2015): 107-123

Week 6. March 3-5

Electoral Parties and Electoral Distortions

Assignments

- Group A response memos due by 5 pm on Tuesday, February 24

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

Immigration Enforcement

Assignments

- Midterm administered in class on Tuesday, March 17.
- *Upper-Level Writing Students Only*: Paper proposals due by 5 pm on Tuesday, March 17.

Required Reading

- Dagonel, Angelo, and Asya Magazinnik. "How Responsive Is Local Immigration Enforcement to Constituency Preferences?" *Available at SSRN 5433734* (2025).
- Provine, Doris Marie, Monica W. Varsanyi, Paul G. Lewis, and Scott H. Decker. Chapters 1 and 5. In *Policing Immigrants*. University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Week 9. March 24-26

The Limits of Bureaucratic Accountability

Assignments

- Group B response memos due by 5 pm on Tuesday, 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.
- McCall, Andrew J. "Police department design, political pressure, and racial inequality in arrests." *American Journal of Political Science* (2025).

Week 10. March 31-April 2

Officeholder Characteristics

Assignments

- Group A response memos due by 5 pm on Tuesday, 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

Fiscal Incentives

Assignments

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

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.
- Page, Joshua, and Joe Soss. (Chapters TBA) In *Legal plunder: The predatory dimensions of criminal justice*. University of Chicago Press, 2025

Week 12. April 14-16

Organized Interest Groups

Assignments

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

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 13. April 21-23

Technological Reform: Risk Assessment

Assignments

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

Required Reading

- Slobogin, Christopher. Chapters 1 and 4. In *Algorithms: Using science to reduce incarceration and inform a jurisprudence of risk*. Cambridge University Press, 2021.
- 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 14. April 28-30

Institutional and Policy Reform

Readings TBA

Week 15. May 5-7

Reading Period

- No class meeting on Tuesday, May 5.
- Final exam administered in class (Date TBA)
- *Upper-Level Writing Students Only*: No class meeting this week. Research papers due by 5 pm on Tuesday, May 12.