Local Democracy in Comparative Perspective
Spring 2026
Loyola Marymount University

MW 9:55 AM – 10:30 AM

Prof. Mark Schneider
Mark.schneider@lmu.edu

Although the media focuses on national politics, local government, policy, and electoral politics are critically important around the world. Local governments in the U.S., for example, manage the police, determine housing policies, provide basic public services such as garbage collection and water and sanitation; and implement national policies from welfare programs to climate change. Local governments in developing countries like India also have substantial powers including the implementation of large programs for the poor, deciding where a road will be built, and helping citizens access a distant and often unresponsive state. In this class, we will examine local democracies, or elected local governments, in a diverse array of contexts in developed and developing democracies. We will focus on answering four fundamental questions with applications to the U.S., India, Brazil, Ghana, and other countries.

(1) What do local governments do and how does this vary across different local political systems and across developed and developing countries?
(2) "Who governs" at the local level—that is, what types of people run for and hold office, and what types of individuals, social groups, institutions, or interest groups influence local government decisions?
(3) When is local democracy most responsive to poor and marginalized groups? Specifically, in what types of social and political contexts does local democracy work best for the poor?

Goals/Objectives of the Course (intended outcomes):
1. Students will come to understand major debates in local politics in developing and developed countries.
2. Students will learn about the local political systems of different countries across the globe and their consequences for governance generally and the poor specifically.
3. Students will engage in effective written expression.
4. Students will learn to analyze complex political phenomena through careful engagement with theory and evidence.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Your final grade will be based on the following components:

Attendance and Participation in Discussion (15%) You are expected to attend all classes and to read the required readings in advance of each class session. You will not be penalized for 2 absences after the first week of class, but will lose 5 percentage points for each additional <u>unexcused</u> absence off the final grade unless the professor agrees to alternative arrangements for

extenuating circumstances. Please note that work conflicts are not excused absences and alerting me in advance of non-essential absences does not make an absence excused.

To do well in this course, you must attend but also actively participate in regular class meetings. Students are required to complete the readings and watch assigned movies before class, and to come to class ready to discuss the material of the day. After reading an article, you should be able to answer the following questions: What is the main argument? Does it make sense logically? What is the evidence for it? What does it conclude based on the evidence? What are the strengths and the weaknesses? Use the reading worksheet at the end of this syllabus to help you with this. It is essential that you come to class prepared so that you can engage in discussion and ask questions. Completing the reading worksheet and weekly responses (described below) will help you be prepared for class discussions.

Weekly responses to reading and other activities (10%) You will be asked to write a 500-word response based on the readings and/or movies assigned that week.
- I will post weekly questions on Brightspace about the readings, movies, or field assignment tasks assigned that week (usually three questions per week). Students need to answer all the questions. The total combined length of the answers must be 500 words, roughly equally divided among questions (that is, if there are four questions, each answer should be about 125 words).
- After answering the questions, students will propose a question they hope to discuss during the seminar based on the week's readings and/or movie (the question does not count toward the word limit). Questions can be about conceptual clarity, real-world implications, or any other aspect of the readings/movies of the day that sparked interest.
- Some weeks, I will ask you to complete an activity such as watching a mayoral debate, city council meeting, or listening to a podcast about local development. Other weeks we have workshops where you present on your field experience. Weekly questions will include responses to these activities (watching debates) or experiences (the field assignment workshop and presentations for the field assignment workshop) in those weeks.
- For the weekly response papers, you will receive a pass/fail mark based on if you completed the assignment and addressed the main questions about arguments and evidence. No response will be due during the midterm week, or in the first, second, or last week of the term.

Follow the News in a City, Town, or County (5%). You will be asked to pick a city to follow in the news throughout the semester. It can be any county or town in the world as long as there is a credible news source covering it on a weekly basis or more often. We'll discuss local news stories at the start of class on Mondays. As a rule of thumb, plan to read at least one article per week related to local governance on your town. At the end of the term, you will write a 3-page memo on what you learned about your town/city/county as it relates to class themes. In the memo, you should describe the local news ecosystem in your locality, basic background on your town, trends in the news stories you've been following, and interpret these trends through the course themes we've covered. This will be due before our final class meeting. In our final class,

we'll have an informal discussion about the towns/counties you covered and what you learned about them along with a general discussion about the course.

Field Assignment (15%). Students will choose a local government body (neighborhood council, city council, board of education, issue-related government meeting, or civic group involved in local issues to engage throughout out the term. Each student should conduct interviews with at least one attendee at the meeting (understand why they participate), office holder or civic leader presenting at the meeting, and someone who offers a comment at the meeting. They should also take field notes on each experience so you can understand the context of what you are seeing (who shows up, is it emotionally charged, what seems to be the conflict is relevant, etc.). We will learn how to take field notes and conduct interviews in class to prepare you for this task. We will have a class session on your first experience or experiences with your field site on Feb 23.

You will present on your field experience in the field project workshop which will last a week at the end of the course. Each presentation should be about 10 minutes long and include what you set out to do, what you learned from the experience, and what you saw/heard/discussed with people about their role in local governance (draw on your fieldnotes and interviews).

Civic Education Activity (10%) People broadly have very little information about local government. For this assignment I will ask you to host a civic education session where you teach about 10 people one lesson about what you think they should know about government and local government specifically. You might gather your friends or people in your dorm or people you might know in your neighborhood back home. You might also include people who are less informed, such as STEM students without social-science coursework. You will want to do a little bit of early research to understand what your target audience knows and wants to know, and what they might not know (which you will post about in a Brightspace activity). You will then hold the session and present on the material you covered, the experience of the session, and any feedback you received after the session. I provide a questionnaire for feedback to give to participants as well. We'll dedicate a class session to presentations and discussion on this activity in the penultimate class. We will also have a session on civic education along with some check-ins to help you along. We'll have a workshop to present about your civic experiences and what you learned from it.

Civic Bootcamp (5%). At the end of this syllabus is a bootcamp activity where you get points for participating in civic activities including attending local government or civic group meetings (which the field project can include), teaching friends and family about civic issues, and so on. For this activity, I ask you to get 100 points at minimum with at least 40 points completed before spring break. Whoever accumulates the most points at the end of the semester will get a prize. Note: Attending events organized by the Center for the Study of LA are a good way to get some bootcamp points!

Final Paper Proposal (5%) You will write a 3-page proposal on your final paper due before the paper proposal workshop on April 22. All students should get their papers approved by the professor and schedule a 15-minute meeting on the paper after completing some preliminary work. You can always speak to me about the paper during office hours anytime, but this is for the official paper meeting.

Final Paper (30%) You will write a final paper (15 pages) that examines a research question on local government that interests you. The paper will address a research question on local government and highlight an in-depth case study or comparative study of multiple cases. You might also want to bring in interviews or fieldwork if the topic is relevant to LA. Your paper topic must be approved by the professor by March 30. We will hold a class session workshop where you will present your paper proposals and get feedback from your classmates.

Classroom Etiquette

To make sure that we have a hospitable learning environment, I ask students to follow three simple rules:

1) Turn your <u>cell phones</u> off and close your <u>laptops</u> when class begins (unless you are in paired discussion looking over readings).
2) Respect your classmates. Debate is encouraged but disagree respectfully by engaging in ideas and evidence rather than personal attacks.
3) Coffee/beverages are fine, but <u>food is not permitted in class</u> since it can distract your classmates.
4) It is acceptable to use AI tools such as ChatGPT or Pilot to identify relevant resources for papers or to find information relevant to the class. It is not acceptable to use AI tools to complete assignments or write papers beyond this. You are smarter and more creative than ChatGPT, and this class is the place to show me how you think about the material.

A Note on Academic Integrity

As goes without saying, it will not be possible to pass this course if I find any evidence of plagiarism/cheating of any kind for any assignment. At minimum, this will result in a zero for that assignment and will be referred to the Dean without exceptions. If you do the work yourself, and think a lot about the material, you'll be fine.

READINGS

All required readings will be posted on Bright Space or via library e-reserves. Recommended articles are optional and likely to be references in lecture in case you want to read in more depth. This course requires you to carefully read all <u>required readings</u> before class and be prepared to discuss them. Generally, 3 articles or book chapters are assigned each week with occasional media pieces to illustrate course concepts. Make sure you not only understand the basic argument of each reading, but also give yourself time to think critically about them. You should complete the reading worksheet provided at the end of this syllabus on at least one reading per week to get practice reading actively and critically.

Required Books

Available at the bookstore and as an ebook at the library:

Oliver, J. Eric, Shang E. Ha, and Zachary Callen. 2012. *Local Elections and the Politics of Small-Scale Democracy*. Princeton University Press.

PART 1: THE POWER AND INSTITUTIONS OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY

1/12: Introduction

Short video

Watch in Class: *Our Towns* (2021). Columbus, Mississippi segment.

Recommend: Fallows, James and Deborah Fallows. 2016. "How America is Putting Itself Back Together." *Atlantic*

1/14: What is Local Democracy and How is it Different Than National Politics?

Learning Goal: Understand why local government is different than national politics and why it matters for civic and social life.

Le Galès, Patrick. 2021. "The Rise of Local Politics: A global review." *Annual Review of Political Science* 24 (1) 345-363.

Recommended: Oliver, J. Eric, Shang E. Ha, and Zachary Callen. 2012. *Local Elections and the Politics of Small-Scale Democracy*. Chapter 1.

1/19: No Class. MLK Day

1/21: Who are Cities Designed For?

Learning Goals: Understand the pluralist and elite models of local government influence.

Watch an Excerpt in Class: *Citizen Jane: Battle for the City*. Altimeter Films, 2016.

Jacobs, Jane. 1961. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities.* New York: Random House. Chapter 7, "The Generators of Diversity," pp. 143–177.

Recommended: Molotch, Harvey. 1976. "The City as a Growth Machine." *American Journal of Sociology*, 82(2): 309–332.

1/26: How Much Power Do Local Governments Have?

Learning Goals: Understand the authority that mayors have in the US and how it compares to a case of deep decentralization in Kerala, India.

Note: We will choose a city council meeting to attend as a class today.

Einstein, Katherine Levine, David M. Glick, and Maxwell Palmer. 2019. *Urban Politics: Cities and Suburbs in a Global Age.* Washington, DC: CQ Press. Chapter 3: ("Who Governs the City? Mayoral Power, City Councils, and City Managers") pp. 39–57.

1/28: Turnout in Local Elections: Explaining Variation

Learning Goals: Understand general turnout patterns at the local level and how this varies.

Oliver, J. Eric, Shang E. Ha, and Zachary Callen. 2012. *Local Elections and the Politics of Small-Scale Democracy.* Princeton University Press. Chapter 2.

Increasing Voter Turnout in Local Elections. National Civic League:
https://www.nationalcivicleague.org/ncr-article/increasing-voter-turnout-in-local-elections/

Recommended: Birch, Sarah. 2010. *"Full Participation: A Comparative Study of Compulsory Voting."* Cambridge University Press (Ch. 1, "Why Compel?").

2/2: Civic Engagement and Non-Electoral Participation

Assignment: Attend 1 hour+ of a city council or neighborhood council meeting and take notes on who attends, what questions and issues are raises, and how the meeting is organized. Bring the notes to class for an activity.

Learning Goals: Understand how bottom-up pressure from civil society shapes government performance and what gaps in citizen participation in urban politics.

Einstein, Katherine Levine, Maxwell Palmer, and David M. Glick. 2019. "Who Participates in Local Government? Evidence from Meeting Minutes." *Perspectives on Politics* 17 (1): 28–46.

Putnam, Robert D. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.* New York: Simon & Schuster. Chapter 1, "Thinking About Social Change in America," pp. 15–28.

2/4: Local News: Decline and the Way Forward

Learning Goals: Understand the challenge local news is facing in the U.S. and discuss the way forward.

Assignment: Describe the local news ecosystem of the town you are following in the news assignment. Look for social media pages of local information as well as traditional sources. Describe what sources you see and what they tend to cover in class.

Watch in Class: The Fall of Newspapers, Rise of Misinformation

Brookings. "Local Journalism in Crisis. Why America Must Revive Its Local Newsrooms."
[Read the full report available in the course drop box folder].

2/9: Research Skills for Field Projects I: Writing Fieldnotes and Designing Interview Questionnaires:

Learning Goals: Learn to conduct interviews and write fieldnotes in the context of the field project and course project.

Assignment: Attend a government meeting and come to class on 2/18 with fieldnotes on that meeting. Also try to conduct a 5-6 question interview with an attendee.

Emerson, Robert, Rachel Fretz, Linda Shaw. 2011. Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Pages 169-182.

Leech, Beth. 2002. "Asking Questions: Techniques for Semi-Structured Interviews." Political Science and Politics 35 (4) 665-68.

2/11: Civics Education I

Learning Goals: Understand the knowledge gap in civic knowledge and best practices for delivering civics education.

Online activity before class: Interview 3 friends about what they know about local government and what they would like to know more about. What do you think you should be including in civic education material based on what learned? Describe what you learned in a post on Brightspace.

Levine, Peter, and Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg. 2017. "The Republic is (Still) at Risk—and Civics is Part of the Solution." *Medford, MA: Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, Tufts University*.

Colby, Anne, and Thomas Ehrlich. 2008. "Politics as a Vocation: Preparing Students for Citizenship." *Journal of Political Science Education* 4(1): 81–98.

2/16: No Class. President's Day

2/18: Civic Education II: Simulations and Interactive Activities

Guest Panel on Civic Education TBA.

Learning Goals: Understand strategies for teaching civics and the experiences of people engaged in this work in high schools, colleges, and beyond. Brainstorm on the best path for the civic education exercise.

Assignment: Upload a draft of your civic education presentation before class. We will discuss it after the panel discussion.

Bartlett, Tara, and Daniel Schugurensky. 2024. "Inclusive Civic Education and School Democracy Through Participatory Budgeting." *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice* 19 (3) 362-380.

iCivics Simulation (try out a couple activities before class)

2/23: Fieldwork Skills Discussion Day: Class Discussion on Fieldnotes and Interviews from your first (or second) field visit.

2/25: Local Elections and Accountability

Learning Goals*:* Understand the ways that voters make vote decisions under low information.

Assignment: Watch a mayoral debate in a large city and a smaller city on youtube and describe the issues that are discussed.

Recommended: Arnold, R. Douglas, and Nicholas Carnes. 2012. "Holding Mayors Accountable: New York's executives from Koch to Bloomberg." *American Journal of Political Science* 56 (4) 949-963.

No Class 3/2 and 3/4. Spring Break.

PART 2: WHO GOVERNS? POWER, INFLUENCE, AND ELECTIONS

3/11: Descriptive Representation: Race and Gender

Learning Goals: Understand how descriptive representation—electing leaders who share the identity of marginalized communities—shapes public attitudes and policy.

Assignment: Submit final version of civic education slides. Set a meeting with the professor for feedback. Please confirm the date of your civic education session with confirmed attendees also by this time.

Watch an Excerpt: *Here's Harold: The Election of Harold Washington*

Hajnal, Zoltan L. 2006. *Changing White Attitudes Toward Black Political Leadership*. Cambridge University Press. Introduction (1-12).

Fox, Richard L., and Jennifer L. Lawless. 2011. "Gendered Perceptions and Political Ambition: An Experimental Study." *American Journal of Political Science* 55(1): 59–73.

3/16: Civic Education Workshop I

No assigned reading. Post your presentations on Bright Space.

3/18: Civic Education Workshop II + Discussion

We'll see the remainder of your presentations. No assigned reading. Post your presentations on Bright Space.

PART 3: LOCAL DEMOCRACY and POLICY

3/23: Redlining and Racial Disparities in Housing

Learning Goal: Understand the ways that redlining shaped inequality within cities. Think about the legacy of redlining on racial and inter-neighborhood inequality today.
Watch in Class: *Shame of Chicago, Episode 1.*

Gerken, Matthew, Samantha Batko, Katie Fallon, Emma Fernandez, Abigail Williams, and Brendan Chen. 2023. "Assessing the Legacies of Historical Redlining." *Washington, DC: Urban Institute/Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center* 25.

3/25: Housing in the U.S.: The Battle for Multi-Family Homes

Guest Speaker (Hopefully): Liam Dillon

Learning Goals: Understand the class dynamic in the battle over housing and new housing construction.

Dougherty, Conor. 13 Feb 2020 "Housing Crisis Is a Crisis of Local Democracy." *The New York Times*.

Brouwer, N. R., and Jessica Trounstine. 2024. "NIMBYs, YIMBYs, and the Politics of Land Use in American cities." *Annual Review of Political Science* 27.

Recommended: Monkkonen P, Manville M. 2019. Opposition to development or opposition to developers? Experimental evidence on attitudes toward new housing." *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 41(8) 123–41.

3/30: Gentrification

Learning Goals: Understand how gentrification impacts housing markets and the people who live in gentrifying neighborhoods.

Assignment: Talk to someone who has lived in your neighborhood for 10 years or longer. Ask them how the neighborhood has changed in terms of new businesses, stores closing, etc. Also check rental prices 10 years ago, 5 years ago, 1 year ago, and today. Post what you find on BrightSpace.

Watch in Class: *My Brooklyn* (2012, dir. Kelly Anderson)

Freeman, Lance. 2006. *There Goes the 'Hood: Views of Gentrification from the Ground Up.* Chapter 2.

4/1: Causes and Politics of Homelessness

Learning Goals: Understand the debate over the causes of homelessness. Think about city-level structural factors as well as individual-level risk factors.

Watch at Home: On the Streets

Shinn, Marybeth, and Jill Khadduri. *In the Midst of Plenty: Homelessness and What to Do About It.* John Wiley & Sons, 2020. Chapter 2: "What Causes Homelessness?"

Herring, Chris. 2021. *Caging the Homeless: Public Policy and the Criminalization of Poverty.* Chapter 1.

4/6: Guest Lecture TBA: Addressing Homelessness

4/8: Policing and Race: Protection vs. Violence

Learning Goals: Understand which elected positions have authority over policing and understand what policing is like in urban areas day to day.

Moskos, Peter. 2008. *Cop in the Hood: My Year Policing Baltimore's Eastern District.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Chapter 4 ("On the Job") 71–98.

Farris, Emily, and Mirya Holman. 2016. "All Politics Is Local? County Sheriffs and Localized Policies of Immigration Enforcement." *Political Research Quarterly* 70(1): 142-154.

Watch in Class: The Wire, Season 1, Episode 2.

4/13: Police Reform

Learning Goals: Understand the challenges of police reform in Minneapolis and Newark, NJ. Also understand interventions that may improve responsiveness of the police to women.

Online Assignment: Look into the policies of policing in the city you are following in the news. Have there been recent reports of bias or fatalities or protests related to policing? What recent reforms have taken place if any? Do these reforms seem relevant to address the problem?

*Watch in class***:** *Policing the Police*

Felker-Kantor, Max. 2017. "Liberal Law-and-Order: The Politics of Police Reform in Los Angeles." *Journal of Urban History*, 46 (5) 1000-1024.

Olzak, Susan. "Does Protest Against Police Violence Matter? Evidence from US Cities, 1990 through 2019." *American sociological review* 86 (6) 1066-1099.

<u>Recommended</u>: Smith, Brad W. 2003. "The Impact of Police Officer Diversity on Police-Caused Homicides." *Policy studies journal* 31 (2) 147-162.

4/15: Paper Proposal Workshop

Bring two copies of your seminar paper proposal to class. Note that you should have your paper topic approved by the professor in advance (by 4/1

Post your 3-page paper proposal on Bright Space and print two copies to share with classmates for an activity.

4/20: Local Democracy and Climate Adaptation

<u>Learning Goals</u>: Understand how climate change is impacting cities and what local government are doing to address or adapt to climate change.

<u>Possible Panel Discussion TBA.</u>

US Conference of Mayors. 2020. "Mayors Leading the Way on Climate How Cities Large and Small are Taking Action." Read the executive summary and 2 examples.

4/22: Field Project Discussion

Bring 3 interview transcripts to class from your field assignment.

4/27: Local Democracy, Energy Equity, and Environmental Justice

Guest Lecture: Justin Schott, **Director of the Energy Equity Project***, University of Michigan*

Schott, Justin, et al. 2022. *Energy Equity Project Framework.* University of Michigan, School for Environment and Sustainability.

Mohai, Paul, David Pellow, and J. Timmons Roberts. 2009. "Environmental Justice." *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 34: 405–430.

4/29: Field Project Workshop I

5/4: Field Project Workshop II + Discussion on the Field Projects for Seminar Papers.

5/6: Course Conclusion

Please complete course evaluations online before class.

Reading Worksheet

For each book, chapter, or article assigned in this course, you should fill out the following (nongraded) worksheet. Many of these points can be addressed in a sentence or two (e.g. Questions 1 and 2; in some cases, answers will not need even to be full sentences (e.g., Question); and in some cases, the answers may overlap. These worksheets should be retained: they will be useful for future reference.

1. State the central question that the reading addresses.

2. State the central argument(s) defended in the paper in response to this question.

3. What type of reasoning or evidence is used to support these arguments? If it is an analytical paper, what is the logic that undergirds the argument? If an empirical paper, what type of data is employed? Are there other data sources that you think might be more appropriate?

4. Do you find the claims of the reading convincing? What do you see as the main gaps that need to be filled?

5. Why (if at all) is the reading interesting?

6. Do you agree with the main claims? What are your hesitations? (This may simply involve restatement of previous points.)

7. Identify one or two implicit premises or background assumptions in the paper that you think are especially controversial or objectionable.

8. Considering your answers to the previous questions, write an abstract for the article of no more than 100 words. (Feel free to repeat formulations given in response to earlier questions.)

9. When you have done this for individual readings, take some time to think about the various readings you have been assigned in relation to each other. See if you can write or imagine a summary table for all the readings taken together which compares and contrasts them.

Local Politics Bootcamp

Goal: Earn 100 points across at least 8 activities (roughly one in-person action every two weeks). At least one 'Teach' action is strongly encouraged.

Learn and Engage
- 5 — Sign up for your Neighborhood Council newsletter (empowerla.org)
- 5 — Sign up for your City Council member's newsletter
- 5 — Follow your City Council member and State Assemblymember on social media
- 5 — Find a council file your CM is sponsoring (LA City Clerk CFMS)
- 5 — Subscribe to a local news outlet (LAist, LA Times, Knock LA, Crosstown)
- 10 — Write a short memo (½ page) on a local office that's not mayor (e.g., County Supervisor, City Attorney, Sheriff, School Board)
- 10 — Attend a Neighborhood/City/School Board/Planning meeting (in-person or online)
- 10 — Attend a meeting of a civic group (ask one question or make one comment)
- 10 — Meet (office hours/Zoom) with a local representative or civic org staffer
- 10 — Attend a lecture on local government or local policy

Build Community
- 10 — Create a GroupMe/WhatsApp/Discord for 5+ classmates/neighbors on a local issue
- 10 — Bring 5 friends to a local-government or policy event
- 20 — Organize a small campus event (film screening, dorm discussion)
- 20 — Plan a volunteer day (LA River/beach cleanup, park beautification)
- 20 — Join a student group related to any civic/social issue
- 30 — Start a short newsletter/flyer/Substack for your dorm, building, or student org
- 40 — Run for (or already serve in) a leadership role in any organization

Teach (Weighted Higher – Capstone Actions)
- 15 — Recruit a friend/classmate to participate in Bootcamp
- 20 — Have a structured discussion about local politics with a family member (write 5 bullet takeaways)
- 30 — Create a 2–3 minute explainer video or a one-page infographic on a local issue
- 30 — Lead a dorm/club event or film screening on a civic issue
- 40 — Teach a short lesson or discussion on local government

Influence Politics
- 10 — Register to vote in LA (or update your registration)
- 10 — Sign a petition about something you care about (housing, transit, climate, etc.)
- 10 — Volunteer for a local cause (food bank, housing advocacy, environmental group)
- 20 — Convince 5+ classmates to register to vote before the deadline
- 10 — Join a civic group or student org with a local politics focus

- 20 — Attend a civic group event (workshop, rally, teach-in)
- 30 — Volunteer on a local campaign (City Council, Assembly, School Board)
- 20 — Give a 5-minute dorm/class talk on why local politics matters
- 10 — Share a post/article about LA local government on social media and tag your councilmember
- 30 — Create an online video about local politics and share it on social media