

## Local Democracy

Summer 2026, Session B: July 6 – August 14

MW 5:30PM to 8:40PM

25-30 Minute break at the half-way point

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Office Hours: M, W 4-5PM or by Zoom appointment

Prof. Mark Schneider

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. Unlike a course that examines one city in-depth, this course will identify patterns in local representation and policy across contexts with different institutions, demographics, and levels of development (e.g., US vs India).

This six-week course is also unique in that it has a focus on New York City itself. We will have opportunities to have experiences in NYC related to local democracy. All students will attend a city council or neighborhood council meeting and take notes on what you see and hear. We will meet organizers of local campaigns and/or local activists participating in local issues specific to NYC. And we will have a field assignment where you explore an issue in NYC government. We will explore the following questions:

- (1) What do local governments do and how does this vary across contexts?
- (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?
- (4) What explains variation in policy outcomes (housing, policing, public services, climate efforts) across towns in the US and across contexts?

### **Goals/Objectives of the Course (intended outcomes):**

1. Students will come to understand major debates in local politics.
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 participate in experiences in NYC and civic engagement activities.

This course meets the innovative and experiential criteria of the summer program by employing civic skill related activities including teaching students to teach their own civic education session among their peers or family, learning to write field notes from NYC experiences, and connecting what we learn in class with experiences they have in NYC. It also meets major requirements in political science as an elective political science course, and teaches comparative approaches to local democracy – meeting the Modes of Thinking criteria.

## 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. In addition, you are required to post a question you are curious about based on the readings on CourseWorks before each class. This is a short course and it will be run as a seminar, which means that attendance is mandatory. You will not be penalized for 1 absence after the first week of class (while students may be choosing classes) but will lose 4 percentage points for each additional unexcused absence off the final grade unless the professor agrees to alternative arrangements for extenuating circumstances.

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 are the strengths and the weaknesses? Use the reading worksheet at the end of this syllabus to help you with this. We will go over the reading worksheet early in the class to help you with this. It is essential that you come to class prepared so that you can engage in discussion and ask questions. You should take notes as you do the readings and weekly responses will help you participate as well. The notes will help you during the in-class discussion. You should think of questions you have based on the readings that you want to bring up in class.

**Follow the News on Local Government in NYC (10%)** You will be asked to follow the news on local government in NYC throughout the term. Each student will pick a local government position or agency or issue to follow throughout the term and post a paragraph news summary each week starting in week 2. Posts will be due before class on Tuesdays. Also you will be asked to follow the social media accounts of the position or agency you choose. Positions and agencies may include any of following:

- Political positions: Mayor; city comptroller; council representative (any rep in NYC), speaker of the city council; NYC public advocate; Manhattan DA; Governor (specifically news on state government negotiations with NYC on funding, tax, and policy); governor-city relations (specifically role of state government in NYC funding and policy).
- Agencies: Police chief (NYPD); housing commissioner (department of housing); schools chancellor (department of education); civilian complaint review board; department of social services.
- Issue areas: Homelessness; housing; infrastructure; climate policies; crime (might require some looking to find news each week).

**NYC Politics Field Assignment (10%).** This course requires activities that expose students to local civic life in NYC. For the field assignment I will ask you to attend three events including any of the following: city council or neighborhood council meetings, planning meetings (e.g., housing), PTA meetings, and/or civil society groups involved in local issues. If possible attend the same type of meeting all three times, but you are welcome to reach these three meetings in any combination you like. We will attend a meeting as a class, schedule pending, to give you some experience navigating the logistics.

\*Note that meeting attendance need not be partisan and can pertain to any issue relevant to local government, local representation, and issues relevant to NYC or the surrounding area. In each meeting you attend, aim to speak with one attendee and one staff member/organizer/representative at the meeting to learn why they participate and how they see local government.

**Partner YouTube Video/Podcast on a Local Government Position or government agency (10%).**

For this assignment, I ask you to develop an informational video on a position of local government. This can be about NYC, another city, or a comparison of two cities. We will watch your videos on the last day of class.

**Midterm (25%)** You will ask to write a take-home midterm exam based on course content prior to the policy section of the course. You will have one week to complete it.

**Fieldnotes from NYC Government Experiences (5%)** You will be asked to take field notes in two of the required meetings – notes on your observations about the people in attendance, what they say, what issues they bring up, how the meeting is run, etc. We'll discuss these in class through check-ins and a session on the BootCamp at the end of the term.

**Take-Home Final (30%).** Students will be required to write a take-home final exam consisting of a short answer section and an essay section. The essay will be in the form of a policy memo.

### **Classroom Etiquette**

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

- 1) Turn your cell phones off 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 food is not permitted in class since it can distract your classmates. We will have a 30 minute break at the half-way point of the class where you can take time to eat.

### **AI and Academic Ethics**

AI Use, Plagiarism and Other Violations of Code of Conduct: All assignments in this course fall under Barnard College's code of conduct. Generative AI tools are not permitted in this course for any written assignments. Students must rely on their own originality, creativity and critical thinking skills to complete assignments, complete take-home exams, write papers, and engage with course material. Any violation (including, but not limited to, cheating on exams, relying on AI, and plagiarism) will result in the student being held accountable to the full extent of university guidelines. This includes self-plagiarism – meaning, cases where students re-use material they wrote themselves for other courses.

### **Barnard Honor Code**

We, the students of Barnard College, resolve to uphold the honor of the College by engaging with integrity in all of our academic pursuits. We affirm that academic integrity is the honorable creation and presentation of our own work. We acknowledge that it is our responsibility to seek clarification of proper forms of collaboration and use of academic resources in all assignments or exams. We consider

academic integrity to include the proper use and care for all print, electronic, or other academic resources.

We will respect the rights of others to engage in pursuit of learning in order to uphold our commitment to honor. We pledge to do all that is in our power to create a spirit of honesty and honor for its own sake.

The Barnard Honor Code includes relevant language for the proper use of electronic class material. “We consider academic integrity to include the proper use and care for all print, electronic, or other academic resources.. ” To be clear, this means that **recorded class content** — from lectures, labs, seminars, office hours and discussion groups — is the intellectual property of your professor and your fellow students, and should not be distributed or shared outside of class.

### **Barnard Wellness Statement**

It is important for undergraduates to recognize and identify the different pressures, burdens, and stressors you may be facing, whether personal, emotional, physical, financial, mental, or academic. We as a community urge you to make health, sanity, and wellness--your priority throughout this term and your career here. Sleep, exercise, and eating well can all be a part of a healthy regimen to cope with stress. Resources exist to support you in several areas of your life, and we encourage you to make use of them.

Should you have any questions about navigating these resources, please visit these sites:

Primary Care at Barnard: <http://barnard.edu/primarycare>

Counseling: <https://barnard.edu/about-counseling> Wellness:

<http://barnard.edu/wellwoman/about>

### **Center for Accessibility Resources & Disability Services (CARDS)**

If you believe you may encounter barriers to the academic environment due to a documented disability or emerging health challenges, please feel free to contact me and/or the [Center for Accessibility Resources & Disability Services \(CARDS\)](#). Any student with approved academic accommodations is encouraged to contact me during office hours or via email. If you have questions regarding registering a disability or receiving accommodations for the semester, please contact CARDS at (212) 854-4634, [cards@barnard.edu](mailto:cards@barnard.edu), or learn more at [barnard.edu/disability-services](http://barnard.edu/disability-services). CARDS is located in Diana 307.

### **Affordable Access to Course Texts and Materials**

All students deserve to be able to study and make use of course texts and materials regardless of cost. Barnard librarians have partnered with students, faculty, and staff to find ways to increase student access to textbooks. By the first day of advance registration for each term, faculty will have provided information about required texts for each course on CourseWorks (including ISBN or author, title, publisher, copyright date, and price), which can be viewed by students. A number of cost-free or low-cost methods for accessing some types of courses texts are detailed on the [Barnard Library Textbook Affordability](#) guide. Undergraduate students who identify as first-generation and/or low-income students may check out items from the [FLI lending libraries in the Barnard Library](#) and in [Butler Library](#) for an entire semester. Students may also consult with their professors, the Dean of Studies, and the Financial Aid Office about additional affordable alternatives for having access to course texts. Visit the guide and talk to your professors and your librarian for more details.

### **Academic Integrity**

By joining this class, students agree to adhere to Columbia's Standards of Intellectual Integrity, reproduced below: "The intellectual venture in which we are all engaged requires of faculty and students alike the highest level of personal and academic integrity. As members of an academic community, each one of us bears the responsibility to participate in scholarly discourse and research in a manner characterized by intellectual honesty and scholarly integrity.

Scholarship, by its very nature, is an iterative process, with ideas and insights building one upon the other. Collaborative scholarship requires the study of other scholars' work, the free

discussion of such work, and the explicit acknowledgement of those ideas in any work that inform our own. This exchange of ideas relies upon a mutual trust that sources, opinions, facts, and insights will be properly noted and carefully credited. In practical terms, this means that, as students, you must be responsible for the full citations of others' ideas in all of your research papers and projects; you must be scrupulously honest when taking your examinations; you must always submit your own work and not that of another student, scholar, or internet agent.

Any breach of this intellectual responsibility is a breach of faith with the rest of our academic community. It undermines our shared intellectual culture, and it cannot be tolerated. Students failing to meet these responsibilities should anticipate being asked to leave Barnard College.

## **READINGS**

All required readings will be posted on Courseworks 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 required readings 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.

## **SCHEDULE AND READINGS**

### **PART 1: THE POWER AND INSTITUTIONS OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY**

#### **7/9: What is Local Democracy and What Does Local Government Do?**

Learning Goal: Understand how local democracy is different than national politics and understand what functions local governments perform.

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

Watch In Class: What Happens When You Cut Off All Council Services

## **7/11: How Do Local Government Institutions Vary: Decentralization and Variation in Local Government Institutions**

Learning Goals: Understand variation in local government institutions and how multi-level governance functions in different contexts.

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”) 39–57.

Recommended: Hooghe, Liesbet, and Gary Marks. 2003. “Unraveling the Central State, but How? Types of Multi-Level Governance.” *American Political Science Review* 97(2): 233–243.

## **7/14: Turnout in Local Elections in the US and in Comparative Perspective**

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.

Ahuja, Amit and Pradeep Chhibber., 2012. “Why the Poor Vote in India: “If I don’t vote, I am dead to the state”. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 47, 389-410.

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

## **7/16: Civic Education**

Learning Goal: Understand how civic education works in the US and best practices for teaching civic education. This will include an activity where we come up with a lesson on basic local governance information.

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.

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

## **7/21: Descriptive Representation**

Learning Goal: Understand the impact of descriptive representation on policy and voting behavior – with special attention to the first election of a female/male/Latino mayor.

Watch: 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).

Holman, Mirya. 2015. *Women in Politics in the American City*. Temple University Press. Chapter 4 (What Difference Does Gender Make).

Recommended: Pantoja, Adrian D., and Gary M. Segura. 2003. "Does Ethnicity Matter? Descriptive Representation in Legislatures and Political Alienation among Latinos." *Social Science Quarterly* 84 (2): 441–460.

## **7/23: Local Accountability and Local Media**

Guest Speaker: Eric Chen, Director Local News Lab – Columbia University

Take-Home Midterm will be handed out in class

Learning Goal: Understand when mayors are held accountable and the role that local news plays in local accountability.

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

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.

## **7/28: Civic Engagement and Non-Electoral Participation**

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

Assignment: Attend your first government meeting or organization meeting before this class. We'll discuss your experiences in the second half of class.

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.

Nuamah, Sally A., and Thomas Ogorzalek. 2021. "Close to Home: Place-based mobilization in racialized contexts." *American Political Science Review* 115 (3) 757-774. [Read the introduction and conclusion].

### **7/30: Housing in the U.S.: Redlining and Class-Based Politics**

Midterm due at the start of class.

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

Watch in Class: Shame of Chicago, Episode 1.

Trounstine, Jessica. 2020. "The Geography of Inequality: How Land Use Regulation Produces Segregation." *American Political Science Review* 114 (2): 443–455.

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

### **8/4: Gentrification and Homelessness**

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

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

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?"

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

### **8/6: Policing and Police Reform**

Learning Goal: Understand different policing strategies and the effectiveness of reforms designed to reduce crime and police violence against unarmed residents.

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.

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

## **8/11: Education + YouTube Presentations**

Learning Goals: Introduce education at its connection to local government.

Final exam handed out at the start of class.

### **Part 1: Education and Local Democracy**

Henig, Jeffrey R. 2013. "The Politics of Local Education: Who Governs and Who Benefits?" In *The Future of School Reform*, edited by Paul Manna and Patrick McGuinn. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press. 91-112.

Wong, Kenneth K., and Francis Shen. 2013. "Mayoral Control and the Performance of Urban Public Schools." *Education Next* 13 (4): 66–74.

### **Part 2: YouTube Video Presentations of Local**

You will present your projects in the second half of class.

## **8/13: Conclusion**

Learning Goal: Discuss bootcamp experiences in NYC and discuss larger themes of the course and the role of local democracy in the grand scheme of United States democracy.

### **Part I: Field Project Discussion**

Upload your fieldnote memos. Read 3 other students' responses and comment on courseworks.

Katz, Bruce, and Jennifer Bradley. 2013. *The Metropolitan Revolution: How Cities and Metros Are Fixing Our Broken Politics and Fragile Economy*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press. Introduction.

## 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 120 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
- 5 — Sign up for your City Council member's newsletter
- 5 — Follow your City Council member and State Assemblymember on social media
- 5 — Subscribe to a local news outlet
- 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 zoom)
- 10 — Attend a meeting of a civic group involved in local issues (ask one question or make one comment)
- 10 — Meet (office hours/Zoom) with a local representative or civic org staffer
- 10 — Attend a lecture in-person with a government official on campus
- 10 — Attend a lecture in-person on campus or elsewhere 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 Civic 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 and post it on social media.
- 30 — Lead a dorm/club event or film screening on a civic issue
- \*30 — Teach a short lesson or discussion on local government (excluding the required activity for class)

### Influence Politics

- 10 — Register to vote (or update your registration) • 10 — Help a friend or family member register to vote.
- 10 — Volunteer for a local cause (food bank, housing advocacy, environmental group)
- 10 — Sign a petition about something you care about (housing, transit, climate, etc.)

- 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 NYC local government on social media and tag your councilmember or representative.
- 30 — Create an online video about local politics and share it on social media