

Interest Groups

POS 4463/Fall 2025

Office hours:
M/F 1-3, Anderson Hall, 205
Suzanne.Robbins@ufl.edu

Class meets:
MWF 9:35-10:25
Anderson Hall, 0021
In-person only

Course info:
Section/#: SR44/25423
3 credits (non Gen-Ed)
pre-req: POS 2041

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Suzanne M. Robbins Ph.D., @ the University of Florida

Course Description & Overview

Examines the theoretical foundations, historical context and current activities of special interest groups in the United States.

Interest groups are a critical link between citizens and the institutions of government. To understand American politics—how it really works—you must understand where groups come from, what they do, and how they influence public policy. This course surveys the role of interest groups in American politics, including representation, lobbying, and electioneering.

Students are expected to have basic knowledge of American government before taking this course. As an upper-division seminar, this class emphasizes analytical reading, evidence-based discussion, and clear communication. We will read widely across the interest group literature and consider both normative and empirical questions. For example: Do interest groups enhance or undermine democracy? How much influence do they have, and how can we tell?

We will also reflect on how well existing academic models explain the current partisan environment and policymaking process. What are the limitations of literature, and what might be done—by scholars, practitioners, or citizens—to better align theory and practice?

Contrary to tradition, against the public morals, and hostile to good government, the lobby has reached such a position of power that it threatens government itself. - Justice Hugo Black, 1935

The latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man; and we see them everywhere brought into different degrees of activity, according to the different circumstances of civil society. -James Madison, Federalist #10, 1787

Student Learning Objectives

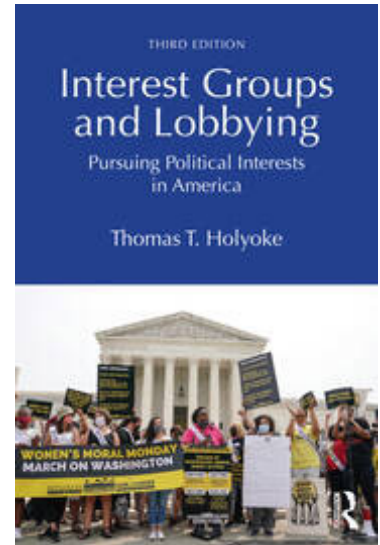
By the end of the semester, students will:

- Develop a deeper understanding of the role of interest groups in American politics through engagement with scholarly research and current events;
- Distinguish between assumptions and evidence when evaluating arguments about group influence and behavior;
- Synthesize diverse literature to draw informed conclusions about interest group activity and impact;
- Strengthen oral and written communication skills through regular reflection and structured presentations;
- Practice critical and analytical thinking by engaging with complex readings, prompts, and peer critique;
- Conduct collaborative, comparative research and provide constructive feedback on the work of others.

Course Materials

The following materials are required for this course. E-books are acceptable, and there is no material fee.

- *Holyoke, Thomas T. Interest Groups and Lobbying: Pursuing Political Interests in America*, 3rd Edition (2025), Routledge.
- *Additional readings* will be posted on Canvas. These include classic works (e.g., Madison, Bentley, Dahl, Schattschneider, Truman, Olson) and contemporary scholarship (e.g., Berry, Hojnacki, Yackee, Merry, Strolovich).
- *News consumption*: Students should regularly read *The New York Times* and/or *The Wall Street Journal*. Free digital access is available through the [UF Business Library](https://businesslibrary.uflib.ufl.edu/wsj-nyt-economist) (<https://businesslibrary.uflib.ufl.edu/wsj-nyt-economist>).
- *Reflection journal*: Please keep a small notebook (physical only) for your weekly reflections and in-class prompts. You will use this regularly.



A detailed list of required readings is available in each Canvas module and briefly summarized in the course schedule on page 4.

Expectations: Tips for Success



- *Come to class—and come prepared.* This course is organized as an advanced seminar. I will lecture, but we will talk often. Read before class, listen actively, and ask questions. Participate in workshops. You can't do well if you skip class.
- *Think critically, not just politically.* Move beyond repeating talking points. Ask yourself: *Why? If this is true, what else must be true? What is this an example of?* Think about implications, question assumptions, and make connections across readings and cases.
- *Stay on top of assignments.* Turn in your work on time. It's harder to contribute meaningfully if you fall behind.
- *Engage with feedback.* Writing and research improve with revision. Be open to suggestions—from me and from your classmates—and use them to strengthen your work.
- *Bridge theory and practice.* This class draws from political science research, but interest group politics unfold in the real world. Use current events, your own experiences, and course materials to connect abstract ideas to concrete examples.

Assignments and Grading

Participation & Attendance (10%)

Attend regularly, contribute thoughtfully, and engage actively in workshops and group activities. Participation includes structured peer critique via Padlet, which helps you develop critical thinking and feedback skills.

Reflection Journal (15%)

You will maintain a small notebook to record short reflections on readings, current events, and in-class prompts. These entries will help you connect theory to practice, raise questions, and engage with course materials on your own terms. The journal supports learning goals related to reading engagement, critical thinking, and synthesis. Journals will be checked randomly for informal review and credit.

Exams (40%, 20% each)

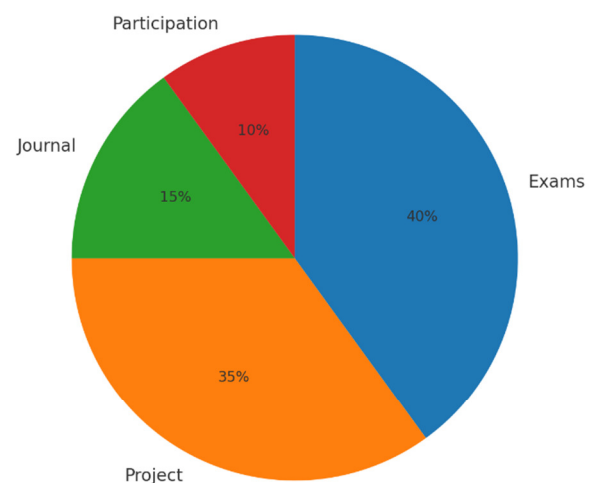
Two in-class exams featuring short-answer questions will assess your understanding of core concepts, theories, and debates in the study of interest groups. Exams emphasize your ability to distinguish evidence from assumption and apply course ideas to broader political dynamics.

Collaborative Case Study Project (35%)

In teams, you will conduct a structured comparison of interest group activity in two or more cases. This project supports learning objectives related to collaborative research, oral and written communication, and analytical thinking. The project includes:

- Four scaffolded submissions (e.g., topic proposals, literature reviews, data gathering);
- A team presentation; and
- An individual final paper that incorporates course readings and findings from both your team and another.

Grade Breakdown: Interest Groups & Lobbying



A	94.0%	C	73.0%
A-	90.0%	C	70.0%
B+	87.0%	D+	67.0%
B	83.0%	D	63.0%
B-	80.0%	D-	60%
C+	77.0%		

The grade values above denote the lower bound for each grade.

Your grade reflects your preparation, critical thinking, collaboration, and ability to engage deeply with course materials—core skills emphasized in the course learning objectives. Rubrics are available on Canvas.

Critical Due Dates

- September 12: Project Work Day #1 (guest)
- September 18: Project Part A due
- October 3: Project Part B due
- October 10: Project Work Day #2 (guest)
- October 15: Exam #1 (in class)
- October 24: Project Part C due
- October 31: Project Work Day #3 (guest)
- November 7: Project Part D due
- November 21: Initial Presentations due in Padlet & Feedback due to classmates
- Dec. 1-3: Project Presentations (Elevator Talks)
- December 5: Individual Project Papers due
- December 10: Exam #2 (in class)

Course & University Policies

Attendance is required. Students failing to attend class during the first week may be dropped from the course. Please contact Dr. Robbins if you miss class for documented absences (e.g., religious observances, illness, academic, or athletic competitions). *Late Work:* Canvas will assess a 5% per day penalty automatically to late work. You may *make up a missed exam* within seven calendar days with acceptable documentation (no early exams). *AI* (i.e., ChatGPT, GoogleLM, etc) are ubiquitous but unreliable, please see the *use of AI policy* on Canvas. *This course complies with all UF academic policies. For information on those policies and for resources for students, please see [this link](https://syllabus.ufl.edu/syllabus-policy/uf-syllabus-policy-links/).* (The direct link is <https://syllabus.ufl.edu/syllabus-policy/uf-syllabus-policy-links/>.)

Reading Schedule

Module 1: Introduction (August 22-25)

- The syllabus
- Goldberg, M. (Op-ED). "They saw their neighbors taken away by Ice." *NYT*, 30 July 2025
- Yarrow et al. "Kennedy might not get his way on pesticides." *Politico*, 15 August 2025
- Vogel et al., "Trump Delayed a Medicare Change After Health Company Donations." *NYT*, 7 August 2025
- Rich S., and V Patel. "Feeling Political Heat, Colleges Pump Up Their Lobbying." *NYT*, 28 April 2025
- Henshall, W., "There's an AI Lobbying Frenzy in Washington." *Time* 30 April 2024
- Cigler, Loomis, & Nownes: Chapter 1*
- Holyoke: Intro and Chapter 1

Module 2: Group Formation (August 27-Oct 15)

Pluralism (August 27-September 3)

- Federalist No. 10 (Madison)
- Political Associations in the U. S. (Tocqueville)
- Group Involvement & Democratic Orientations (Joslyn)
- The Governmental Process (Truman)

First Critiques of Pluralism (Sep. 5-8)

- Who Governs? (Dahl)
- Semi Sovereign People (Schattschneider)
- The Structure of Power in American Society (Mills)

Collective Action Theory (Sep. 10-15)

- Holyoke, Chapter 2
- Logic of Collective Action (ch.1, Olson)
- Incentive Systems (Clark & Wilson)
- An Exchange Theory of Interest Groups (Wilson)

NeoPluralists & Group Maintenance (Sep. 19-24)

- Trade Associations (Drutman)
- Three Modes of Political Mobilization (Walker)
- Neo Pluralism (McFarland)
- The Importance of Financial & Human Capital (Barakso et al)
- Cigler, Loomis & Nownes text: Chapters 2, 4-6
- Holyoke, Chapter 3
- Identity Crisis (Heaney)

Implications for Representation (Sep. 26-Oct. 15)

- Holyoke, Chapter 4
- Organizations & the Democratic Representation of Interests (Schlozman et al)

A More Level Playing Field? (Strolovitch)

Module 3: Lobbying, Elections, & Influence (Oct. 20-Nov. 21)

Introduction (October 20):

- Lobbying & Influence (Leech)
- Cigler, Loomis, Nownes: Chapter 10
- Stunning Findings (Morgan)
- I was a Lobbyist (Williams)
- Here's the Real Reason we don't have Gun Reform (Drutman)

Policy Making (October 22-24):

- Holyoke, Chapter 5-8
- Cigler, Loomis & Nownes, Chapters 9, 12

Lobbying Strategy & Revolving Door (Oct. 27-Nov. 5)

- Holyoke, Chapter 9
- Cigler, Loomis and Nownes, Chapters 8, 11
- Lobbying in the Shadows (LaPira)
- The Power of Negative Lobbying (McKay)
- Constructing Narratives (Merry)
- Revolving Door (La Pira)

Electoral Influence (Nov. 7 – 21)

- Candidates, Groups, and the Campaign Finance Environment (CRS)
- Holyoke, Chapter 10
- The Rise of Dark Money (Drutman)
- How Outside Money Makes Governing More Difficult (Norton & Pildes)
- Cigler, Loomis, & Nownes, Chapter 7
- Holyoke, final chapter

**all readings that are not in the Holyoke text are linked in Canvas.*