Course description

This course explores America’s role in international politics, aiming to teach students some of the major theoretical perspectives in International Relations, and how to critically analyze the major dynamics shaping American foreign policy today. What would happen if the United States stopped trying to play such an active role in world politics, and focused more on problems at home, as Donald Trump seemed to suggest on the campaign trail? Is China on the rise, and what does Chinese growth mean for the United States? How much of an effect does the media have on how Americans think about the world around them? Do nuclear weapons make us safer? Was there an “Obama Doctrine”, and can it tell us anything about Donald Trump’s foreign policy agenda?
Should I take this class?

Ultimately, the question of America’s role in global politics is an enormous one, and deserves far more time than the twelve weeks allotted to us: an entire semester could be spent on each and every one of the issues we’ll look at. Accordingly, the class is structured as a survey class, and is thus similar to a buffet, presenting a smorgasbord of topics in the hopes that you may decide to study some of them further in one of the many other Government courses offered here at Harvard. Because the class is structured as a survey, there are no prerequisites, apart from an interest in the subject matter. In previous years, the class has attracted a mix of students ranging from freshmen who have never taken an IR class before, to senior Government concentrators with a diverse repertoire of classes under their belt.

Although we’ll frequently turn to historical examples to make sense of the current political situation, this class is not a course on the history of American foreign relations. Similarly, although we’ll analyze some of the most pressing issues facing US foreign policy today – e.g. how to understand the rise of ISIS, or Russia’s recent actions in Crimea – the class is not simply a discussion of current events or a rehashing of the previous night’s tweets. Our focus with the class is less on memorizing details of particular cases, and more about acquiring a vocabulary and set of theoretical frameworks we can use to make sense of the world around us as political scientists. Contemporary decision-makers in Washington face a large number of normative questions about how the United States should conduct its foreign affairs, but underlying many of these debates are sets of assumptions about how the world works. By the end of the semester, my hope is that you’ll be able to interrogate those assumptions directly.

The class has been set up in two parts. The first half of the course begins with an introduction to International Relations (IR) theory and American grand strategy, before exploring the inputs of the American foreign policy process: the President and Congress, bureaucratic politics, public opinion, the media, and interest groups. This half of the class will foster an understanding of why the United States behaves the way it does, all the while exploring questions like the conditions under which leaders matter, the institutional causes of “intelligence failure,” and why some interest groups exert more sway than others.

If the first half of the class focuses on the inputs to US foreign policy, the second half focuses on the outputs, as we analyze some of the most pressing issues in US foreign policy today. This portion of the course begins with questions about international order and the rise and fall of great powers. We’ll look at the challenges associated with American hegemony, and one potential reaction to it, anti-Americanism. We’ll also examine another great power that may or may not pose a challenge to the American-led order: the rise of China. We’ll then turn to an exploration of political violence: terrorism, (counter)insurgency, and asymmetric conflict, all of which loom especially large on the American foreign policy agenda in the wake of the war on terror, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the ongoing conflagration in Syria. Finally, having explored a number of
ways in which the world is a mess, we’ll then turn to two domains where there are
glimmers of cooperation, but where challenges remain: cybersecurity, and nuclear
(de)proliferation. We’ll then conclude by bringing everything together, and asking what
the future of US foreign policy holds. Every year we bring in a number of guest speakers
— usually a mix of scholars and practitioners — to share their expertise. I’ll provide more
information about this year’s guests as the semester progresses.

Required texts

There are no required texts to purchase for this class; all readings are available
electronically on the course website, https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/30730/files, and
consist of a mix of academic and policy articles and book chapters. Please refer to the
reading guide posted on course website, which contains both general strategic advice about
how to read for Gov 1790, and guiding questions for each week. These guiding questions
for each set of readings will be posted on the course website around a week ahead of each
class, to help you prioritize and focus on what you should be taking away from each piece.

Course requirements and grading

10% Active participation in sections
15% In-class exam on IR theory and US grand strategy: September 26, 2018
20% In-class exam on sources of US foreign policy: October 22, 2018
25% Research paper: due 10:30 AM on November 19, 2018
30% Final exam on contemporary issues in US foreign policy on December 14, 2018

Lectures will be held from 10:30 AM - 11:45 AM on Mondays and Wednesdays in Tsai
Auditorium (CGIS S010). Note that because of the short class time and the demise of
“Harvard time”, each class will begin exactly at 10:30 AM. Note that the class is graded
A–F, and is not normally offered pass/fail. The class is not open to outside visitors without
prior approval from the instructor.

There will be an 10 page research paper due for all undergraduate students in the course; in
it, you’ll critically engage with an issue in US foreign policy and analyze it from a number
of theoretical perspectives. The paper (to be submitted online through the course website,
before the start of class) will give you the opportunity to research an issue that interests you
about the US in world politics, and demonstrate understanding of the different schools of
thought on the issue amongst political scientists. We’re fortunate this year to have a special
writing fellow allocated to Gov 1790, who’s here to help you throughout the research paper
process. Graduate students (if applicable) will complete a longer research paper on a topic
of their choice, with the aim of eventual submission for publication in a peer reviewed
journal. More information on the paper will be presented several weeks into the course.
The exams will consist of a combination of essays, short answers, and multiple choice. All exams will be based on the readings and the material presented in class. The first exam will cover the introduction to IR theory and American grand strategy from the first two and a half weeks of class; the second exam will cover the sources of US foreign policy presented over the next four weeks. The final exam will cover the material on the contemporary sources of foreign policy presented in the second half of the semester. Any student who needs to miss an exam needs to discuss this with me prior to the actual exam. If an emergency arises and you are unable to contact the instructor prior to the exam, please contact me as soon as possible. Also, be aware that you will be asked to produce adequate documentation (a doctor’s note, for example) if an exam is unexpectedly missed before any makeup exam will be given.

10% of the final grade will be based on active participation in sections, described in further detail below.

Finally, because the class has been explicitly designed to touch upon controversial topics in US foreign policy circles, it is inevitable that some of the discussions will get heated. It is important, however, to maintain a respectful atmosphere in class, recognizing that many of these topics are so controversial precisely because they’re the sorts of issues about which reasonable people can disagree.

Section information

10% of the final grade will be based on active participation in sections, which will meet every week for an hour beginning in the third week of the class. Electronic sectioning will begin on Thursday, September 13 and end on Friday, September 14; sections will be announced via email on Sunday, September 16, and the first sections will take place the following week; the email will also provide additional information on section times and locations. Note that because of how Harvard’s new sectioning system works, we may not be able to accommodate ex-post sectioning switching requests apart from exceptional circumstances. The participation grade will be based on a number of factors: showing up to section, but also having completed the readings, and being ready to ask questions, provide reactions, and critically engage with the course material. Participation grades will be based on the quality of participation rather than quantity, but you can't participate if you aren't there, so not only will multiple absences affect your participation grade negatively, but material discussed in class will feature prominently in the exams, so it is crucial for students to do the readings and come to class prepared to discuss the material. Some students tend to be less comfortable with speaking up in class than their peers; if this is something you’re worried about, please contact your TF so that we can find other ways of calculating your participation grade.
Gov 1790 lunches

Gov 1790 tends to be a big class. Its size has advantages: more of you can bring your energy, ideas, and enthusiasm to class, and we don't need to resort to a lottery to determine who's allowed in. Its size also has its disadvantages, though, in that bigger classes tend to be more impersonal, and afford less of an opportunity for one-on-one interaction.

To try to retain the accessibility associated with a smaller class experience, I'll be holding regular lunches in Annenberg and the undergraduate house dining halls throughout the semester, typically in small groups of 4–8. The purposes of the lunches are simply for me to find out more about you, and to give you the chance to chat about the class, International Relations, and whatever you might be interested in.

These lunches are, of course, entirely optional: some of you would likely rather eat cardboard than eat with your professors (and for some of you, eating in Harvard dining halls isn't all that different from eating cardboard), but for those of you who want the chance to break out of the large lecture-hall model of classroom interaction, these lunches are one way of doing so.

More information will be circulated about how to sign up for lunches early in the semester.

Collaboration and academic integrity policy

Discussion and the exchange of ideas are essential to academic work. For assignments in this course, you are encouraged to discuss the material presented in the course with your
classmates. However, you should ensure that any written work you submit for evaluation – whether in the research paper, or the exams – is the result of your own research and writing and reflects your own approach to the topic. You must also adhere to standard citation practices in political science and properly cite any books, articles, websites, lectures, etc. that have helped you with your work. If you received any help with your writing (feedback on drafts, etc), you must also acknowledge this assistance. Additional information on citation practices will be made available with the research paper instructions.

Advice from last semester’s Gov 1790 students

At the end of every semester of Gov 1790, I ask some of the students whose performance placed them amongst the top of the class to write a short paragraph of advice to be handed out to students who will be taking Gov 1790 next year, with advice on how to study for the exams and write the research paper. Even though the course isn’t identical each time it’s offered, their advice tends to be quite helpful, and I’ve posted their recommendations on the course website.

Technology policy

Please ensure that your cell phones are set to silent and put away before lecture or section starts. A number of faculty here at Harvard have been banning the use of laptops, tablets and other forms of technology in classrooms because of a growing body of evidence that students take better notes by hand, and perhaps more importantly, that laptop users’ tendency to “multitask” negatively affect the learning outcomes of those sitting around them. For the time being, students are permitted to use laptops or other technological devices in the class, but this technology is permitted solely for note-taking purposes. I reserve the right to ban laptops altogether if it becomes apparent that their use is producing too much of a distraction.

Special accommodations

Students requiring academic accommodations are requested to present their letter from the Accessible Education Office (AEO) and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term. Failure to make these arrangements by this date may negatively affect our ability to implement the arrangements on time.

Tentative Class Schedule

Part I: Theories of International Politics and Sources of Foreign Policy

Wednesday, September 5: Introduction to the class

Review of the syllabus and overview of the semester
A. IR theory and American grand strategy

Monday, September 10 and Wednesday, September 12: An introduction to IR theory


Monday, September 17 and Wednesday, September 19: Continuity and Change in US Foreign Policy


Monday, September 24

In-class exam on IR theory and American grand strategy

B. Sources of American foreign policy

Wednesday, September 26: The President and Congress


Monday, October 1 and Wednesday October 3: Bureaucratic Politics


Wednesday, October 10: Public Opinion


Monday, October 15: The Media


Wednesday, October 17: Interest Groups


Monday, October 22

♣ In-class exam on sources of US foreign policy

Part II: Contemporary Issues in US Foreign Policy

C. Unipolarity and its discontents

Wednesday, October 24: Hegemony and the Liberal International Order


**Monday, October 29: Anti-Americanism**


**Wednesday, October 31 and Monday, November 5: The Rise of China**


**D. The logics of political violence**

**Wednesday, November 7 and Monday, November 12: Terrorism**


**Wednesday, November 14: Counterinsurgency and Asymmetric Conflict**


**Monday, November 19:**

Paper due, to be submitted via the course website
Monday, November 26. Civil wars and peacekeeping

Topic as selected by class vote as part of the entrance survey.


Wednesday, November 28: Cyberwar


Monday, December 3. Nuclear Weapons


Wednesday, December 5. Conclusion

The Future of US Foreign Policy

Friday, December 14. Final exam

Final exam on contemporary issues in US foreign policy. Time: 2-5 PM, Location TBA.