



The Business of Politics Syllabus

Updated: 08/24/2025

Course Description:

This class is for students who want to better understand the relationship between politics and business. The class focuses on business leaders and businesses as political actors; the regulation of business by government at the Federal, State, and local level; individual and business participation in the policymaking process; and constraints on business as a political power. Students taking the class will be prepared to help manage their organizations through the policy and political landscape in a manner that is advantageous to their business.

Specifically, this course will present:

- The basic structure of federal, state, and local governments (civics 101), including a detailed discussion of how bills become laws, and laws become regulation.
- Consideration of why we have regulation of business; who is regulated, who does the regulating, and the process of regulatory advocacy.
- The structure and purpose of political campaigns, polling, surveys, political contributions, and the use of money to influence the outcome of campaigns, including Political Action Committees (PACs).
- The role and purpose of in-house government relations programs, trade associations, lobbyists, and interest groups in pursuit of advocacy.
- The ethics of business as it relates to politics, including the Fair Political Practices Commission and corporate social responsibility.
- A thorough discussion about issues facing governments today: budget booms and shortfalls, perceived political dysfunction, the current economic cycle, and where it looks like we are headed.
 - Note: We will be using California state politics and policy as case studies since 85% of GSM graduates go on to work here in CA, but concepts we are discussing will be applicable to the federal level, all 50 states, and local governments.

Concepts and theories will be presented in part through the help of guest speakers. These will include leading elected officials, lobbyists for business and labor groups, regulatory experts, and campaign managers who work with and advise the business community on political strategy and donations.

Students will work individually and in groups to analyze a regulation/statute/election that has profoundly affected the business environment in California. Students will present their research and findings to the rest of the class in the final two weeks of class.

Grading: This course will be graded on a letter basis, A to F. The grade will be subject to the following components, which must all be completed to receive a passing grade. Due to the extensive and unique nature of invited guest speakers, and the desire to create an interactive environment, attendance is highly recommended. Please clear absences prior to the day of class. As previous Sac MBA Working Professional student myself I understand there are times you must miss class, but let's communicate about it first.

Class Participation: 30% (attendance, show and tell)

Homework Assignments: 30% (short assignments and case studies)

Final Presentation: 40% (individual presentation)

Assignments: In addition to assigned readings, which should be completed prior to class, students will be responsible for individual and group assignments, including show and tell, class presentations, case studies, group debates, and the final presentation.

- Each student will be responsible for finding an issue of interest related to business and politics (show and tell) to discuss for 2-3 minutes at the beginning of class. These short presentations should integrate the concepts we have, or will be, discussing in class, and should demonstrate to others the inter-relationship that policy and political decisions have on business activity at the state and national level.
- Various modules will require group analysis of case studies, and preparation for in-class discussion. Certain assignments will require a written response (no longer than 2 pages).
- For the final presentation students will work in as individuals to do an in-depth analysis of a statute / regulation / policy issue that they feel has changed how business is conducted in California. No written report is required, but students should prepare a PowerPoint or other electronic presentation to present their findings to the class. Students should feel free to use current or historic examples but should clear the topic with me prior to beginning their research (I will ensure that no two presentations are similar to each other for maximum impact and analysis). Presentations will occur during the last two classes of the quarter. Presentation should be approximately 15 mins in length, with a 8-10 minute presentation and several minutes devoted to Q&A.

Text and Course Material: TextPak

UC Davis Code of Academic Conduct: Honesty, Fairness & Integrity

<http://sja.ucdavis.edu/files/cac.pdf>

Instructor Background and Contact Information: Mark Smith, 916-335-5072, markosmith@gmail.com

Mark Smith is a UCD GSM alum and the owner of Smith Policy Group and SKV Advocacy, lobbying and consulting firms based in Sacramento, California. Smith Policy Group provides clients with policy advocacy, connections with federal, state, and local elected officials, appointees, and regulatory bodies, and advises clients on policy and political engagement. Prior to opening SPG, Mark was a Senior Policy Advisor at Environmental and Energy Consulting, a Sacramento based lobbying and consulting firm. He was also formerly the Director of Public Policy, Western Region, for Ducks Unlimited (DU), where his duties included managing federal and state government relations in 9 Western states (HI, AK, WA, OR, CA, AZ, NV, UT, ID). Prior to working for DU, Mark was the Manager of State Government Relations for Sempra Energy, Director of Government Relations for the American Council of Engineering Companies and worked as a Legislative Director in the CA State Senate and State Assembly.

Class Schedule

Class 1: September 24 (Thurs)

- 1) Class Introductions / Review Syllabus / Background
- 2) Civics 101: Review of government organizational structure at the City/County/State/Federal level.

Readings: #1-14

Class 2: October 02 (Thurs)

- 1) Bill process. How a bill becomes a law: Federal and state lawmaking and committee process. County and local government regulations and ordinances.
- 2) Lobbying 101 - Government relations and advocacy. The role of government relations in the business environment. Contract lobbyist, trade association lobbyists, in-house lobbyist. What does a lobbyist do and do they deserve the bad rap?

Readings: #58-65, 15

Assignment: Examples of and discussion of taxes (due class 3)

Class 3: October 09 (Thurs)

- 1) Government budget process. Revenues and expenditures. An insider perspective on California's systemic budget problems.

Guest speaker

- Thomas Sheehy, Owner, Sheehy Consulting (CONFIRMED)

- 3) Discussion about taxation. Sinclair, Prop 26. "Fair taxes". Tax policy influencing behavior.
- 4) Redistricting. What are districts and why do they shape our elections? How are districts determined? Electoral college. How your vote is counted and how does it really work? Electoral reform

Readings: #16-22, 38-42

Assignment: Initiatives – reflections on citizen legislation (due class 4)

Class 4: October 16 (Thurs)

- 1) Propositions (citizen or legislative initiatives). Paid circulators. Voice of the people?
- 2) Discussion about personal political views in the workplace. Personal views vs corporate interests.
- 3) The role and risk of business as a policy and political actor. The purpose of business advocacy organizations like the CA Chamber of Commerce, regional Chambers of Commerce, business associations. The political and policy purpose of these groups.

Guest speaker

- Ben Golumbek, Executive Vice President and Chief of Staff for Policy, CA Chamber (7:30pm) (CONFIRMED)

Readings: #23-28, 66-69

Class 5: October 23 (Thurs)

- 1) Media in Politics and Policy. More specifically the traditional and new media role in shaping policy positions and impacting politics. Focus on interest group coordination (business coalitions) to drive a specific set of actions/outcomes.

Guest speaker

- Brandon Castillo (CONFIRMED)

- 2) Campaign 101: The political process and campaign. Candidate identification and recruitment. Setting up a campaign. Staff and volunteers. Running a campaign. Getting elected.

Readings: #29-32, 33-37

Assignment: Mock elections, candidate teams (due class 7)

Assignment: Example of how the industry you work in (or want to work in) is regulated. (due class 6)

Class 6: October 30 (Thurs)

- 1) The role of the Judiciary in the policy and political process. The structure of the legal system. Recourse and remedies for business against statute and regulations. Is CA a judicial “hellhole?”

Guest lecturer

- a. Steven Green, former Dept of Justice attorney and Business Law professor (CONFIRMED)

- 2) Regulations: The role of unelected regulators and regulations in the business environment. The philosophy of regulation vs. competitive selection in the marketplace. How regulators use their power to pick winners and losers in the marketplace, and how business can adapt.
- 3) Discussion about industry regulation – personal examples

Readings: #70-78, 53-57

Class 7: November 06 (Thurs)

- 1) Life as an elected official – An insider’s perspective.

Guest speaker

- a. Senator Roger Niello (CONFIRMED)

- 2) Mock elections assignment – group discussion

Class 8: November 13 (Thurs)

- 1) Ethics. The role of the Fair Political Practices Commission, the Federal Elections Commission, and other ethics bodies.
- 2) Money in politics.

Readings: #43-52

Class 9: November 20 (Thurs)

Final presentations

Class 10: December 04 (Thurs)

Final presentations (if needed)