

Syllabus — PS 150: Political Violence

Winter 2025

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Send course communications only via BruinLearn.

Course description

We will explore the nature, causes, and consequences of collective political violence. The starting point for the course is that violence is one political strategy of many that groups of people can use to seek change in society. We will ask what kinds of social changes groups seek and why they choose (or are forced to use) violence. We will learn why violence at times cannot be prevented even when everyone would be better off without fighting. We then study how political violence is organized: who leads, fights, assists, and is victimized. In doing so, we learn about the special status of state-led violence, and how it is perceived differently than violence perpetrated by non-state groups. We consider the norms, laws, and ethics that govern violence, and what happens when they are violated. We close with an examination of how violence is portrayed by perpetrators, survivors, governments, and the media. Throughout, we will pay attention to how gender and social identities intersect with who is involved in and affected by political violence.

Learning objectives

- How groups of people use violence strategically to achieve their goals for change;
- The wide variety of kinds of political violence and their ubiquity in the world;
- The devastating consequences of political violence for people and communities;
- Why preventing violence is sometimes impossible, and how societies try anyway;
- The special status of state violence, why it is seen differently, and whether it should be;
- How violence is treated differently based on the identity of perpetrators and survivors;
- How violence is reported on and why we should be skeptical, especially at first;
- How scientific data is collected on violence and why we should treat it skeptically.

How we will meet these goals

Between classes. First, you will read a combination of conceptual readings and primary sources written by organizers, fighters, collaborators, and survivors of political violence. To

actively engage with the readings, we will use the Perusall platform (accessed within BruinLearn). In it, you can post your comments, reactions, and questions as you read — and have your questions answered by fellow students and instructors rather than waiting for class, as well as, importantly, answer others' questions which itself promotes your learning. You should operate on the principle “if I have a question, everyone probably does too.”

Second, over the course of the quarter you will become an expert on a particular incident of political violence, by writing successive sections of a memo due at the end of the quarter. The specifics of your case will help you learn the abstract concepts in the course.

During class. There is growing evidence that *live lectures are not effective learning tools* for many students. Instead, in class we will learn by doing. Each class session starts with a live Q&A session, based on your questions about the readings for the week. After that, you will engage in a team-based activity in which you apply concepts and ideas from the readings.

In section. Each session will focus on research and writing of your memo. You will build up the memo step-by-step, and section will be structured to help you find the facts you need and write them in the format of a generally-understandable memo.

Evaluation

We will use the breakdowns listed below to guide our grading decisions, but you will also evaluate yourself and your teammates before we make a decision. We will post interim grades several times during the quarter as one way to assess your performance. You will evaluate your own performance formally halfway through the quarter and again at the end. We will ask you to assign yourself a grade, and we will take this assessment into account when we make our own.

1. *Engagement with readings in Perusall* (30%). Your engagement grade is holistic, not points-based, and assesses: (1) reading/listening all material, and both high quality¹ (2) questions and comments, and (3) responses to others. Engagement is due before each class.

2. *Preparedness assessment* (10%). To help you track your understanding, you will take a short, multiple-choice reading quizzes at the start of each class. They are designed to assess your readiness to participate in team assignments. If you are performing poorly, please come to office hours to talk about how to better prepare. Your lowest two quiz grades will be dropped.

¹ “High quality” is, of course, subjective. This is not about whether your comments are “smart” or “sophisticated.” What we mean is that you draw on what you have read, make connections between readings and concepts when appropriate, and demonstrate you are engaging with the material. You do not need to bring in outside information, readings, or resources.

3. *In-class team assignments (35%)*. Half of the grade is based turning in the assignment and its content (check or check minus); the other half is based on peer evaluation by your teammates. No credit will be given if you are absent, except by rare prior arrangement with the instructors. To avoid a feeling of being rushed in class, **assignments are due later, at 6 p.m., on BruinLearn** (no extensions). We will not regrade except in cases where we did not grade the correct assignment. Your lowest two team assignment grades will be dropped.

5. *Case study (25%)*. There will be interim deadlines and the final case study will be due at the end of finals week. We will not regrade the interim assignments; rather, they are interim grades meant to help you track your progress, which can be improved for the final case study grade with rewriting and further research. Interim submissions more than 24 hours late will not be graded; the final deadline is firm and a letter grade will be deducted for every hour late. There will be presentations of some of the case studies in the final exam period (attendance required). Details will be provided in section in Week 1.

How to succeed in this course

We have designed this course so anyone can succeed.

If you read the assigned readings, participate in Perusall discussions, complete the preparedness assessments, complete your team assignments Tuesday and Thursday, and complete the case study, then you are likely to do well in the class. We have designed the grading so that if you participate and make a significant effort in each assignment, you will do well. Getting the answers right every time is much less important than learning the material over time.

We encourage you to take advantage *early and often* of three resources: your TA's student hours, Professor Blair's student hours, and asking questions on Perusall. Together with your fellow students, we are here to help! To get started, we suggest you meet with your TA in Week 2 or Week 3 to check-in about how the course is going and how we can help you succeed.

Most importantly, if you are struggling and fall behind, contact us immediately. We can help and you will be surprised how understanding we are of challenges from care duties, work obligations, and medical issues including mental health. First and foremost we will try to help and, when we cannot, connect you to resources on campus or in LA. Then we will work with you to get back on track in class. Your wellbeing is paramount to us.

Students with disabilities

Students with disabilities enrolled in this course who may need disability-related accommodations are encouraged to make an appointment to see Professor Blair before the

end of the second week of the quarter. All conversations will remain confidential. Please arrange to have the required CAE documentation sent to Professor Blair *as soon as possible*.

Students needing academic accommodations based on a disability must contact the Center for Accessible Education (CAE) at (310) 825-1501 or present in person at Murphy Hall A255. As the professionals delegated authority from the campus to determine reasonable disability accommodations, CAE will assess all requested accommodations and communicate appropriately with faculty. When possible, students should contact the CAE within the first two weeks of the term as reasonable notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. For more information visit www.cae.ucla.edu.

Your ethical responsibilities

You are subject in this class to UCLA's [academic honesty policies](#). You should not pass off the work or words of others as your own, including from fellow students and generative AI tools like ChatGPT. You can avoid this by liberally citing and when relevant including quotation marks or notes indicating what is directly taken from other sources. The [Undergraduate Writing Center](#) can provide support on how to quote and cite sources. *You* are ultimately responsible for what you turn in, and so treat all sources as potentially biased or inaccurate and verify key factual information and stress-test the arguments.

Plan for each week

Every Thursday, we will share the plan for the next week. To give you a sense of what the quarter will be like, the weekly plan will usually include these elements:

Monday:

- Writing assignment from previous week due 10 p.m. if assigned

Tuesday:

- First set of Perusall engagement due
- Quiz in class
- In-class team activity

Thursday:

- Second set of Perusall engagement due
- Quiz in class
- In-class team activity

Section:

- Short additional readings may be due

- Q&A on week's readings
- Work session on weekly writing assignment, if assigned

Draft schedule

Each unit lasts approximately one week.

1. What is political violence? Why does it matter?
2. Violence is one strategy to achieve political change
3. Why violence sometimes cannot be avoided
4. Who organizes
5. Who fights
6. Who assists
7. Who is victimized
8. What happens after
9. Norms, laws, and ethics
10. Propaganda and media representations