

First-Year Seminar 72X: Holding Politicians Accountable
Fall 2025

DRAFT

Latest Version of Syllabus: Sept. 4, 2025

Class Sessions:

Wednesdays, 12:45-2:45 PM

Location:

Sever Hall, Room 304

Canvas Site:

<https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/154353>

Instructor

Julie Anne Weaver

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Website:

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Office Hours Sign-up:

<https://calendly.com/julianneweaver>

Course Description

Across the world, massive street protests and growing disdain for politics not only suggest high citizen dissatisfaction with politicians' performance—from poor public services, high corruption, and increasing crime—but highlight the difficulty of holding politicians accountable to the voters who put them in office. Democracies are designed with certain mechanisms to generate political accountability. Re-elections are meant to give voters a tool to reward or punish incumbents for their behavior in office; government oversight agencies like auditing institutions are intended to police politicians from within; and so on. Despite this range of methods for keeping politicians accountable, why is there still so much corruption and impunity within government? Why don't politicians provide the policies and public services people seem to want? What are the barriers

citizens and civil society face in engaging in politics? What can we learn from citizen efforts to reign in politicians even within authoritarian regimes? Perhaps most importantly, what policies could we implement to reduce impunity and strengthen accountability?

Throughout the semester, we will aim to answer these questions through a mix of reading, in-class discussion, and individual work on a capstone project. As a First-Year Seminar, this is not a typical lecture course. Rather, you can expect class sessions to be composed largely of class discussion (among the full class and in smaller groups), in which we analyze and synthesize across the readings. Though you may occasionally have very short lectures by me to introduce new material, students are largely expected to come to class already having done the assigned reading for that day and ready to discuss it. Each week I will send out guidance on how to approach the next week's reading. Early in the semester, we will do reading effectiveness exercises to help students develop the skills to digest large amounts of academic material quickly and effectively.

The assigned readings are mostly academic and are drawn from the social sciences (principally political science, but economics and sociology as well). In addition, most weeks I will ask you to read a short news article or policy piece as a case study and/or policy application of the more academic treatment of the week's topic.

Course Objectives

By the end of the course, the goal is that students will have improved their skills in each of the following areas:

- Describing and analyzing the gaps between how achieving accountability is conceived on paper versus how it happens on the ground
- Engaging in scholarly, open-minded debate about theoretical frameworks for understanding the practice of democracy and accountability
- Developing skills in analyzing policies and the barriers to policymaking for better accountability
- Deepening expertise on a chosen method of accountability

Materials and Access

All required readings for this course will be available in digital formats, so no books or other materials will be required for purchase or physical check-out from libraries. All readings will be posted on the canvas website.

Assignments and Evaluations of Student Work

There are two main components to the course: 1) reading *before* class and then actively engaging in discussion *during* class; 2) completing a capstone project.

Like all First-Year Seminars, the course is graded SAT/UNSAT. I will still provide written feedback on each of the capstone project assignments and let you know if you need to change your approach to participating in class.

Each class component and assignment will be weighted as follows:

Class participation and engaging with the thematic material: 50%

- Attending class sessions: 20%
- Being prepared for (i.e. doing the readings and having thought about them in advance) and actively participating in weekly class sessions: 30%

Capstone project: 50%:

- Project proposal: 5%
- Mid-term project update: 10%
- In-class presentation: 15%
- Final paper: 20%

Preparing for, attending, and actively participating in class sessions: Students are expected to attend every class. As noted below, students may miss only one class per semester, after which any subsequent absences are only excused with a note from your resident dean.

You are also expected to have done the reading in advance and come prepared to discuss the assigned readings. Every week, I will send out a reading guide, in which I highlight the main issues, questions and themes that will be our focus that week, and that should help you as you work through the material. It should also help you prepare for the class discussion by knowing in advance where to concentrate your reading and potential discussion questions.

Students are expected to contribute actively to the class discussion. Active and thoughtful participation comes in various forms: asking clarification questions, sharing your analysis of the material, responding to your classmates' comments, or pointing out where you disagree with the readings. Some students are lucky to find that speaking up in class is easy, while others are naturally quieter. If you fall towards the quieter range, come see me in office hours and we can

discuss ways to make it easier for you to participate. Productively contributing to a group discussion is an important life skill we will be working to cultivate; to that end, I will be working hard to make sure those who tend to talk a lot learn to give everyone the floor, and those who tend to talk less, can practice speaking more.

Your active discussion during class will demonstrate that you have actually done the readings in advance. *If it becomes apparent that students are not doing the readings, I will start implementing other in-class assignments (i.e. pop quizzes, etc.) to assess knowledge of the readings.* Because of the widespread use of AI, I no longer assign weekly discussion posts, and thus cannot use the posts as a way to gauge advance reading.

Capstone Project: For your capstone project, you will select a method for holding politicians accountable (i.e. re-election, protest, independent oversight agencies, watchdog media, etc.), delve deeply into existing research to explain why that method does not or does not always work, and explore policy options to make it work better. A few notes:

- You are free to choose an accountability method that we have not explicitly covered in class.
- You are encouraged to focus your project on either a particular case or to compare two or three cases. By “case”, I mean an instance of your chosen method of accountability occurring in a particular country, in a specific time period, or the use of that method for a particular policy or instance of impunity. For example, you could focus on climate change protest in a certain city or country, or compare climate change protest in one part of a country to another, or in one time period to another, or compare protest over climate change to protest over corruption in the same setting/time.
- The aim of choosing a focus is to sufficiently narrow your topic so you can dive deeply into how the accountability strategy was used and why it succeeded or failed.
- You are encouraged to read both academic papers, as well as consult newspaper accounts or other archival or social media data.

You will have short assignments throughout the semester to both incentivize you to make steady progress on your project, as well as to receive concrete written feedback from me that you can incorporate into the final paper.

- *Project proposal* (1-2 pages): Early in the semester, you will submit a short proposal that should describe the following: 1) the accountability method you have chosen; 2) why you are interested in that method; 3) how you will narrow your project (i.e., what case or cases will you focus on); and 4) provide an initial list of relevant academic literature you will consult.

- *Mid-term project update* (3-4 pages): State your final project topic and how you are narrowing your focus. Describe and analyze at least 2 explanations for why that accountability practice may not work in practice.
- *In-class presentation*: Give a short (5 minute) presentation to your classmates on your initial results.
- *Final paper* (10 pages): Your final paper should clearly describe the accountability mechanism and the specific case(s) you chose, identify the barriers in actually holding politicians accountable, and outline specific policy options and their likelihood of success.

Due Dates:

- Project Proposal: Friday, Sept. 26 (end of Week 4)
- Mid-term Project Update: Friday, Oct. 31 (end of Week 9)
- In-class Presentation: Wednesday, Dec. 3 (last day of class)
- Final Paper: Due on date of registrar's final exam for the course

Attendance Policy

Attendance at all class sessions is expected. Each student is permitted to miss one class session, no questions asked. However, any subsequent absence(s) will need to be accompanied by a written notification/justification from your Resident Dean. All unexcused absences will count against your participation grade.

Late Policy

All assignments will be submitted through canvas and are due by 6 PM EST on the due date.

All students are given an extension bank of 48 hours with which they can submit any written capstone project assignment late, no questions asked. You can use the full 48 hours on one assignment or break it up across two assignments. In other words, you can submit one assignment 2 days late, or two assignments 1 day late.

After that, students will lose what would be considered half of a letter grade (i.e., A to A-; B+ to B) for every 24 hours that an assignment is submitted late (though again the class is SAT/UNSAT).

The only exceptions to this policy are with a documented medical illness or other emergency, *which includes written documentation from your resident dean.*

Note that this extension bank policy *does not apply to the response papers*, given that you can opt to skip two of the response papers anyway, and because they are not as useful if you write them after class has already been held, *nor does it apply to the in-class presentation*. If you have already used your two skipped weeks and then cannot complete a response paper, and/or you must miss the presentation, then as above, please provide written documentation of your medical or other emergency from your resident dean, and you will not be penalized.

Academic Integrity

Collaboration: I encourage most forms of collaboration between students, including discussing the readings in advance of the class meetings; providing peer feedback on written work; and discussing ideas, sources and findings for the final research project. However, any written work you submit for evaluation should be the result of your own research and writing. This means that you must independently compose all written assignments, including the reading responses and each of the assignments for the capstone project.

Citations: It is imperative that you properly attribute ideas to their true author. You must acknowledge not only direct quotes, but also summaries, paraphrasing or any arguments that come from others. This includes properly citing any books, articles, news sources, and websites (note this is not an exhaustive list). You may use whichever citation style you wish (i.e., MLA, Chicago, etc.), but please remain consistent throughout the assignment, meaning select one citation style and stick with it.

In general: Please consult and follow the [Harvard Guide to Using Sources](#), as well as the [Harvard Honor Code](#), to which we are all bound.

If you have any concerns whatsoever about whether a particular type of collaboration is permissible, and/or if you need to cite in a particular case, please ask me *beforehand*.

Accommodations

Harvard University values inclusive excellence and providing equal educational opportunities for all students. Our goal is to remove barriers for disabled students related to inaccessible elements of instruction or design in this course. If reasonable accommodations are necessary to provide access, please contact Harvard's [Disability Access Office \(DAO\)](#). Accommodations do not alter fundamental requirements of the course and are not retroactive. Students should request accommodations as early as possible, since they may take time to implement. Students should notify DAO at any time during the semester if adjustments to their communicated accommodation plan are needed.

Contacting Me and Course Communications

I will hold regular office hours by appointment (<https://calendly.com/julieanneweaver>). I am happy to answer any questions over email or to discuss any issues, concerns or ideas in person, on zoom, or over the phone. Note I have a 24-hour communications blackout policy prior to assignment due dates, during which I will no longer answer questions about that assignment.

Assistance and Additional Resources

At some point, every one of us will need to seek out some extra outside assistance. Please do not hesitate to get in touch with me to discuss your particular concern – I can guarantee you are not the only student facing it. In addition, for academic concerns, Harvard’s [Academic Resource Center](#) has one-on-one appointments, workshops, peer tutoring, and many online resources covering topics like study skills, time management and reading effectively. For writing, the [Harvard Writing Center](#) is a great source for writing help, including one-on-one appointments to get writing feedback. There are also a huge array of centers and organizations at Harvard meant to support you in your non-academic life, including the [Center for Wellness; Counseling and Mental Health Services \(CAMS\)](#), and the [Office of Community and Culture](#).

COURSE SCHEDULE

Sept. 3 Week 1: Introduction

Overview of course themes – What is accountability? Why should we care if politicians are not accountable?; Q&A about concerns and assignments; Establishing course norms; How to read effectively in the social sciences (reading exercise)

Sept. 10 Week 2: Overview of Democracy and Accountability

What are the accountability-related goals of democracy? What are the range of specific accountability mechanisms inherent to the design of democracy?

Tsai, Lily. International Encyclopedia of Political Science, 6th ed. s.v. “Accountability”.

Manin, Bernard, Adam Przeworski, and Susan C. Stokes. 1999. "Elections and Representation," In *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation*, edited by Adam Przeworski, Susan C. Stokes, and Bernard Manin, Cambridge University Press.

Coppedge, Michael, et al. 2011. "Conceptualizing and measuring democracy: A new approach." *Perspectives on Politics*: 247-267. **NOTE:** Read only pages 253 (starting with "Conceptions") through page 256 (end after indicator #33).

Rose-Ackerman, Susan. 2005. *From Elections to Democracy: Building Accountable Government in Hungary and Poland*. Cambridge Univ. Press. Chapter 1.

Sept. 17 Week 3: Electoral Accountability

How are re-elections designed to foster political accountability? In practice, what prevents re-election from incentivizing good behavior in office?

Dunning, T., Grossman, G., Humphreys, M., Hyde, S. D., McIntosh, C., & Nellis, G. (Eds.). 2019. *Information, Accountability, and Cumulative Learning: Lessons from Metaketa I*. Cambridge University Press. Ch 1 (pages 3-15) and Ch 3 (pages 50-66, i.e. only read through section 3.2).

Adida, Claire, Jessica Gottlieb, Eric Kramon, and Gwyneth McClendon. (2017). Reducing or reinforcing in-group preferences? An experiment on information and ethnic voting. *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, 12(4), 437-477.

Weaver, Julie Anne. 2021. "Electoral Dis-connection: The Limits of Re-Election in Contexts of Weak Accountability." *Journal of Politics* 83(4): 1462-1477.

Sept. 24 Week 4: Horizontal Accountability

What are the goals of the institutions of horizontal accountability and how are they designed? What are the barriers these institutions face in holding politicians accountable?

NOTE: Project Proposal Due Friday, Sept. 26

Case study 1: 'Lava Jato' scandal and judicial prosecution of corruption in Latin America
Case study 2: Congressmen George Santos and Congressional oversight

O'Donnell, Guillermo A. "Notes on Various Accountabilities and Their Interrelations." In Peruzzotti, Enrique, Smulovitz, Catalina, eds. 2006. *Enforcing the rule of law: Social accountability in the new Latin American democracies*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Baraybar, Viviana, and Ezequiel Gonzalez-Ocantos. 2022. "Prosecutorial Agency, Backlash and Resistance in the Peruvian Chapter of Lava Jato." In: Botero, S., Brinks, D. M., & Gonzalez-Ocantos, E. A. (Eds.). *The Limits of Judicialization: From Progress to Backlash in Latin America*. Cambridge University Press.

NPR articles about the George Santos case:

N.Y. Rep.-elect George Santos is being investigated for lying about his past, Dec. 29, 2022

Rep. George Santos voluntarily steps down from House committee assignments, Jan. 31, 2023

McCarthy says Santos will remain in office as N.Y. Republicans call for his ouster, Jan. 12, 2023

Santos took office one month ago and his New York district says he's got to go, Feb. 5, 2023

George Santos is expelled from Congress by an overwhelming vote, December 1, 2023

Former Rep. George Santos pleads guilty to wire fraud, identity theft, August 20, 2024

Oct. 1 Week 5: Social Accountability & Formal Political Participation

What is social accountability? What are the ways governments have designed formal channels for citizen participation? What are the limits of these methods?

Peruzzotti, Enrique, Smulovitz, Catalina, eds. 2006. *Enforcing the rule of law: Social accountability in the new Latin American democracies*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press. Ch 1, pages 3-27.

McNulty., Stephanie L. 2019. *Democracy from above? The unfulfilled promise of nationally mandated participatory reforms*. Stanford University Press. Chapter 1.

Blair, H. (2020). Accountability Through Participatory Budgeting in India: Only in Kerala?. In *Governance for Urban Services* (pp. 57-76). Springer, Singapore.

Evan S Lieberman, Daniel N Posner and Lily L Tsai. 2013. Does Information Lead to More Active Citizenship? Evidence from an Education Intervention in Rural Kenya. *World Development* Volume 60, August 2014, Pages 69–83.

Oct. 8 **Week 6:** **Protest**

What are the range of methods individuals and groups use to lodge their discontent and push for change outside of official channels? What explains when citizens choose to engage in protest or other civil resistance as a means of influencing politics and holding politicians accountable? When and why are such strategies successful?

Chenoweth, Erica. *Civil Resistance: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Oxford University Press, 2021. Introduction (p. 1-27); Ch 2 (p. 81-141).

Scott, James C. "Everyday forms of resistance." *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* 4, no. 1 (2008): 33-59.

Oct. 15 **Week 7:** **Watchdog Media**

What role can (or should) the media play in citizens' effort to promote accountability? What are the major challenges the media faces in playing this role? How can we strengthen the link between the media and political accountability?

Peruzzotti, Enrique. "Media Scandals and Social Accountability." In Peruzzotti, Enrique, Smulovitz, Catalina, eds. 2006. *Enforcing the rule of law: Social accountability in the new Latin American democracies*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Kruks-Wisner, Gabrielle. 2022. "Social Brokerage: Accountability and the Social Life of Information." *Comparative Political Studies*.

Boas, T. C., & Hidalgo, F. D. (2011). Controlling the airwaves: Incumbency advantage and community radio in Brazil. *American Journal of Political Science*, 55(4), 869-885.

Oct. 22 **Week 8:** **Accountability in Authoritarian Regimes**

To what extent can citizens hold political leaders accountable in authoritarian regimes? What do these efforts teach us about accountability more broadly?

Tsai, Lily L. "Solidary groups, informal accountability, and local public goods provision in rural China." *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 2 (2007): 355-372.

Tsai, L. L. (2015). Constructive noncompliance. *Comparative Politics*, 47(3), 253-279.

Case Study: Protest and China's reversal of Zero-Covid (early December 2022)

NPR, "How a deadly fire in Xinjiang prompted protests unseen in China in three decades," Nov. 28, 2022

NPR, "China's lockdown protests and rising COVID leave Xi Jinping with '2 bad options'," Nov. 29, 2022

New York Times, "China Eases 'Zero Covid' Restrictions in Victory for Protesters," Dec. 7, 2022

Oct. 29 Week 9: Holding Politicians Accountable for Corruption

NOTE: Mid-term Project Update Due Friday, Oct. 31

What does the persistence of corruption across the world teach us about the difficulty of holding politicians accountable? What can efforts to tackle corruption teach us about how to strengthen accountability?

Fisman, Raymond, and Miriam A. Golden. 2017. *Corruption: What everyone needs to know*. Oxford University Press. Chapter 9.

Olken, Benjamin A., and Rohini Pande. 2012. Corruption in developing countries. *Annu. Rev. Econ.*, 4(1), 479-509. *Note*: Selected sections only.

NOTE: Please also re-review these readings from previous weeks:

"Media Scandals and Social Accountability" (Week 7)

"Prosecutorial Agency, Backlash and Resistance in the Peruvian Chapter of Lava Jato." (Week 4)

"Electoral Dis-connection: The Limits of Re-Election in Contexts of Weak Accountability." (Week 3)

Nov. 5 Week 10: Holding Domestic Politicians Accountable for International Policies and Challenges

Who should/can be held accountable for policies that have both domestic and international elements? What constraints specific to the international nature of these policies make accountability more difficult than other types of policies and performance? How does the international environment and the international nature of the problem and solution influence these specific cases of accountability?

Based on their preferences, students will be assigned to small groups and will spend the first half of the class discussing the accountability challenges specific to their assigned topic/policy. In the second half of the class, we will come together to pull out commonalities across these diverse policy realms.

Small groups topics: Climate change; Drug policy; Immigration and refugees; International trade; Overseas interventions and conflicts; International actors and commitments (INGOs, UN, etc.)

Group-specific readings TBA.

Nov. 12 Week 11: Accountability in the United States

What is different about the United States (in terms of institutions, culture, history, etc.) that impacts the possibility of, and strategies used for, achieving political accountability? What lessons from other places apply to the United States despite these differences? How can citizens be most effective in pushing for accountability in local, state, and national office?

What Makes the US unique?

Kriner, D., & Reeves, A. (2014). The electoral college and presidential particularism. *BUL Rev.*, 94, 741.

Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., & Westwood, S. J. (2019). The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States. *Annual review of political science*, 22(1), 129-146.

Case Study: Gun Control in the US

Pew Research Center: “Key Facts about Americans and Guns,” Sept. 13, 2021

Pew Research Center: “About a third of K-12 parents are very or extremely worried a shooting could happen at their children’s school”, Oct 18, 2022

Council on Foreign Relations: “U.S. Gun Policy: Global Comparisons,” June 10, 2022

Nov. 19 Week 12: Accountability for Democracy Itself: Democratic Erosion in the US and Beyond

How can citizens hold politicians accountable for upholding democracy itself? What does the extent of democratic backsliding around the world tell us about the health of political accountability? If the United States is at risk of democratic decline, what can citizens do to hold politicians accountable for respecting democratic institutions and norms?

Bermeo, Nancy. "On democratic backsliding." J. Democracy 27 (2016): 5.

Voice of America, “Senegal Suspends Mobile Internet, Bans Election Delay Demonstration.” February 13, 2024.

Vox News, “Good news: Democracy won in Senegal. Here’s why it matters.” Apr 4, 2024.

Boston Globe, “Donald Trump wants to destroy American democracy. He will fail.” July 7, 2024.

NOTE – WED NOV 26 – NO CLASS – THANKSGIVING BREAK

Dec. 3 Week 13: Student Presentations; Course Wrap Up