

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

PSPS 2300: Introduction to Judicial Process

3 credit hours, face-to-face

Course: PSPS 2300
Semester: Fall 2026
Meeting Time: Tuesday and Thursday 2:40 – 4:05 PM

Instructor: Trevor G. Samaha, Ph.D.
Email: trevor-samaha@utc.edu

Course Catalog Description:

An examination of the role, operation and decision-making processes of the U.S. Supreme Court, lower federal courts, and state courts. Every Fall. Recommended for pre-law students.

Course Introduction:

An examination of the role, operation and decision-making processes of the U.S. Supreme Court, lower federal courts, and state courts. This course is an introduction to the politics of law. We will examine what roles the bar and judiciary play in the U.S. polity. Topics to be discussed include the structure of the judicial branch of government, legal education, the legal community, civil litigation, criminal litigation, and the policymaking role of appellate courts. The course is designed as an introductory survey and as preparation for the upper-level law and politics courses offered by the department.

Expected Learning Outcomes:

1. A command of basic substantive knowledge about the major institutions, actors, and relevant processes in the state and national legal systems.
2. A knowledge of major policy and legal issues in the state and national legal systems and an appreciation of the complexity reflective of the uncertainties, trade-offs, and institutional context of problems confronting governments and actors in the nation's courts.
3. An ability to think analytically about political phenomena in a manner that applies alternative explanatory perspectives across major theoretical schools of thought in the political science/judicial politics literature.
4. An appreciation of the policy implications of different theoretical approaches and, more generally, how they relate to the larger ethical issues facing the state and national legal systems.

In addition to the course-specific learning outcomes, we will be reinforcing and practicing each of the following PSPS student learning outcomes:

1. Students are able to apply key concepts used to study governmental and non-state structures and actors in political systems.
2. Students are able to analyze political phenomena and critique arguments in a theoretically informed manner.
3. Students are able to apply their disciplinary knowledge to address contemporary, real-world problems.
4. Students are able to identify, evaluate, and accurately apply verifiable sources of evidence, including empirical research.

Notes on the Syllabus:

This syllabus is the first place you should turn to when you have questions about your responsibilities or the structure of the course. If you do not find the information that you are looking for in the syllabus, please feel free to contact me with questions.

Information contained in the syllabus, especially regarding scheduling, is subject to change during the semester at my discretion. Generally, such changes will move the due dates for some readings back or remove some readings from the schedule. I will announce any changes in class and by email.

The best way to ensure that you are aware of any changes is to attend class and check your Mocs email regularly. I will also try to update the course reading schedule available on Canvas whenever changes are made, but such updates may not be made immediately. If there is an unintended contradiction between this syllabus and university policy, the university policy supersedes the syllabus.

Course Materials:

Required Books:

Abadinsky, Howard. 2021. *Law, Courts, and Justice in America*. 8th ed. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press. ISBN: 9781478639695

Feinman, Jay M. 2023. *Law 101: Everything You Need to Know About American Law*. 6th ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. ISBN: 9780197662571

Recommended Book:

Susskind, Richard E. 2023. *Tomorrow's Lawyers: An Introduction to Your Future*. 3rd ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. ISBN: 9780192864727

The bulk of the readings for this course will come from the required books. All other readings will be available on Canvas. I recommend *Tomorrow's Lawyers: An Introduction to Your Future* for students who think they may want to pursue a law career. I may recommend chapters from this book when they correspond to topics in class, but they will be completely optional, and you will not be tested on any material from this book.

Grading Criteria:

Attendance	100 points
Office Hours	50 points
Quizzes	100 points
Court Observation Project	150 points
Interview Assignment	150 points
Exam 1	150 points
Exam 2	150 points
Final Exam	150 points
TOTAL	1000 points

Determination of Grades:

1000 points	A+
930-999 points	A
900-929 points	A-
870-899 points	B+
830-869 points	B
800-829 points	B-
770-799 points	C+
730-769 points	C
700-729 points	C-
600-699 points	D
<600 points	F

I will round anything .5 or more to the next highest point. (For example, a 799.6 will be rounded to 800, but a 797.6 will be rounded to 798, not 800.)

Your beliefs and values about politics and society have **absolutely no impact on your grade**. Your grade is based on completing the requirements of the course. Do not assume that agreeing with my ideology will enhance your grade and do not assume that disagreeing with my ideology will hurt your grade. There is no relationship between your beliefs and values and your grade.

Attendance: Simply put, attendance is mandatory. Every absence beyond the second will cost you ten points from your attendance score. You start with 100 attendance points and can only go down from there. **Essentially, you get two free absences.** Since I do not distinguish between excused and unexcused absences, students are strongly encouraged to save their free absences for sessions missed due to illness, emergencies, and schedule conflicts, such as participation on UTC athletic teams. If you miss class, you will not be allowed to make up any in-class work from that day, including quizzes or exams. Students may also lose attendance points if they are physically present but do not meaningfully participate in class activities, discussions, or exercises.

Office Hours: 50 points of your total grade will be gained by simply meeting with me during office hours. You must complete this meeting by Thursday, November 19th in order to receive credit. Please note: you can still attend office hours after this date, but you are only eligible for the points on or before November 19th. All office hours will be held in-person. Office hours are an essential space for intellectual dialogue, mentoring, and mutual understanding beyond the classroom. I encourage you to treat them not just as a resource for course clarification, but as an opportunity to share your interests, goals, and questions about law, politics, or anything else you're exploring. These conversations help professors truly get to know their students, which is invaluable when it comes time to write letters of recommendation. A meaningful letter is grounded in genuine familiarity, and office hours are one of the best ways to build that relationship.

Quizzes: Quizzes will be held (almost) weekly throughout the semester and are based primarily on the assigned readings. Their purpose is straightforward: to confirm that you've completed the reading and are ready to engage with the material. Quizzes will typically take place on Tuesdays. However, if another scheduling conflict arises, the quiz may be moved to Thursday. In short: always come prepared to take the quiz on Tuesday, but know that it may occasionally shift to Thursday. All quizzes will be administered in class. They are closed book and closed note. If you are not in class for a quiz, you will receive a zero on the quiz unless you made arrangements to take the quiz at an alternate time or on an alternate day *before* the quiz was administered.

Court Observation Project: In order to gain a first-hand understanding of court proceedings, you will be required to attend three court proceedings or trials. Further instructions can be found on Canvas and we will discuss the assignment in detail in class at a later date.

Interview Assignment: In order to gain a further understanding of the judicial process, you will be required to interview someone involved in the process. Further instructions can be found on Canvas and we will discuss the assignment in detail in class at a later date.

Exams: Exam questions will be drawn from both lecture and reading material. One week prior to each exam, I will email out a study guide for the upcoming exam. If you can answer all the questions on the study guide, you should have no problem getting a good grade on the exam. More information regarding the format and expectations for the exams will be given later in the semester.

Classroom Policies:

It is expected that all students adhere to the following at all times:

1. Respect the viewpoints, opinions, and backgrounds of others at all times. We will frequently encounter potentially difficult and controversial questions and topics. We must all make every

effort to tolerate competing and contradictory views and create and sustain a space where everyone feels comfortable expressing opinions on law, politics, and society. All students have a right to a productive and safe learning environment. I endeavor to maintain a classroom environment that allows for lively, yet mature, debate: feel free to state your opinions on politics and society, but do so intelligently, without rancor or vitriol, and allow your classmates to do the same.

2. “Smart” glasses (Meta, Viture, etc.) are prohibited in class at all times. This is especially important during exams/quizzes. If you wear smart glasses for any reason during an exam or quiz, you will receive a zero on the exam/quiz.
3. Silence your cell phone **before** class starts and stay off it during class. No texting/emailing/Tweeting/Snapchatting or any other form of electronic communication during class. It’s distracting and disrespectful to the students around you and me. Keep your phone in your pocket or in your bag during class, not on your desk. If I see you on your phone, I will ask you to put it away and you will lose attendance points for that class. This is especially important during exams/quizzes. If you use your phone for any reason during an exam or quiz, you will receive a zero on the exam/quiz.
4. No recording (audio or video) of the lectures by students is permitted.

Failure to follow these rules may result in being asked to leave the classroom for the remainder of the meeting period.

Academic Integrity:

Students are required to adhere to the university’s policies regarding academic dishonesty. The integrity of the classes offered by any academic institution solidifies the foundation of its mission and cannot be sacrificed to expediency, ignorance, or blatant fraud. Therefore, I will enforce rigorous standards of academic integrity in all aspects and assignments of this course. If you are found to have plagiarized on any assignment, you will receive a zero for that assignment. If you are found to have plagiarized on the written portion of an exam, or any writing assignment, in addition to receiving a zero on the paper or assignment, I reserve the right to give you a failing grade for the class based on the severity of the infraction.

For UTC’s detailed policies regarding the definitions of acts considered to fall under academic dishonesty and possible ensuing sanctions, please see the Student Code of Conduct and Honor Code. Should you have any questions about possibly improper research citations or references, or any other activity that may be interpreted as an attempt at academic dishonesty, please see me before the assignment is due to discuss the matter.

The University’s Honor Code Pledge states: “As a student of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, I pledge that I will not give or receive any unauthorized assistance with academic work or engage in any academic dishonesty in order to gain an academic advantage. I will exert every effort to insure that the Honor Code is upheld by myself and others, affirming my commitment to a campus-wide climate of honesty and integrity.”

Artificial Intelligence (AI) use policy: Students may use AI tools (such as spell checkers and grammar checkers or language refinement tools) to assist with proofreading and stylistic improvement of their writing. However, the substance of all written work (ideas, arguments, structure, content, etc.) must originate entirely from the student. AI may not be used to generate, compose, or substantially rewrite any portion of an assignment. The use of AI to produce original

content, even if later edited by the student, constitutes a violation of academic integrity and will be treated as plagiarism. Put simply, you may use AI to polish your prose, but not produce it.

Example:

Acceptable: You write a draft of an essay and use AI to suggest clearer phrasing or correct grammar.

Unacceptable: You ask AI to “write an essay about the functions of the federal Courts of Appeals” and submit the result, even if you make your own edits.

If you are unsure whether a particular use of AI is appropriate, ask me before submitting the assignment. When in doubt, err on the side of avoiding AI. I may require an oral defense of any assignment before assigning a grade.

Institutional Policies:

Students are responsible for reviewing and being familiar with the university’s policies, including the Campus Syllabus (<https://www.utc.edu/academic-affairs/campus-syllabus>).

PSPS 2300 – Fall 2026 – Schedule

Readings are expected to be completed before the week they are assigned (unless another due date is specified). For example, you should read Feinman Chapter 1 before you come to class on Tuesday week 2 of the semester. All reading assignments can be found either in the assigned textbook or on Canvas. Important dates are in bold. The schedule is subject to change during the semester at my discretion. Generally, such changes will move the due dates for some readings/assignments back or remove some readings/assignments from the schedule. I will announce any changes in class and by email.

Week 1 – Course Introduction – August 25th and 27th

Review Syllabus, Introductions, How to be successful in PSPS 2300

Readings: none

Week 2 – Civics Review, Basics of Law, Social Scientists vs. Lawyers – September 1st and 3rd

Introduction of Court Observation Project

Readings: Feinman Chapter 1

Week 3 – Legal Systems, Sources of American Law, American Legal Thought – September 8th and 10th

Readings: Abadinsky Chapters 1 and 2

Week 4 – Courts – September 15th and 17th

September 15th – Guest Speaker

Readings: Abadinsky Chapter 5

Week 5 – Becoming a Lawyer, Being a Lawyer – September 22nd and 24th

September 22nd – Guest Speaker

Readings: Abadinsky Chapters 3 and 4

Week 6 – Becoming a Lawyer, Being a Lawyer – September 29th and October 1st

Readings: none, study for the exam

Week 7 – Exam 1 – October 6th and 8th

October 6th – Guest Speaker

Exam 1 on Thursday, October 8th

Readings: none, study for the exam

Week 8 – Civil Law – October 13th and 15th

October 13th – NO CLASS – Fall Break

October 15th – Guest Speaker

Readings: Abadinsky Chapter 10 & Feinman Chapter 4

Week 9 – Civil Law – October 20th and 22nd

Readings: Feinman Chapters 5, 6 and 7

Week 10 – Criminal Law – October 27th and 29th

Readings: Abadinsky Chapter 8 & Feinman Chapter 8

Week 11 – Criminal Law, Election Discussion – November 3rd and 5th

Readings: Feinman Chapter 9 & Abadinsky Chapter 9

Week 12 – Judges – November 10th and 12th

November 10th – Guest Speaker

Exam 2 on Thursday, November 12th

Readings: Abadinsky Chapter 7

Week 13 – Prisons – November 17th and 19th

Court Observation Project due November 22nd at 11:59 PM

Readings: [Watch 13th \(documentary\) on YouTube](#) (It's also on Netflix if you have an account and want to watch without ads)

Week 14 – How to write a (Law School) Personal Statement – November 24th and 26th

November 26th – NO CLASS – Thanksgiving Holiday

Readings: none

Finals Week – Final Exam – December 2nd through 8th

Final Exam is Thursday, December 3rd from 1 – 3 PM

Interview Assignment due December 3rd at 11:59 PM