

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

PSPS 4300R: Comparative Legal Systems

3 credit hours, face-to-face

Course: PSPS 4300R
Semester: Fall 2026
Meeting Time: Wednesday 6:00 – 8:45 PM

Instructor: Trevor G. Samaha, Ph.D.
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Course Catalog Description:

A comparative survey of major legal traditions around the world, beginning with the English Common Law and Continental Civil Law systems. The course examines how legal institutions, professional communities, and judicial structures operate in Great Britain, France, Germany, and selected countries in South America, Africa, and Asia. Topics include legal education, civil and criminal procedure, judicial organization, and the policymaking role of courts. The United States and its federal–state legal framework serve as a recurring point of comparison.

Course Introduction:

This course introduces students to the world's major legal traditions, beginning with the two dominant families of law: the English Common Law and the Continental Civil (Code) Law. After establishing this foundation, the course examines how the legal cultures of Great Britain, France, and Germany have evolved within their respective political systems, professional communities, and judicial institutions. Building on these cases, the course then explores how legal systems across South America, Africa, and Asia have developed through a combination of indigenous traditions, colonial legacies, post-independence reforms, and contemporary political pressures. Particular attention will be given to how hybrid systems emerge, how courts operate within varying constitutional frameworks, and how global legal norms interact with local social and political realities. Throughout the semester, students will analyze the reciprocal relationship between law and politics: how legal institutions shape governance and how political environments, in turn, influence judicial behavior, legal education, professional norms, and access to justice. Topics include the organization of judicial branches, the training and roles of lawyers and judges, civil and criminal procedure, and the policymaking influence of appellate courts. Throughout the course, we will use the United States and its fifty-one legal systems as comparative referents.

Student Learning Outcomes:

In this course 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:

Hallaq, Wael B. 2009. *An Introduction to Islamic Law*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. ISBN: 9780521678735

Richardson, Benjamin J., Shin Imai, and Kent McNeil. 2009. *Indigenous Peoples and the Law: Comparative and Critical Perspectives*. Portland, OR: Hart Publishing. ISBN: 9781841137957

The bulk of the readings for this course will come from the assigned textbooks or assigned readings posted to Canvas.

Grading Criteria:

Attendance	100 points
Quizzes	200 points
Midterm Exam	200 points
Written Assignments	300 points
Final Exam	200 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 first 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 one free absence**. Since I do not distinguish between excused and unexcused absences, students are strongly encouraged to save their free absence 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.

Quizzes: Quizzes will be held (almost) weekly throughout the semester and are based on the assigned readings. Their purpose is straightforward: to confirm that you've completed the reading and are ready to engage with the material. All quizzes will be administered in class. They are closed book and closed note.

Written Assignments: At four different points this semester, you will be assigned a writing assignment in which you apply course concepts to the legal systems we study. These assignments give you the opportunity to work on your analytical skills while also showing your comprehension of course topics. You will need to complete three of these assignments during the semester. If you complete all four assignments, I will drop your lowest grade. More information will be given on each assignment individually.

Midterm/Final Exam: To evaluate all that you learned throughout the semester, there will be a midterm exam and a final exam for this class. 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 4300R – 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 Schauer (1987) before you come to class week 2 of the semester. All reading assignments can be found either in the assigned textbooks 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 & Review of the U.S. Legal System – August 26th

Readings: none

Week 2 – Common Law Legal Systems; Concepts – September 2nd

Readings: Schauer (1987) on Canvas

Week 3 – Common Law Legal Systems – September 9th

Readings: Dworkin (1975) on Canvas

Week 4 – Common Law Legal Systems; Australia and the UK – September 16th

Readings: Craig (2017) on Canvas

Written Assignment 1 due September 20th at 11:59 PM

Week 5 – Civil Legal Systems; Concepts – September 23rd

Readings: none

Week 6 – Civil Legal Systems; France and Germany – September 30th

Readings: none

Week 7 – Civil Legal Systems; Mexico and Japan – October 7th

Midterm Exam due Sunday, October 11th at 11:59 PM

Readings: none

Week 8 – Religious Legal Systems; Sharia – October 14th

Readings: Hallaq Part I

Week 9 – Religious Legal Systems; Iran and Nigeria – October 21st

Readings: Hallaq chapters 7–9

Written Assignment 2 due October 25th at 11:59 PM

Week 10 – Authoritarian Legal Systems; Authoritarian Concepts – October 28th

Readings: Moustafa (2014) on Canvas

Week 11 – Authoritarian Legal Systems; China and Hungary – November 4th

Readings: Scheppele (2018) and Minzner (2011) on Canvas

Written Assignment 3 due November 8th at 11:59 PM

Week 12 – Customary/Indigenous Legal Systems; Concepts and Ghana – November 11th

Readings: Richland (2005) on Canvas, Chapters 1 and 8 from Richardson, Imai, and McNeil

Week 13 – Customary/Indigenous Legal Systems; Canada and New Zealand – November 18th

Readings: Chapters 2 and 5 (and 14 optional) from Richardson, Imai, and McNeil

Written Assignment 4 due November 29th at 11:59 PM

Week 14 – Thanksgiving Holiday (No Class) – November 25th

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

Final Exam is Wednesday, December 2nd from 6:00 – 8:00 PM