

Independent Research in Economics (3-Credit)

Pandering, Leadership, and Political Agency

Instructor: Professor Keh-Kuan Sun

Semester: Spring 2026

Course Overview

This independent research course serves as a rigorous preparatory stage for a long-term research project in political economy. The curriculum is designed to front-load the essential training in formal modeling and the deep theoretical dive into political agency models, allowing the student to focus on writing the final research output during the summer session. The goal is to provide a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding electoral accountability and pandering.

Major Learning Goals

1. **Fluency in basic game theory:** Mastery of sequential and simultaneous games, mixed strategies, and the ability to apply **Perfect Bayesian Equilibrium (PBE)** and **Bayesian Nash Equilibrium** concepts required for modern political agency models.
2. **Deep familiarity with the political agency literature:** Understanding the core tension between adverse selection (selecting good types) and moral hazard (sanctioning poor performance) in electoral control.
3. **Strong writing skills:** Ability to produce clear, structured, and synthetic arguments following principles from *Writing Economics*.
4. **Preparation for summer RA/independent research:** Scoping and outlining an actionable research question based on the semester's readings.

Readings

- Baron & Hershey (1988). *Outcome Bias in Decision Evaluation*.
- Canes-Wrone, Herron & Shotts (2001). *Leadership and Pandering*.
- Coate & Morris (1995). *On the Form of Transfers to Special Interests*.
- Gurdal, Miller & Rustichini (2013). *Why Blame?*
- Ashworth (2012) *Electoral Accountability: Recent Theoretical and Empirical Work*.
- Ashworth (2014) *Is Voter Competence Good for Voters? Information, Rationality, and Democratic Performance*.

- Fearon (1999). *Electoral Accountability and Representation*.
- Ferejohn (1986). *Incumbent Performance and Electoral Control*.
- Miller (2005). *The Political Evolution of Principal-Agent Models*.
- Neugeboren & Jacobson (2014) *Writing Economics*.

Weekly Schedule (15 Weeks)

Week	Date	Module/Topic	Core Readings / Concepts
MODULE I: Game Theory Foundations (Weeks 1–6)		Focus: Formal Methods & Equilibrium Concepts	(Dixit et al.)
1	Jan 20/22	<i>(Research Travel: no meetings)</i> Sequential Games	Self-study: Dixit CH 2.3; CH 3.1-3.2: Game Trees, Rollback Equilibrium (Backward Induction).
2	Jan 27/29	Simultaneous-Move Games	Dixit CH 4.1-4.8: Payoff Tables, Nash Equilibrium (Pure Strategies), Dominance, Best-Response Analysis.
3	Feb 3/5	Continuous & Mixed Strategies	Dixit CH 5.1: Continuous Strategies, Best-Response Curves. Dixit CH 7.1-7.2: Mixed Strategies, Expected Payoff.
4	Feb 10/12	Mixed Strategies & Information	Dixit CH 7.3-7.4: Opponent's Indifference Property. Dixit CH 9.1-9.3: Dealing with Risk, Moral Hazard, and Cheap Talk.
5	Feb 19	Uncertainty and Asymmetric Information	Dixit CH 9.4-9.6: Signaling and Screening , Separating/Pooling Equilibria, Bayesian Nash Equilibrium .
6	Feb 23/26	Strategic and Voting Theory	Dixit CH 16.1-16.5: Plurative/Mixed Methods, Strategic Misrepresentation of Preferences, Median Voter Theorem.
MODULE II: Political Agency &		Focus: Selection vs. Sanctioning	

Week	Date	Module/Topic	Core Readings / Concepts
Accountability (Weeks 7, 9, 10)			
7	Mar 2/5	[GT Summary Due] & Political Agency Setup	Major Deliverable 1 Due (March 2). Miller (2005): Principal-Agency Theory (PAT), Information Asymmetry, Incentives, Credible Commitment.
8	Mar 9/12	<i>Spring Recess / Research Travel</i>	
9	Mar 16/19	Electoral Control & Accountability	Ferejohn (1986): Pure Moral Hazard (Sanctioning, Retrospective Voting). Fearon (1999): Elections as Selection of good types (Adverse Selection).
10	Mar 23/26	Accountability Synthesis	Ashworth (2012): Synthesis of Selection/Sanctioning, Incentives driven by <i>outcome's information about type</i> . Pandering models derived from reputational herding.
MODULE III: Pandering, Policy Design, and Behavioral Economics (Weeks 11, 14)		Focus: Theory and Synthesis	
11	Mar 30	Leadership and Pandering	Major Deliverable 2 Due (March 30). Canes-Wrone, Herron & Shotts (2001): Informational theory of executive policymaking, Pandering vs. Leadership (True/Fake).
12	Apr 6/9	<i>Easter Break / Research Travel</i>	
13	Apr 13/16	<i>Research Travel</i>	
14	Apr 20/23	Policy Design & Behavioral Accountability	Coate & Morris (1995): Inefficient "sneaky" methods of redistribution; necessity of Politician Uncertainty . Gurdal, Miller & Rustichini (2013): Experimental evidence of Unjustified Blame (Outcome Bias).
15	Apr 27/29	Project Scoping & Literature Review	Dedicated meetings to outline and draft the introduction and literature

Week	Date	Module/Topic	Core Readings / Concepts
			synthesis for the Final Project, emphasizing clarity and structure.

Deliverables Summary

The writing assignments are scaffolded to ensure the student masters formal theory and conceptual distinctions before tackling the comparative synthesis required for the final research project.

Weekly Deliverables

- **Reading notes:** Comprehensive notes, including definitions of formal concepts and identification of core arguments.
- **In-person Discussion:** Readiness to present material and discuss prepared topics.

Major Written Work

Deliverable	Description	Due Date	Assessment Focus
1. Game Theory Summary (2–3 pages)	Synthesis of core game-theoretic concepts (e.g., Nash equilibrium, PBE, signaling/screening, strategic voting).	March 2 (Week 7)	Fluency in basic game theory.
2. Accountability Memo (2–3 pages)	Focused analysis contrasting models of Sanctioning (Ferejohn 1986) versus Selection (Fearon 1999).	March 30 (Week 11)	Deep familiarity with political agency literature.
3. Comparative Synthesis Memo (4–6 pages)	Synthesis of the core models from Module III, connecting pandering (Canes-Wrone et al.) with policy inefficiency (Coate & Morris) and behavioral accountability (Gurdal et al.).	Beginning of Summer Research Session	Ability to synthesize divergent theoretical perspectives.

Final Project (Module IV - Summer Research Session)

The final research deliverable leverages the preparatory work from the Spring semester.

- **Deliverable:** A polished **6–8 page research-style paper**.
 - **Content:** Must include a clear introduction, literature synthesis, model interpretation, and an application or extension.
 - **Writing Standard:** The paper must emphasize **clarity and structure** as recommended by *Writing Economics*. The literature review should synthesize, grouping common findings rather than summarizing individual papers.
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Academic Integrity & Documentation

- **Proper citation** is required.
- Use reference management software (Zotero is recommended).
- Ensure **clear separation of your ideas from sources** to avoid plagiarism.
- Footnotes are reserved for **substantive elaborations** or suggestions for further reading, not for citations. Citations should be briefly indicated in the text using the Author-Date System (e.g., Becker 1976).