

DRAFT OUTLINE

A final version of the syllabus will be available on the first day of class.

FALL 2020
The U.S. Supreme Court: Conflict, Change and the Court

Instructor: Jessica Gresko
Twitter: @JessicaGresko

Course Description: Immigration. LGBT rights. Healthcare. Abortion. The death penalty. Cell phone privacy. The U.S. Supreme Court has decided cases on all of these topics in recent years, and its decisions ultimately touch the lives of all Americans. In this class we will study the Supreme Court's place in the U.S. legal system. Topics we will cover include: how a case gets to the court, the justices, the role of lawyers before the court, the purpose of oral argument, the court building and its symbolism, and media coverage of the court.

In addition, students will listen to the arguments in current Supreme Court cases and spend class time discussing them. In papers, students will be asked to rigorously explain why the justices likely took those cases and how they will come out based on what they hear at oral argument. This class is geared not only toward anyone who is interested in the law or government service but also toward anyone interested in working on or being informed about the biggest issues of the day.

About Your Professor: Hi, I’m Jessica Gresko and for more than a decade I’ve been a reporter for The Associated Press, first in Miami and now in Washington, where I cover the Supreme Court. As a legal reporter, I have covered court cases at all levels, both local and federal. I earned my B.A. in history and political science from Columbia University in New York and a M.S.L. (Master’s in the Study of Law) from Georgetown University Law School. I grew up in Southern California and took my first journalism class at UCLA. I have taught at UCDC since 2014. I look forward to getting to know you.

Course Materials and Accessibility:

The required textbook for this class is: The Supreme Court by Lawrence Baum, 13th edition (2018) ISBN: 9781544327389
You do need the 13th edition and not another edition of this text.

Assignments: Students will complete a number of assignments over the course of the semester. The main components of students’ grades will be:

(1) Two short papers (due 10/22 and 11/14)
(2) 1-page responses in weeks when students are not working on papers
(3) Class participation.

Semester students will earn 15 percent of their grade in a 4-week module overseen by Professor Jennifer Diascro.
Weekly Agenda:
The summary topics below are a general guide and subject to change

WEEK 1: The American Legal System
Assessment: what does the average American know about the court?  
How does the Supreme Court fit in the US legal system?  
Mini bio: Chief Justice John Roberts

WEEK 2: The Court
Characteristics of individuals selected as justices  
The confirmation process  
Mini bio: Justice Clarence Thomas

WEEK 3: The Court’s Cases Part I
Paper #1 Discussion: Why is the Supreme Court hearing this case?  
Number and type of cases the Supreme Court hears  
The role of the Solicitor General’s office  
Novice v. Experienced advocates  
Pool memos and amicus briefs  
Mini bio: Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg

WEEK 4: The Court’s Cases Part II
Continuation of last week’s topics  
Mini bio: Justice Stephen Breyer

WEEK 5: Oral Argument & Decision Making
Short Paper #1 Due  
The role (or not?) of oral argument  
Aggressive questioners, silent partners & laughter from the bench  
The decision process  
Mini bio: Justice Samuel Alito

WEEK 6: Current Issues: LGBT Rights
Watch and discuss the documentary “The Case Against 8”  
Review the court’s recent LGBT rights decisions

WEEK 7: Current Issues: The Death Penalty
Mini bio: Justice Sonia Sotomayor

WEEK 8: Current Issues: TBD based on oral argument calendar
Mini bio: Justice Elena Kagan

WEEK 9: Current Issues: TBD based on oral argument calendar
Short Paper #2 Due  
Mini bio: Justice Neil Gorsuch

WEEK 10: Current Issues: TBD based on oral argument calendar
Mini bio: Justice Brett Kavanaugh