

POL 1050: Money, Power and Democracy

Syllabus (Version 10.9.2025) - Toine Paulissen – toine.paulissen@dcu.ie

The aims of the course

On October 1 2024, Jack Chamber, Ireland's Finance Minister, delivered a [statement](#) on the government's Budget for 2025. "With a hint of a smile", as [reported by Politico](#), Chambers noted how Ireland had a massive budget surplus thanks to taxes collected from the hundreds of U.S. multinationals based in the country. As a result, the new budget included billions of euros in tax cuts and spending increases that added over 1,000 EUR to the average income of voters over the course of 12 months.

While this might not sound particularly problematic at first sight, the governing parties Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael almost immediately received heaps of criticism over this decision from opposition parties. The reason? An impending general election in which Sinn Féin seemed poised to break the hegemony the ruling parties had had over Irish politics for much of the past century. As such, the Budget was construed as a blatant attempt by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael at 'buying' that election in an attempt to consolidate their power.

Were the opposition parties justified in their criticism? Or did the governing parties operate justly within their possibilities? Was there even the intention to influence the election, and did the money actually affect voters? What role does money generally play in democratic processes and the division of power? And should the state intervene when inequalities, such as between government and opposition parties, occur, or should actors instead be allowed to fully take advantage of their financial means?

In this course, you will explore how money, power and democracy are intrinsically linked, and how different polities approach this interchange. By doing so, you will gain insights into how these different approaches translate into benefits and disadvantages for legislators, political elites, interest

groups, corporations, and citizens. While you not might necessary end up as a lawmaker, government advisor or consultant yourself, chances are that your professional career will see you having to think about the political impact of certain financial decisions. This course will give you a framework and real-world examples to help you in your decision-making.

Furthermore, the course will help you understand more about how money shapes elections, referendums, and policy outcomes, both in Ireland and beyond. Are the biggest spenders always the ones with the most power? Or do powerful actors just happen to have access to more funds? Was Elon Musk's one million dollar election lottery during the 2024 U.S. presidential campaign legal? Why was a U.S. Supreme Court decision called "Citizens United" particularly beneficial for special interests and corporations, rather than citizens? And why do so many companies, universities, associations and non-governmental organizations from around Europe have offices in Brussels?

How the course looks to reach these aims

In order to best gain these insights, you will have to take responsibility for your learning and actively participate in the course activities, which are divided into lectures and seminars. The lectures will initially be broad and theoretical, tackling key theories and concepts and providing information that is vital for understanding the interplay between money, power, and democracy. The remaining lectures will then apply the theoretical insights to three specific cases: Ireland, the European Union, and the United States.

During four seminars, each linked to the theory or the case studies discussed in the lectures, you will then engage in class discussions based on readings and simulation exercises which you will prepare in advance. These preparations, which will each make up 6.25% of your grade or 25% in total, will help guide you towards a better comprehension of the course materials. For the readings, you will answer several questions which will help you understand the theoretical arguments developed, the operationalization of the concepts therein, the data analyses provided, and the interpretation of the results of these analyses. This will consolidate the knowledge you acquire through the lectures. The simulation exercises, then, will put you in the shoes of a political advisor in a real-world, giving you practical insight into how to apply your knowledge. The seminar will then serve as an informal

setting to go over these preparations with the whole class, discuss them in depth, and iron out any ambiguities there might still exist afterwards. More info regarding deadlines and submission is available under course evaluation, while we will also touch upon the preparations further during class.

The course schedule can be found in the schedule document on Loop.

Reading, writing and thinking in the course

This course will involve a fair share of reading and writing, which are essential to really get the best out of your learning experience. Of course, in today's world, that means that we need to have a conversation about generative artificial intelligence (AI) in the sense of Large Language Models (LLMs), such as ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Perplexity and so on. LLMs give us outputs based of training data found on the internet; unfortunately, a lot of what is found on the internet is biased and inaccurate, meaning that LLM outputs are not to be trusted outright. These models also often 'hallucinate' facts, so far as to say that they are often producing "[bullshit](#)". Furthermore, the technology relies on stolen property, exploited laborers, and significant environmental costs, while it seemingly has a negative impact on our brain functioning as well.

Most importantly, using LLMs makes your work bland, lacking any personality or voice. Yet, in today's day and age, and in the future, people who can articulate thoughts in their own words and with their own voice will stand out from the crowd. If you hone your skills as a writer, but also as a reader and thinker, it will undoubtedly set you up for professional success, and will grant you the ability to take full credit and feel a sense of fulfillment for your work. But this requires hard work: you will have to practice and power through shitty first drafts, errors, and revision. You will have to reread texts, take notes, underline, and actively engage with the words on the page.

The use of AI is therefore discouraged as a whole, and in line with DCU AI policies, you are not allowed to use it in a plagiarizing manner – i.e. present work written by AI as your own. Your work in this course should be made by you – not someone you pay and not a bot. Similarly, all lectures, assignments, feedback, and grades will be made by me without AI, nor will any of your intellectual property be fed to tools that train AI.

Course Evaluation

As mentioned before, the preparations for the seminars will make up 25% of your final grade. In the case of the simulation exercises, a rubric will be provided that will show the elements on which the exercise will be evaluated. The questions/exercises will be put online two weeks before they are due, which is 7 am of the day on which the respective class discussion is scheduled. By that time, the respective assignment needs to have been sent to me via email.

25% of your grade will be determined by an oral, open-book assessment that will take place instead of the final lecture on 26 November and involves a presentation about a topic selected by you, giving you the chance to display your critical thinking and creativity. You will be asked to prepare three questions in advance; at the time of the assessment, one subject/question will be selected by me for presentation, for which you can use your preparation. As such, this part of the evaluation is completely in your own hands, and can be prepared in advance in as much detail as possible. The three questions have to be sent to me by email for approval by the start of reading week (October 20).

The other 50% of your grade will be determined by a formal open-book exam consisting of two essay questions which will test your ability to quickly look up and synthesize information, a critical element of professional and academic life.

During class, I will go into more detail on the assignments, the oral assessment, and the formal exam.