

**University of Toronto**  
**Faculty of Arts and Science**  
**Department of Political Science**

**POL466: Theories of International Organization**

**Instructor:** Dr. William O'Connell

**Instructor email:** william.oconnell@utoronto.ca

**Lecture:** Monday, 9:00am - 11:00am

**Office Hours:** Monday, 12:00pm - 2:00pm in SS3058

**Course description**

Over the past two centuries, we have seen an exponential proliferation of international organizations (IOs) which serve to moderate, mediate, facilitate, orchestrate, or effectuate the behaviour of sovereign states. These organizations may vary in terms of membership, scope, formality, and, especially, effectiveness. This course will explore the historical context in which international organization as an idea and practice has emerged, why different IOs take on different forms, how the role of IOs has evolved over time, how IOs exercise power, in whose benefit, and with what authority, and the myriad ways in which international relations scholarship has approached IOs as an object of study. In doing so, we will endeavor to understand the effects of contemporary geopolitical tension on postwar international order.

The objectives of this class are threefold. The first is to develop a sophisticated understanding of the role international organizations, whether formal or informal, play in international politics. The second is to develop research and writing skills regarding complex topics for a variety of audiences. The final objective is to develop oral communication skills by verbally distilling complex information and generating organic connections between different sets of related material.

Weekly meetings will entail a seminar discussion of that week's topic, guided by the assigned readings. One week will involve a simulation of a G20 meeting on a list of applied topics.

**Prerequisites**

POL208H1/ POL208Y1/ POL209H5/POLB80H3

**Assignments**

*Participation (20%) Ongoing*

*G20 briefing note (15%) Due at 5:00pm Friday, February 13th*

*G20 simulation (10%) In-class Monday, February 16th*  
*Research proposal (30%) Due at 5:00pm Friday March 13th*  
*Oral exam (25%) Sign-up slots on March 30<sup>th</sup>*

## **Assignments description**

Participation entails three components: attendance, involvement in discussions, and active listening. Attendance is self-explanatory – you need to be physically present. Participating in discussions involves asking questions, answering the questions of your peers, and, crucially, drawing off the reading material. Quality is more important than quantity. Active listening is also essential – a discussion is not simply waiting for your turn to make a comment. In fact, you do not have to be speaking constantly to be a meaningful participant. Instead, a clear demonstration of active listening involves signaling through body language, note taking, etc. that you are paying attention to the interventions of your classmates. Note that the use of technology during class (e.g. cellphones, laptops, tablets, etc.) will severely compromise your ability to demonstrate this active listening.

The G20 simulation will have you assigned to a specific G20 country and given a list of topics which will be discussed. You will be responsible for preparing a five-page briefing note which outlines your country's priorities on these topics, how they relate to one another, goals of the meeting, and what your country might be willing to concede to achieve those goals. The simulation will involve a mock G20 meeting where these topics will be debated, with the goal of achieving some form of realistic agreement by the end of class.

The research proposal assignment will be approximately 3000 words plus a bibliography, and will outline a research question and a plan for answering that question. Specifically, your proposal should include basic background information, the motivation, a review of the relevant academic literature, an explanation, hypothesis, or hunch which could answer your question, some preliminary evidence based on that literature or primary sources, and a discussion of what data or evidence you would need to collect to validate or disprove your explanation. Note that this does NOT follow the standard format of a university term essay. The goal is to do the preparatory work required for advanced academic research. You are not expected to have clear and convincing evidence in support of your explanation, rather you are expected to come up with a plausible explanation and a plan for gathering appropriate evidence.

The oral exam will take place on the last day of the class. Students will sign-up for a time slot. The exam will constitute an open-ended discussion of content from class and the readings, based on a random selection of two prompts drawn from a list provided in advance.

A 24-hour cooling period will be in effect following the release of any grades for this course. Once you receive a grade, you must wait a full 24 hours before you may email me

asking for clarification or additional feedback. Emails sent within the 24-hour period will be disregarded.

### **Due dates, extensions, and late policies**

Assignments are due at **4:59pm** on the specified date. -5% will be deducted per day for work handed in after the deadline. Extensions will only be granted in the event of unforeseeable circumstances (e.g. mental or physical health issue, family emergency, etc.), a commitment exogenous to your own time management (e.g. religious observance), or for a documented accessibility reason. Extensions will not be granted for computer related problems (be sure to back up your work!) **or** deadlines for other courses (since you are given the above deadlines well in advance) **or** external work or social commitments. Extension requests are more likely to be accepted if made in advance. Extension requests made after the deadline are less likely to be accepted.

### **Technology in the classroom**

There is abundant research that digital technology in the classroom can be distracting for both the user and those around them. Likewise, there is abundant research demonstrating that hand-written note taking has significant benefits for memory recall. Further, you are being evaluated in this course in part based on active listening, and your ability to do so will be harmed if you are using digital devices for purposes other than referring to or taking notes, pulling quotes from readings, etc. Finally, paying active attention to the interventions of others is a basic gesture of respect for your classmates and the instructor. With these factors in mind and given that this is a seminar class with a very small enrollment, the use of digital technology will not be *prohibited*, but it is *strongly discouraged*.

### **Will the lectures be recorded or streamed?**

No. Classes will not be recorded and will not be livestreamed. Accordingly, you are expected to be in class, in person, for each session. In the event you are unable to attend, be sure to do the reading, take appropriate notes, and ask your classmates about any material you may have missed.

Class content is proprietary and, accordingly, you may not record, photograph, or reproduce any material or discussions yourself without the written consent of the instructor. Failure to obtain this consent is a copyright violation and is prohibited. This includes the use of AI-assisted transcription software.

### **Textbook**

There is no assigned textbook for this course. Readings will be made available on Quercus. As this course follows a seminar format, it is imperative that you come to class having done the assigned reading. Failure to do so will be readily apparent and will negatively impact your grade.

## Office hours

My office hours are listed above. I strongly encourage you to make use of them. Beyond course content, my office hours are open for you to discuss undergraduate thesis topics, graduate school applications, or to explore career options after graduation.

## Communications

Beyond my office hours, I am available via email. I will do my best to respond within 48 hours ***on weekdays***. If you email me over the weekend, I will not respond until Monday. Note that this means if you email me the day an assignment is due you are unlikely to receive a response before the deadline.

Please email me from your university account otherwise it may end up in my spam folder, in which case I will not see it and will not reply, and please put the course code in the subject line. Please email me directly, rather than via the Quercus messaging function.

Before emailing me, please check the syllabus and any assignment-related documents posted online as often the answers to your questions will be there.

## Academic dishonesty

Students are expected to understand and comply with the University's [Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters](#). Additional information on the Code and strategies to avoid violations are provided here: <https://www.academicintegrity.utoronto.ca/>. Academic dishonesty is a serious offense and the consequences, as noted in the Code, can be severe. A few high-level considerations:

*The most common violations are presenting some else's work as your own, copying material directly from sources without proper citation, insufficiently paraphrasing material that is cited but not quoted, using the same material for multiple assignments without prior discussion with the instructor, or falsifying sources and/or information.*

*Ignorance of the rules is not an excuse, nor is a lack of intent. It is your responsibility to know the rules and to adhere to them. If you have any questions do not hesitate to reach out and/or to consult the above website.*

The University provides instructors with discretion on the appropriate use of AI in their classrooms. For this course, I consider the use of **any** generative AI technology for **any** component of your course work to be an "unauthorized aid" and therefore strictly prohibited under the Code.

Normally, students will be required to submit their course essays to the University's plagiarism detection tool for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their essays to be included as source

documents in the tool's reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University's use of this tool are described on the Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation web site (<https://uoft.me/pdt-faq>).

## **Accessibility**

I intend for this course to be an inclusive and accessible space. If you have an accessibility consideration that may require accommodation, please refer to Accessibility Services. I recognize that sometimes the wait for Accessibility Services appointments can be quite long or circumstances that require accommodation may be temporary in nature. If you do not have official documentation but have accessibility-related concerns you are encouraged to discuss those with me.

## **Schedule**

### **Session One, January 5th: Introduction**

*This session will provide an overview of the course and will set the stage for the semester by discussing in broad terms why states succeed or fail in cooperating through institutions.*

Readings:

Wendt, Alexander. 1992. "Anarchy is what states make of it: The social construction of power politics". *International Organization*. 46(2): 391-425.

Ikenberry, G. John. 2018. "The end of liberal international order?". *International Affairs*. 94(1): 7-23.

Goddard, Stacie E. and Abraham L. Newman. 2025. "Further back to the future: Neo-royalism, the Trump Administration, and the emerging international system". *International Organization*. 79(S1): S12-S25.

### **Session Two, January 12th: Liberal and rationalist approaches**

*The formal study of IOs has its roots in theories which examine how states overcome collective action problems to achieve mutual gains. While not all rationalist studies fit neatly in the liberal tradition, these approaches share a common set of assumptions about the nature of state behaviour, and have together built the foundations of how IOs are conceptualized and examined in international relations research.*

Readings:

Keohane, Robert O. 1982. "The demand for international regimes". *International Organization*. 36(2): 325-355.

Fearon, James D. 1998. "Bargaining, enforcement, and international cooperation". *International Organization*. 52(2): 269-305.

Voeten, Erik. 2019. "Making sense of the design of international institutions". *Annual Review of Political Science*. 22: 147-163.

### **Session Three, January 19th:** Critiques of liberal approaches

*Dominant approaches to any area of study necessarily attract resistance, and the study of IOs is no exception. This session will outline various critiques of the liberal/rationalist approach. We will discuss realist and constructivist ways of conceptualizing the work of IOs, methodological problems in analyzing IO formation and design, and what the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of IOs says about the future trajectory of global governance.*

#### Readings:

Strange, Susan. 1982. "Cave! Hic dragones: A critique of regime analysis". *International Organization*. 36(2): 479-496.

Mearsheimer, John J. 1994/5. "The false promise of international institutions". *International Security*. 19(3): 5-49.

Wendt, Alexander. 2003. "Why a world state is inevitable". *European Journal of International Relations*. 9(4): 491-542.

### **Session Four, January 26th:** Power and legitimacy

*The work of IOs necessarily involves the exercise of power, though the source of this power may vary. Moreover, underlying any exercise of power is a question of legitimacy - who has the authority to do what to whom, and why? This session will discuss various perspectives on how IOs exercise power, and where this power originates.*

#### Readings:

Hurd, Ian. 1999. "Legitimacy and authority in international politics". *International Organization*. 53(2): 379-408.

Barnett, Michael N. And Martha Finnemore. 1999. "The politics, power, and pathologies of international organizations". *International Organization*. 53(4): 699-732.

Squatrito, Theresa, Magnus Lundgren, and Thomas Sommerer. 2019. "Shaming by international organizations: Mapping condemnatory speech acts across 27 international organizations, 1980-2015". *Cooperation and Conflict*. 54(3): 356-377.

### **Session Five, February 9th: Informality and the G-forums**

*IOs are generally thought of as multilateral organizations created through formal treaties. But these institutions have never been the sole form of international organization and, indeed, are in many areas becoming increasingly sidelined in favour of informal, "minilateral" forums. This session will discuss the how and why of the proliferation of informal organizations in global governance, and what this trend means for the future of international relations. We will also devote time to discussing the G-20 simulation exercise and the briefing note assignment.*

#### Readings:

Roger, Charles B. 2020. *The Origins of Informality: Why the Legal Foundations of Global Governance are Shifting, and Why it Matters*. Oxford University Press. Ch. 1 "The move to informality".

Fioretos, Orfeo. 2019. "Minilateralism and informality in international monetary cooperation". *Review of International Political Economy*. 26(6): 1136-1159.

Cooper, Andrew F. and Ramesh Thakur. 2013. *The Group of Twenty (G20)*. Routledge. Ch 1. "Introduction".

### **Session Six, February 9th: IOs and information**

*One of the main identified strengths of IOs is information transparency - they can collect data, coordinate logistics, and monitor progress on various objectives, each of which can serve to hold states accountable to their commitments. But this function is not perfect: like other IO functions, it can become dysfunctional or co-opted as a tool of power politics. This session will discuss the information function of IOs and the effects this has on both domestic and international governance.*

Kelly, Judith G. and Beth A. Simmons. 2015. "Politics by number: Indicators as social pressure in international relations". *American Political Science Journal*. 59(1): 55-70.

Carnegie, Allison and Austin Carson. 2018. "The spotlight's harsh glare: Rethinking publicity and international order". *International Organization*. 72(3): 627-657.

Morse, Julia C. And Tyler Pratt. 2025. "Information disorder and global politics". *International Organization*. 79(S1): S26-S43.

**\*\*Reading week\*\***

**\*\*G20 briefing note due Friday, February 20th\*\***

**Session Seven, February 23rd: G-20 simulation**

*This session will involve a simulation of a G-20 meeting. Per the assignment sheet posted on Quercus, you will be assigned a country whose interests you will represent in a discussion on a list of topics provided in advance. The goal of this session is to come up with a basic set of agreements by the end of the meeting.*

**Session Eight, March 2nd: Socialization and coordination**

*A more subtle role of IOs lies in serving as a mechanism for socialization. They set appropriate norms of interaction for states, which manifests in behavioural expectations for political principals as well as their bureaucratic agents. This session will explore how IOs disseminate norms, and practices both internally and externally.*

Johnston, Alastair Iain. 2001. "Treating international institutions as social environments". *International Studies Quarterly*. 45(4): 487-515.

Pouliot, Vincent. 2008. "The logic of practicality: A theory of practice of security communities". *International Organization*. 62(2): 257-288.

Lewis, Jeffrey. 2005. "The Janus face of Brussels: Socialization and everyday decision making in the European Union". *International Organization*. 59(4): 937-971.

**Session Nine, March 9th: Regime complexity**

*The distinction between formal and informal organizations is muddied by the increasing proliferation of both types, as well as other types of international institutions, including non-governmental organizations, multinational corporations, transnational networks, etc. In fact, most areas of international relations are governed not by a single institution, but rather a complex web of organizations with overlapping mandates and membership. This session will discuss the idea of regime complexity and how to make sense of the increasingly dense and opaque layers of global governance in nearly every major issue area.*

**Readings:**

Alter, Karen J. And Sophie Meunier. 2009. "The politics of international regime complexity". *Perspectives on Politics*. 7(1): 13-24.

Hofmann, Stephanie C. 2019. "The politics of overlapping organizations: Hostage-taking, forum-shopping and brokering". *Journal of European Public Policy*. 26(6): 883-905.

Abbott, Kenneth W., Jessica F. Green, and Robert O. Keohane. 2016. "Organizational ecology and institutional change in global governance". *International Organization*. 70(2): 247-277.

**Session Ten, March 16th:** Change, exit, and death

*International relations scholars have spent a lot of time theorizing how and why IOs form. They have spent less time theorizing why they persist, or how they end. This session will discuss various approaches to understanding change in IOs, including how their purposes change over time, why new institutions emerge while others remain stagnant, or why some institutions die while others survive.*

Readings:

Fioretos, Orfeo. 2017. "Institutions and time in international relations". In Fioretos, Orfeo (ed.) *International Politics and Institutions in Time*. Oxford University Press.

Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, Mette. 2020. "Death of international organizations: The organizational ecology of intergovernmental organizations, 1815-2015". *Review of International Organizations*. 15(2): 339-370.

Gray, Julia. 2018. "Life, death, or zombie? The vitality of international organizations". *International Studies Quarterly*. 62(1): 1-13.

**Session Eleven, March 23rd:** European integration

*As we have discussed through out the semester, the development of international organization is intimately linked to the persistence of a Westphalian system of territorial sovereignty. This has been transcended in Europe, where states have successfully ceded significant power to a supranational body. This session will discuss the history and trajectory of the European Union, and what European integration can tell us about the possibilities for the future of global governance.*

Readings:

Haas, Ernst B. 1961. "International integration: The European and universal process". *International Organization*. 15(3): 366-392.

Warleigh, Alex. 2006. "Learning from Europe? EU studies and the re-thinking of 'international relations'". *European Journal of International Relations*. 12(1): 31-51.

Jones, Erik, R. Daniel Keleman, and Sophie Meunier. 2021. "Failing forward? Crises and patterns of European integration". *Journal of European Public Policy*. 28(10): 1519-1536.

**Session Twelve, March 30th:** Oral exam

**\*\*Oral exam to be scheduled this session - see sign-up sheet on Quercus\*\***

**\*\*Research proposal due Wednesday, April 8th\*\***