

# Virginia Community College Course Content Summary

**Course Title:** PLS 136: State and Local Government and Politics

## **Course Description**

Teaches structure, powers, and functions of state and local government in the United States as related to federalism; constitutionalism; elections; powers of legislative, executive, and judicial powers of state and local government; state-local-federal relations; fiscal matters; metropolitan issues; and policy issues, like health, education, criminal justice and welfare. The assignments in the course require college-level reading fluency and coherent communication through written reports. Lecture 3 hours per week.

## **General Course Purpose**

To enable students to demonstrate a well-rounded knowledge of state and local government and politics; understand the fundamentals of the structure, power, and functions of state and local government; and, understand the unique characteristics of the individual states.

## **Course Prerequisites/Corequisites**

None.

## **Course Objectives**

Upon completing the course, the student will be able to:

Communication

- Speak and write about political issues that are central to state and local governance
- Discuss the philosophical and theoretical arguments undergirding state and local governance in the American constitutional system

Critical Thinking

- Compare political processes at the state and federal level
- Describe and evaluate the institutional changes that have altered the relationship of power between and among localities, states, and the federal government

Quantitative Literacy

- Analyze how political and economic trends influence public policy, using demographic information and other data sources.

Civic Engagement

- Create a position paper that evaluates and proposes an institutional reform or policy change needed at the state or local level

Who Governs? States and Localities in America's Constitutional Order

## **Major Topics to Be Included:**

Localism, Civic Ideal, Community

- Consider essential concepts relating to “community,” “place,” “fragmentation,” and the connection of state and local governments to the world, as captured in the phrase, “think globally, act locally.”

Federalism

Non-centralization, A real Division of Power, Union

- Identify the relationship between the levels of government – federal, state, and local and explain the benefits and opportunities.
- Explain what former Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, Louis Brandeis meant by his remark that states are the “laboratories of democracy” and analyze whether national standards are warranted.
- Describe the different periods of federalism throughout American history. For example, Dual Federalism (Layer Cake), Cooperative Federalism (Marble Cake), Creative Federalism, and New Federalism.
- Analyze how the nation determined representation and how that has evolved.

## State Constitutionalism

Frame-of-government provisions, Bills of rights, Policy provisions, Expansion and restriction of governmental power

- Explain whether or not state constitutions matter and identify references of support.
- Describe ways the states differ from one another in politically meaningful ways.
- Evaluate differences between the national and state constitutions, and consider differences among different state constitutions.
- Evaluate the competency of state governments versus the federal government.

## People and Their States

Demographics, Social Equity, Public Interest

- Explain whether our nation has “decentralized administration” as Alexis de Tocqueville described it and what values are promoted in this situation.
- Evaluate how America’s federal system addresses or causes some of the following: inequality, participation, and mass media.
- Identify different “cultures” in different regions of the US.

## State Parties and Elections

Redistricting, Voting Technology, Campaign Finance, Party Administration

- Explain the constitutional function of state governments in drawing district boundaries for state and federal elections and evaluate whether this process remains in the hands of state legislators.
- Identify and explain state-level reforms for changing representation and third party movements.
- Analyze whether American political parties today encourage civic virtue and the factors that could be manipulated to change it.
- Explain ongoing issues related to federalism and America’s party systems.
- Describe how state and local political party organizations interact with each other, and with the national party organizations.

## Legislative Power

Organization, Processes, Committees, Policy, Finance

- Explain concepts such as the legislative process, committee structure, parties in the legislature, staff support, and professional vs citizen legislatures.
- Describe how state legislatures have changed historically in terms of diversity and what institutional factors account for these developments in variation across states.
- Analyze dependency on interest groups and lobbyists at the state and local level.

## Executive Power

Qualifications & Tenure, Legislative Role, Appointment Power, Executive Orders, Emergency Powers

- Compare and contrast the different amounts of formal and informal powers governors have across the fifty states.
- Describe “neutral competence” in state and local bureaucracy and how governors/mayors leverage it.
- Evaluate whether the institution of “governor” matters for politics at the national level.

## Administration

Transparency, Freedom of Information Act, Agencies and Cabinets, Public Engagement

- Describing state and local bureaucracy historically and currently.
- Evaluate current controversies in state and local bureaucracy, which can include expertise vs. Self-representation, responsiveness, and various efforts to reform the bureaucracy.”

## Judicial Power

Appointments and Elections, Processes, Oversight

- Compare and contrast methods of electing or appointing justices and judges at the various levels of government.
- Explain the processes of the state judiciary.
- Evaluate whether justice is more accountable at the local level.
- Analyze the use of juries.

#### Local Governance

Counties, Municipal Governments, Special Districts (including School Districts and Regional Entities), with particular attention to Virginia's Independent Cities

- Describe the different types of local governments for counties and municipalities.
- Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of different types of governments, some of which place more power in an executive (e.g., mayor) and others that disperse power.
- Explain the various arguments for and against regional governments that cross jurisdictions.
- Identify the factors that make Virginia's independent cities unique in the US.

#### State-Local Relations

Economic & Infrastructure Development, Strategic Communications & Grassroots Advocacy, Regulatory Solutions

- Explain why cities and other types of localities continue to exist if they lack specific protections in the U.S. Constitution.
- Identify the impact of redistributing local tax revenue compared to redistributing state monies to reduce national inequities.
- Describe what factors are necessary for effective governance for states and cities.
- Analyze whether states are violating principles of federalism that protect their position in the U.S. federal system when preempting local decision-making.

#### Federal-Local Relations

Policy Decision-making and Enforcement, Deregulation, Infrastructure

- Explain in what ways is the progressive impulse for rationale, homogenized, and efficient government consistent or inconsistent with multiple governments sharing power.
- Identify how a thriving Congress and presidency affects cities and other types of localities.
- Budgeting and the Fiscal State

Risk Management, Compliance, Tax Assessment, Budgets

- Explain the policymaking process.
- Explain the impact of balanced budget requirements for state and local governments.
- Evaluate whether states are essential institutions for the implementation of federal policy, or are they merely convenient.
- Recognize the variation of public spending across the states and within the states.
- Describe the impact of the growth of the federal government on state and local governments' abilities to raise revenue.
- Analyze whether competition among state governments for corporate tax revenues has encouraged a "race to the bottom."

#### Metropolitan Issues

Environment, Public Services, Sprawl, Legacy Cities, Smart Growth/Sustainability

- Explain what makes city life so attractive and its distinct political form in the United States.
- Identify which policies and political types encourage healthy, vibrant cities.
- Evaluate recent issues in urban affairs, for example, "de-urbanization," "gentrification," and the impacts of an urbanized society on the environment.

Health, Education, and Welfare

Distribution of Powers, Leveraging Resources, Federalism, Public Interests

Course Prefix and Number \_\_\_\_\_ (To be assigned by the VCCS)

- Explain how examples of national policies influence policymaking in the states.
- Evaluate whether states and localities make it easier for policy to change, or if they make it easier for policies to become “entrenched.”
- Analyze whether inequities manifest in the current policy-making process at the state and local level.

Optional Topics: Policies of State and Local Governments

Topics: Education, Law Enforcement, Health and Welfare, and Environment

- Describe state and local government roles in various areas of public policy.
- Explain various approaches to areas of policy and the ideological underpinnings of different approaches. Examples include the Affordable Care Act, Common Core, criminal justice reform, policing reform, among other issues and policies.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the policies and the role of the federal government in these areas.

### **Major Topics to be included**

Who Governs? States and Localities in America’s Constitutional Order

Federalism

State Constitutionalism

People and Their States

State Parties and Elections

Legislative Power

Executive Power

Administration

Judicial Power

Local Governance

State-Local Relations

Federal-Local Relations

Budgeting and the Fiscal State

Metropolitan Issues

Health, Education, and Welfare