

POLS/ECON 409 · *Final Paper Topics*

Select one of the options below and write a 10–12 page paper answering the question posed. Your paper must draw significantly on readings from the course. Formally cite all sources you use, including materials from the course reading list.

Papers that clearly develop an argument and support that argument with well-sourced and explained evidence will receive the highest marks. Papers that fail to make a clear argument, provide only weak, poorly explained, or poorly sourced evidence, or suffer from serious deficits in writing will be marked down accordingly. *You may not use generative AI in any way on this assignment: do not use generative AI tools to do research, create outlines, draft text, or polish your writing.* **The final paper is due Tuesday, 10 June 2025 at 3 PM via Canvas.**

The questions vary in difficulty. Questions marked *** are the most challenging: for these questions, simply pinning down a plausible set of arguments and supporting evidence for them will be sufficient for strong marks. Questions marked * follow more directly from course discussions, so high marks will require more polished essays skillfully weighing opposing arguments and persuasively presenting your conclusions. Questions marked ** fall in the middle. It is possible to score high marks under any question, but don't think it will be easier to do so if you choose an "easier" question!

1. [*] Eichengreen's magisterial *Hall of Mirrors* is a dual history of the financial crises that led to the Great Depression and Great Recession in the United States and Europe. We read only the half of the book pertaining to the Great Recession. Now go back and read the chapters on the Great Depression (1–3, 7–10, and 15–18), and consider the four cases: the US in the 1920s–1930s, the US in the 2000s–2010s, Europe in the 1920s–1930s, and Europe in the 2000s–2010s. In your own view – supported by evidence from Eichengreen and other sources in the course – what are the key common causes of these crises, and what are the important differences? Be selective, providing the clearest possible distillation of your own perspective on the essential historical lessons backed by as much evidence as you can muster.

2. [★★] The stable postwar political economy of the advanced democracies of Europe and North America ended with a bang in the 2008 financial crisis. In its wake emerged new economic trends and political forces that had yet to clearly coalesce when the pandemic hit in 2020. In 2025, we seem to be accelerating towards a new political and economic reality making a radical break from the preceding era in terms of technology, economics, and politics.

Consider (either or both) of the economic forces of automation and capital accumulation, on one hand, and the emerging battle over democracy, the rule of law, and the role of the state in the United States that has been ignited by the second Trump administration. Drawing on our readings and discussion, what do you expect the political economy of the United States will look like in either three, five, or ten years? (Choose just one time frame, and please specify your choice in your essay!)

Be sure to address how you expect (either or both) technology and capital accumulation to evolve, as well as how you expect those forces to shape (and be shaped by) political developments. Address as well how you expect the political regime and the state to develop from the tumult of 2025.

Although all essays on this topic will necessarily be speculative, strong essays will (a) support speculation with as much theory and evidence as possible, (b) tie specific predictions to the necessary conditions for your forecasts to come true, and (c) attempt to narrow the set of plausible futures using knowledge of political economy and other relevant fields. If you are not comfortable committing to a single prediction, you may instead provide one or more possible scenarios, but that will make it even more important to explain the conditions that would make each scenario more or less likely to occur.

It is possible to tackle this topic without drawing on further readings beyond those already assigned, but it may help to read some of the concluding chapters from books assigned in this course to see what futures those authors considered possible from their vantage points. For example, you might consider Piketty (chapters 13, 14, 15, 16 and Conclusion), Blythe (chapter 7), or Galbraith (chapter 14). Finally, you may bring in materials from the recommended readings (e.g., Bender & Hanna) or from outside the course, but you are not required to do so. Regardless, the key will be to focus your essay: it is better to make a cogent and well-supported argument about a smaller set of claims than to attempt to briefly discuss everything you think will happen in the coming years.

3. [***] Pick any of the works listed below and look up (at least) 3 publications critical of that work. (Note that these critiques need not be uniformly skeptical; they could also be modifications or extensions of a work that alter the original conclusions in some way. You could start a search for such pieces by looking for publications that cite these works.) Write a synthetic memo assessing the critics' arguments against the original work and rendering your own judgment on who is right on the major claims.¹ You must receive instructor's approval by email (no later than 29 May 2025) of your list of critical publications.

Option 3A. Thomas Piketty. 2014. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. *This is the option with the most available critical literature, including but not limited to the chapters collected in Boushey, DeLong, and Steinbaum (2017). Articles in economics journals will be most helpful here.*

Option 3B. Claudia Goldin and Lawrence F. Katz. 2008. *The Race Between Education and Technology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. *Depending on the focus of the critiques you select, you may need to read additional chapters of Goldin & Katz.*

Option 3C. Any other specific work or literature we have read in this course. If you choose this option, be specific in defining this work or literature in the introduction to your essay. *This is the most challenging option, so a sharp focus will be necessary.*

Hint for getting your list of published critiques approved: The quality of the final essay depends on having incisive critiques published in either a scientific journal or a well-regarded magazine or weblog. Your essay will have little to contribute if you only respond to vague, superficial, or limited criticism. If you choose this prompt, please endeavor to submit your proposed critical sources early – it is often necessary to replace one or more sources before proceeding.

Additional suggestions: Students sometimes start this assignment by conducting searches for “critique of [blank].” This usually produces a smattering of low-quality essays with relatively weak, scattershot arguments. Ambitious published

¹ By synthetic memo, I mean to suggest that your essay need not have a single thesis statement, but instead could work through a series of debates, each with their own main points.

critiques of a prominent work of scholarship often have their own arguments to make, and thus are not very likely to be framed as purely derivative “critiques.” In other words, you will have to dig for the strongest responses to your author, not for the most clearly labelled ones.

CHRISTOPHER ADOLPH
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON
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