

POSC469 Urban Politics Through the Lens of Mexico City

Dornsife Faculty-Led Programs: Problems Without Passports 2025 (4 units)



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Dates
July 15 – Aug 9, 2025
1 week in USC/Los Angeles
3 weeks in Mexico City

Course Description

Latin America is the most urbanized region in the world. Its cities host 80% of total population and Mexico is not the exception. Like other cities in the developing world, Mexican cities face a dilemma: high rates of urbanization in the last decades have required more urban services than ever before, yet city governments have limited resources to provide these services and often lack of the adequate means to solve such complex problems. Nevertheless, some Mexican and Latin American cities have designed innovative policy solutions to urban problems that are gaining recognition and adopters from around the world. Special emphasis is placed on some of the policy solutions designed and put in practice in Mexico City and other Mexican cities, ranging from bus rapid transit and social housing to the adoption of new local taxes.

This course explores how cities face the challenge of providing public goods and services—such as water, transport, and infrastructure—as well as the applied politics and policy debates around local governments' provision of these goods and services. It also offers concrete examples to observe and analyze how urban public policies have been implemented –successfully and not– in different *Alcaldías* of Mexico City.

The course includes lectures and class discussions to introduce the different topics that will be covered. It then complements such theoretical knowledge with both (i) **in site visits** to different areas of Mexico City to observe specific public policies' implementation (e.g. cable cars in Ecatepec, the suburban train, a water treatment plant, the [C5](#) and more) and (ii) **guest speakers**, including local government officials.

Course Requirements

The course content will be delivered in English. A knowledge of Spanish is recommended but not necessary.

Learning outcomes:

Upon successful completion of this course, students will:

- (i) Understand and analyze the major challenges faced by cities in developing countries like México.
- (ii) Come away with a general knowledge about public policy strategies to address urban problems from a theoretical and practical perspective.

- (iii) Recognize the complexity that urban policy design and implementation entails having observed and analyzed real examples of it.
- (iv) Assess the role played by local governments in the welfare of cities' inhabitants.

Logistics in Mexico

Partner Institution in Mexico City: this is a course that involves students and faculty from USC and [El Colegio de Mexico](#), one of the most prestigious academic institutions in Mexico. Our lectures and seminars will take place in El Colegio.

Transportation: Students are responsible for booking their own air travel to and from Los Angeles to Mexico City. It is ideal that we fly together on July 19, 2025. For travel within the city students will use ride-hailing services or designated drivers. (i) Transportation from and to COLMEX, (ii) for course site-visits and (iii) day excursions/tours will be arranged by the faculty director through professional transport services.

Lodging: students will stay in [Krystal Grand Hotel](#) or similar in the neighborhood of Coyoacán. Two students will share a room.

Itinerary

Week 1 – In Los Angeles – We will meet at USC from Tuesday to Friday for three hours each day. The class sessions require some basic readings to cover key topics like urbanization trends and challenges, government capacity and participatory governance.

Week 2 – In Mexico City – With a combination of lectures, guest speakers and site visits in our first week in Mexico City we will learn and analyze three important urban challenges: infrastructure and service delivery, urban water provision and the fiscal gap.

Week 3 – In Mexico City – During our second week in Mexico we will discuss urban safety and crime reduction and will visit the C5, the office in charge of collecting data to make decisions related to public safety, health emergencies, the environment and mobility. Then, we will concentrate on another pressing challenge: the informal economy and we will visit some street markets to observe (and interview) street vendors.

Week 4 – In Mexico City – During this last week we will discuss another challenge: urban mobility and transit innovations. The site visits, to the metro cables in Ecatepec and BRTs, together with the lectures will give us a good idea of different projects that have been implemented in Mexico City –with different degrees of success— to connect the city. Lastly, we will discuss the environmental challenges that cities in the Global South, like Mexico City face. Some of the green and adaptation policies that have been implemented in Mexico City will also be discussed.

Budget

- **Round-trip airfare: approximately \$500**
- **Accommodation: \$1,300**
- **Food & Personal Costs: \$350 (TBD by student)**
- **U.S. Passport Fee: \$165**
- **USC Health Insurance: \$107**

Assessment

(i)Research project. Students will work in groups of two to investigate and write an analytical paper for which they will conduct their own research. The analytical paper must answer a research question posed by the students. The paper could be about any of the topics covered during course. The paper must be 1,500-words long (+/- 10%). A good paper is well written, clear, and organized. A good analytical paper shows not only that the student has a good level of understanding of the literature addressed during the session of the selected topic but also adds new sources resulting from the students' own research on the topic.

The research project has three components. The first one involves the selection of a topic and a partner. Students must submit, by July 21, a two-paragraph description of their topic, including the case study (or case studies) their project will concentrate on (10 points). For the second component, each group will submit, by July 31st, a research question, their outline and a preliminary bibliography. The outline must show the way in which students intend to respond to the research question and how the bibliographic references contribute to each outline section (10 points). Finally, students will submit their papers by Aug 10 (20 points). Further guidelines will be share with students on Bright Space. **(40%)**

(ii)In-Class Work, Participation and Assignments. Students will be assigned to do reading reports, short research pieces and individual and group work throughout the four weeks of the course. Students are expected to be wholly present and involved throughout the course of the trip. Points will be deducted from the student's total in the event of a lack of participation or any other behavior that deviates from the leader's expectations of trip participation. **(30%)**

(iii)A trip logbook in which you describe, in words and with pictures and videos, your impressions and personal reflections about your stay in Mexico City. **(30%)**

Summer Program 2025 Faculty-Led Program Itinerary

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
	July 15 Class (USC): Course Overview Rules of the Game	July 16 Class (USC): Urbanization Trends & Policy Challenges	July 17 Class (USC): Local Governments & Institutional Capacity	July 18 Class (USC): Local Participatory Governance	July 19 Flight Day	July 20 Tour Coyoacán
July 21 Class (COLMEX): Urban governance, infrastructure & service delivery (Prof. Alejandra Trejo) Welcome Lunch at COLMEX	Jul 22 Site Visit: Suburban Train-AIFA (Prof. Alejandra Trejo)	Jul 23 Class (COLMEX): The Economics of Urban Water (Prof. Carlos Lopez)	Jul 24 Site Visit: El Cárcamo de Dolores (Prof. Carlos López)	Jul 25 Class (COLMEX): The Urban Fiscal Gap (Prof. Unda)	July 26 Free Day	July 27 Tour of Teotihuacán
July 28 Class (COLMEX): Urban Mobility and the Politics of Safety in Mexico City (Prof. Arturo Diaz)	July 29 Site Visit: Tour and conversation with officials from the C5 (Prof. Arturo Diaz)	July 30 Class (COLMEX): The informal economy (Prof. Unda)	July 31 Site Visit: Street Market/ Tianguis (Prof. Unda)	Aug 1 Class (COLMEX): Transit Innovations (Prof. Unda)	Aug 2 Free Day	Aug 3 Free Day
Aug 4 Site Visit: MetroCables Ecatepec (Prof. Unda)	Aug 5 Tour of Mexico City's Downtown	Aug 6 Class (COLMEX): Green and Adaptation Policies (Prof. Boris Graizbord)	Aug 7 Tour of Xochimilco & UNAM Farewell Dinner at Los Danzantes Coyoacan	Aug 8 Free Day	Aug 9 Flight Back	

Class schedule

Week One

1. Tue. July 15: Course Overview, Rules of the Game and Travel Logistics

The basics about Mexican history, politics and economics

2. Wed. July 16: Urbanization trends & policy challenges

Basic Readings:

*UN-Habitat, 2022, "Chapter 2. Scenarios of Urban Futures: Degree of Urbanization", in *Envisaging the Future of Cities, World Cities Report 2022*. United Nations Human Settlements Program.

World Bank, (2009). "Chapter 1: Density", in *Reshaping Economic Geography. World Development Report*, pp 48-72.

WRR, (2016), Towards a More Equal City: Framing the Challenges and Opportunities, pg 1-33.

Class activity based on: UN-Habitat Lecture of Robert Buckley, titled "[Urbanization and Demographics: The Coordination Problem](#)"

3. Thu. July 17: Local Governments & Institutional Capacity

Basic Readings:

*Fiszbein Ariel, (1997), "The emergence of local capacity: lessons from Colombia", *World Development*, 25(7), pp.1029-1043.

*Unda-Gutierrez, Monica & Reyes, Alejandra, (2024), "The Local Government in Mexico," in N. Steytler (Ed.) *Forum of Federations Handbook on Local Government in Federal Systems*. Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 313-345.

Anwar Shah, Sana Shah, (2006), "The New Vision of Local Governance and the Evolving Roles of Local Governments", in *Local Governance in Developing Countries*. Public Sector Governance and Accountability Series, The World Bank.

Class activity based on: "Cities that Work" videos of Jennifer Musisi, Executive Director of Kampala, and Fred Andema, Revenue Director of Kampala.

4. Fri. July 18: Local Participatory Governance

Basic Reading:

Donaghy, Maureen M. (2011). "Do Participatory Governance Institutions Matter? Municipal Councils and Social Housing Programs in Brazil." *Comparative Politics*, 44(1): 83-102.

Wampler, Brian (2008). "When Does Participatory Democracy Deepen the Quality of Democracy?" *Comparative Politics*. 41(1): 61-82.

Class activity based on: two fragments of the [Conference/video](#): "Participatory Governance and Decentralization: A Comparative Study in Programs and Outcomes." & Documentary "[Public Money](#)" from PBS, on Participatory Budgeting

Week two

5. Mon. July 21: Urban governance, infrastructure and service delivery (Prof. Alejandra Trejo Nieto)

Basic Readings:

Da Cruz, N. F., Rode, P., & McQuarrie, M. (2018). [New urban governance: A review of current themes and future priorities](#). *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 41:1, 1–19.

Kei Otsuki (2016). [Infrastructure in informal settlements: co-production of public services for inclusive governance](#), *Local Environment*, 21:12, 1557-1572.

Trejo Nieto, Alejandra Berenice; Niño Amezcuita, José Luis; Vasquez, María Luisa (2018). [Governance of metropolitan areas for delivery of public services in Latin America](#), *REGION*, European Regional Science Association (ERSA), 5:3, 49-73.

6. Tue. July 22: Urban governance, infrastructure and service delivery

Site Visit: [Suburban Train](#)

7. Wed. July 23: The Economics of Urban Water (Prof. Carlos Lopez)

Basic Readings:

Zetland, D. (2011). The beginning of the end. In Zetland, D. *The end of abundance: Economic solutions to water scarcity*. Aguanomics Press.

Zetland, D. (2011). Water from the tap. In Zetland, D. *The end of abundance: Economic solutions to water scarcity*. Aguanomics Press.

Delgado-Ramos, G. C. (2015). Water and the political ecology of urban metabolism: the case of Mexico City. *Journal of Political Ecology*, 22(1), 98-114.

Kimmelman, M. (2017). Mexico City, Parched and Sinking, Faces a Water Crisis- [New York Times](#).

8. Thu. July 23: The Economics of Urban Water (Prof. Carlos Lopez)

Site Visit: [El Cárcamo de Dolores](#). Decorated by Diego Rivera, El Cárcamo is a facility built in 1951 celebrating the water infrastructure of the growing city.

9. Fri. July 24: The Fiscal Gap (Prof. Unda Gutierrez)

Basic Readings:

Martinez-Vazquez, Jorge, (2015), “Mobilizing financial resources for public service delivery and urban development”, in UN-Habitat, *The Challenge of Local Government Financing in Developing Countries*, pp. 15-35.

Unda-Gutierrez, Monica. (2025). “Electoral Democracy and Local Finances: Fiscal Populism in Mexico” *Urban Affairs Review*.

Unda-Gutierrez, Monica. (2021). “Una hacienda local pobre: qué explica la recaudación predial en México”, [Poor local governments: what explains the property tax collection in Mexico], *Estudios Demográficos y Urbanos*, 36:1, pp. 49-88, 2021.

Week three

10. Mon. July 28: Urban Mobility and the Politics of Safety in Mexico City (Prof. Arturo Diaz)

Basic Readings:

Arteaga Botello, Nelson (2015), "Doing surveillance studies in Latin America: the insecurity context", *Surveillance & Society*, 13 (1): 78-90.

Mejía-Dorantes, Lucía and Paula Soto Villagrán (2020), "A review on the influence of barriers on gender equality to access the city: a synthesis approach of Mexico City and its Metropolitan Area", *Cities*, 96: 102439.

García-Tejeda, Enrique and Gustavo Fondevila (2023), "Street Robbery around the Golden Line in Mexico City: A Quasi-Natural Experiment between Metro Stations and Bus Stops", *GeoJournal* 88, (4): 4143-58.

Vilalta, Carlos J. (2011), "Fear of crime in public transport: research in Mexico City", *Crime Prevention and Community Safety*, 13: 171-186.

11. Tue July 29: Urban Mobility and the Politics of Safety in Mexico City

Site Visit: [Command, Control, Computing, Communications and Citizen Contact Center of Mexico City](#) ("C5": Centro de Comando, Control, Cómputo, Comunicaciones y Contacto Ciudadano de la Ciudad de México). Tour and conversation with officials from the C5.

12. Wed. July 30: The Informal Economy (Prof. Unda-Gutierrez)

Basic Readings:

Alejandro Portes & William Haller, (2005), "Chapter 18: The Informal Economy", in Neil J. Smelser and Richard Swedberg (eds), *The Handbook of Economic Sociology*, Princeton University Press. 403-420.

Santiago Levy, (2008), *Good Intentions, Bad Outcomes: Social Policy, Informality, and Economic Growth in Mexico*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

13. Thu. July 31: The Informal Economy

Site Visit. [street market \(tianguis\)](#). Neighborhood: Picacho Ajusco & street vendors in Coyoacán main plaza. Aim: observe conditions and dynamics of street vendors. Questions: how to explain the informal economy (exclusion or escape)? What are their needs? What is their relationship with government officials? What type of policies could help create more inclusive economies?

14. Fri. Aug 1: Transit Innovations (Prof. Unda Gutierrez)

Basic Readings:

Rode, P., Heeckt, C., da Cruz, N.F. (2019), [National Transport Policy and Cities: Key policy interventions to drive compact and connected urban growth](#). *Coalition for Urban Transitions*. London & Washington, D.C.

Cervero, Robert; Iuchi, Kanako; Suzuki, Hiroaki. (2013), "Chapter 1 Introduction: Critical Challenges Facing Cities and Urban Transport," in [Transforming cities with transit: transit and land-use integration for sustainable urban development. Urban development series](#), Washington, D.C. World Bank Group. Pp. 25-48

Watch the BBC World Service: [What a Waste: Bogotá](#), (22 min).

Week Four

15. Mon. Aug 4: Transit Innovations

Site Visit: [Metrobus Insurgentes](#) & [Metrocables Ecatepec](#)

16. Wed. Aug 6: Green & adaptation policies (Prof. Boris Graizbord)

Basic Readings:

UNEP, (2011), "Cities" in Part II of Towards a green economy. Pathways to sustainable development and poverty eradication, pp. 460-490

UN-Habitat lectures: (i) "Transforming the City Towards Low Carbon Resilience" by Steffen Lehmann and (ii) "Cities and the new climate economy" by Philipp Rode

Electronic devices

Unless otherwise announced, please do not use electronic devices in class. Research shows that electronic devices not incorporated for lecture purposes detract not only from your own learning, but also from your fellow classmates.

Respect

This course provides a forum for lively debates about competing visions of politics and society. Throughout the semester, we will be addressing some issues on which people may have strong and diverse opinions. Please respect one another by considering the comments made by your peers, even if you disagree, and by addressing your comments at the ideas presented, not the person presenting them.

Academic Integrity

The University of Southern California is a learning community committed to developing successful scholars and researchers dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and the dissemination of ideas. Academic misconduct, which includes any act of dishonesty in the production or submission of academic work, comprises the integrity of the person who commits the act and can impugn the perceived integrity of the entire university community. It stands in opposition to the university's mission to research, educate, and contribute productively to our community and the world.

All students are expected to submit assignments that represent their own original work, and that have been prepared specifically for the course or section for which they have been submitted. You may not submit work written by others or "recycle" work prepared for other courses without obtaining written permission from the instructor(s).

Other violations of academic integrity include, but are not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, fabrication (e.g., falsifying data), collusion, knowingly assisting others in acts of academic dishonesty, and any act that gains or is intended to gain an unfair academic advantage.

The impact of academic dishonesty is far-reaching and is considered a serious offense against the university. All incidences of academic misconduct will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity and could result in outcomes such as failure on the assignment, failure in the course, suspension, or even expulsion from the university.

For more information about academic integrity see [the student handbook](#) or the [Office of Academic Integrity's website](#), and university policies on [Research and Scholarship Misconduct](#).

Please ask your instructor if you are unsure what constitutes unauthorized assistance on an exam or assignment, or what information requires citation and/or attribution.

Students and Disability Accommodations:

USC welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. The Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS) is responsible for the determination of appropriate accommodations for students who encounter disability-related barriers. Once a student has completed the OSAS process (registration, initial appointment, and submitted documentation) and accommodations are determined to be reasonable and appropriate, a Letter of Accommodation (LOA) will be available to generate for each course. The LOA must be given to each course instructor by the student and followed up with a discussion. This should be done as early in the semester as possible as accommodations are not retroactive. More information can be found at osas.usc.edu. You may contact OSAS at (213) 740-0776 or via email at osasfrontdesk@usc.edu.

Support Systems:

[Counseling and Mental Health](#) - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

<https://studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling/>.

For Students Around the World:

Let's Talk... On Zoom is an opportunity to talk one-on-one with a counselor. Each "Let's Talk" is structured as a 30-minute drop-in for individual conversation. As an outreach activity, this is a good way to explore what talk therapy might be like. All USC students (currently enrolled or under the Student Health fee) are eligible to participate in this activity, regardless of geographic location.

[988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#) - 988 for both calls and text messages – 24/7 on call

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline) provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across the United States. The Lifeline is comprised of a national network of over 200 local crisis centers, combining custom local care and resources with national standards and best practices. The new, shorter phone number makes it easier for people to remember and access mental health crisis services (though the previous 1 (800) 273-8255 number will continue to function indefinitely) and represents a continued commitment to those in crisis.

[Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services \(RSVP\)](#) - (213) 740-9355(WELL) – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender- and power-based harm (including sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and stalking).

[Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title IX \(EEO-TIX\)](#) - (213) 740-5086

Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants.

[Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment](#) - (213) 740-5086 or (213) 821-8298

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

[The Office of Student Accessibility Services \(OSAS\)](#) - (213) 740-0776

OSAS ensures equal access for students with disabilities through providing academic accommodations and auxiliary aids in accordance with federal laws and university policy.

[USC Campus Support and Intervention](#) - (213) 740-0411

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

[Diversity, Equity and Inclusion](#) - (213) 740-2101

Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

[USC Emergency](#) - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call

Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

[USC Department of Public Safety](#) - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-1200 – 24/7 on call

Non-emergency assistance or information.

[Office of the Ombuds](#) - (213) 821-9556 (UPC) / (323-442-0382 (HSC)

A safe and confidential place to share your USC-related issues with a University Ombuds who will work with you to explore options or paths to manage your concern.

[Occupational Therapy Faculty Practice](#) - (323) 442-2850 or otfp@med.usc.edu

Confidential Lifestyle Redesign services for USC students to support health promoting habits and routines that enhance quality of life and academic performance.
