

**EC 129: Economic History of the United States**  
Course Syllabus – Winter Quarter / 2025  
Division of the Humanities and Social Sciences  
California Institute of Technology

**Course Instructor**

Prof. Pawel Janas  
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Office Hours: Thursdays, 2:30 – 3:30 and by appointment (please email)

**Course TA**

Guillaume Wegmueller  
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Office Hours and location: TBD

**Course Description**

This course explores the economic development of the United States, emphasizing the historical narrative, economic theory, and analytical methods used to study it. We will cover ten topics – one topic per two lectures - about the major economic phenomena over the last 125 years. Students will engage with various research methods and economic theories pertinent to the field. Essential social science analytical tools, including linear models, inference, instrumental variables, and difference-in-differences, will be introduced. Students are expected to attend all classes and actively contribute to class discussions.

**Course Goal**

By the end of the quarter, students will develop skills to be able to reason and communicate like an empirical economist and economic historian.

**Learning Outcomes**

The successful student will be able to do the following after finishing the course:

1. Engage with academic articles by reading critically, summarizing the arguments effectively, and critiquing the logic, statistical methods, and economic theory involved
2. Describe several basic narratives of American economic growth since 1900
3. Use the framework of American history to illuminate economic concepts
4. Use the framework of economics to illuminate subjects in American history

**Prerequisites**

Students should have some familiarity with statistical programming, economics, and history. Experience with econometrics is preferred but not required.

**Required Text**

A required reading list of peer-reviewed publications and book chapters will be posted and updated throughout the course. I will provide you with all the PDF files of the reading assignments on Canvas. I will also provide you with all lecture slides, but they will not contain all the details of what is discussed during the lecture - it is your responsibility to take notes in class. For programming help, I encourage you to become adept at quickly finding reputable solutions to programming questions online or via Co-Pilot or ChatGPT.

## Course Website

<https://caltech.instructure.com/courses/8155>

## Assessment

Homework Assignments	40%
In-Class Quizzes	20%
In-Class Midterm	20%
In-Class Final	20%

A : >93%    A- : 93-90%    B+ : 90 – 87%    B : 83-87%    B- : 80-83%    C+ : <80%

## Attendance and Participation

Class attendance and participation are core tenets of this class. As Caltech students, I believe you can learn most, if not all, of the technical skills in this course by yourself. I will periodically give unannounced quizzes in class to check for attendance. Please communicate (via email) any absences related to family emergencies, religious holidays, conferences, job interviews, or other events that prevent you from attending class as soon as possible.

## Email Policy

Please direct email questions about assignments to the course TA (Guillaume). The first 5-10 minutes of every lecture will be your opportunity to ask clarification questions. All emails sent to the course instructor will be read during normal business hours (9am – 5pm, Monday – Friday).

## Wellness Policy

If you find yourself overwhelmed or encountering other personal challenges during the term, please reach out to me so we can develop a plan for you to pursue success in this course in a healthy way. In addition, I encourage you to utilize Caltech's resources.

## Students with Documented Disabilities

Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with Caltech Accessibility Services for Students (CASS). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact CASS as soon as possible, since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. For more information: <https://cass.caltech.edu/>, [cass@caltech.edu](mailto:cass@caltech.edu). If you are having difficulties with access or other challenges in the class you think might be related to a disability, but do not yet have a diagnosis, please feel free to reach out to CASS to learn more about resources.

## Academic Integrity and Collaboration Policy

Caltech's Honor Code: "No member of the Caltech community shall take unfair advantage of any other member of the Caltech community." All instances of plagiarism or other academic misconduct will be referred to the [Board of Control](#) for undergraduates.

Integrity and programming: in this course, it **IS** acceptable to copy code from publicly available online or from generative AI. In fact, a hallmark of a good analyst is quickly finding answers to previously asked programming questions. Very rarely will you come across a bug or issue that has not been solved by someone else – instead of re-inventing the wheel, you must learn how to incorporate AI into your own code. It is **NOT** acceptable to copy code from your classmates on individual assignments. Discussion of

the conceptual issues of the problems is allowed.

### My Status as a "Responsible Employee"

As a faculty member, I am required to notify the Institute's Equity and Title IX Office when I become aware of discrimination, sexual harassment, or sex- or gender-based misconduct involving our community members. If one of my students shares such an experience with me, I can help connect them to support resources but will not be able to keep that information confidential as part of fulfilling my responsibility to make sure my students are offered the opportunity to access information and support by the Institute. For more information, you can email [equity@caltech.edu](mailto:equity@caltech.edu), go to [equity.caltech.edu](http://equity.caltech.edu), or review the Institute's [Sex- and Gender-Based Misconduct Policy](#).

If you have experienced such prohibited conduct and want to report it or speak to a confidential resource, consult the [Equity and Title IX Office's webpage on reporting](#) for guidance.

### Course Schedule

Week	Dates	Question	HW Due
1	1/7 & 1/9	What is economic growth?	
2	1/14 & 1/16	Why do countries grow?	HW 1
3	1/21 & 1/23	Why do people move?	
4	1/28 & 1/30	Why do people go to school?	HW 2
5	2/4 & 2/6	Why do certain industries thrive? + In-class Midterm (2/6)	
6	2/11 & 2/13	Why do financial markets arise?	HW 3
7	2/18 & 2/20	Why do markets fail?	
8	2/25 & 2/27	What is the role of government in economic growth?	HW 4
9	3/4 & 3/6	Why do cities form?	
10	3/11 & 3/13	Why does inequality exist?	HW 5
11	3/18	In-class Final	

### Additional Resources for Students

- **Student Wellness Center:** Wide variety of health and wellbeing services; <https://wellness.caltech.edu/>
- **Counseling Services:** Free for all students, regardless of insurance plan; <https://counseling.caltech.edu>
- **Occupational Therapy:** Individual sessions and consultations on building healthy habits and routines, time management, planning and organization, and more. Free for all students; <https://ot.caltech.edu>
- **Center for Inclusion and Diversity:** Resources concerning navigating diversity and inclusion, including staff who can speak with students about challenges of harassment and discrimination; <https://diversity.caltech.edu/>
- **Title IX:** Caltech's Title IX Coordinator ([titleix@caltech.edu](mailto:titleix@caltech.edu)) works with students on issues related to sexual harassment, sexual misconduct, and sex discrimination; <https://titleix.caltech.edu/>
- **Caltech Accessibility Services for Students:** The Accessibility Services Specialist works with students with temporary medical conditions, or mental, physical or learning disabilities on accommodation requests and services; <https://cass.caltech.edu>
- **Residential Support:** Resident Associates (RAs) and Residential Life Coordinators (RLCs) are also resources for TAs and students; <https://residentialexperience.caltech.edu/>
- **Career Advising and Experiential Learning:** Provides resources to help students make career decisions and implement career plans; <https://career.caltech.edu/>